

## J A X    H E R P    N E W S

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Editor: John Berger

NATIVE CRITTER OF THE MONTH: YELLOW RAT SNAKE (Elaphe obsoleta quadrivittata)

Contributed by John Rossi

The Yellow Rat Snake usually does well in captivity, however it can be the most difficult of Florida's rat snakes to maintain. This is due to the fact that these snakes are more arboreal than the red rat snake and seem more delicate than the grey rat snake. They will wander the cage and rub their snout on objects far more often than the other rat snakes. This usually leads to a raw infected rostral area which eventually spreads, enters the mouth and if untreated, the respiratory tract. The snake will invariably stop eating and succumb to infection or starvation. The best way to prevent this is with a large, tall glass sided (or other smooth material but never untreated wood) cage with pegboard top. A screen top can be used if the snake doesn't rub it too much. A branch should be provided. As with many other snakes, indoor outdoor carpet, a frequently cleaned water dish and hide box are all recommended. A vitalite and bottom heat are nice additions that will increase your success.

Baby yellow rat snakes look very much like grey rat snakes and the two are almost impossible to tell apart. Good luck if you are in an area where the subspecies overlap. Otherwise just check the range maps.

Fortunately all of our southern rat snakes including the yellow will eat both anoles and pinkies as babies and grow rapidly until they are eating strictly mice, rats, and chicks. They will also eat eggs.

In my opinion this snake appears much more frequently near permanent bodies of water than are other rat snakes. They are active during the day in spring and fall but are nocturnal during the summer.

In summary, the yellow rat snake makes a great pet, but it is not as easy to maintain as the other rat snakes.

Tip of the Month

Cleanliness is critical for successfully maintaining most herps. A recent study showed that most snakes kept in captivity actually accumulate potentially deadly (to themselves) bacteria in their mouths. This means that any stress or injury may predispose these snakes to very serious and potentially fatal mouth or respiratory infections. Such stress would include bites from an intended meal or temperatures too low or high or even being handled too often. Indeed, this could explain why some snakes get sick even in an otherwise perfect captive environment. The most practical way to prevent this accumulation of

bacteria is to change the water every day and disinfect the cage frequently with a very dilute chlorox solution (1/20 chlorox to water). Then rinse the cage thoroughly. Remove all fecal material as often as possible. If cleanliness as mentioned above is combined with some of the tips mentioned in previous articles such as providing correct lighting, and a hiding place, your reptiles will have a much better chance of living a longer and healthier life.

This is an especially big problem for aquatic reptiles and they require filters or more likely, very frequent changes of their water.

### Last Meeting

October's meeting featured a very informative discussion on reptiles in captivity by Vic Morgan. Several box turtles and leopard tortoises were displayed as was an eastern hognose snake. Over 60 people attended.

### Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on Thursday, November 12th at 7:30 PM in the Church Room of the Museum of Arts and Sciences. We are very sorry that we can not find a single day of the week that pleases everyone so we will probably be bouncing between Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday for some time to come.

Mr. Ed Brown will discuss the successful maintenance of the Caiman (South America's version of crocodilians, for the beginners). Also, Lt. Mike Edwards of the Florida Game and Fish Commission will discuss the legal aspects of owning reptiles and show some interesting slides.

### Gopher Tortoises

- need help! Major construction is imminent and some will need to be relocated. We need some volunteers to help with this project. If everyone volunteers just a few hours we can get plenty of work done. All members with 5 gallon buckets please get them ready and let us know how many you have. Jim Hartman is the chairman and his phone number is 389-4389.

### BOOKLIST- Part One

Any herpetologist worthy of the name obtains his knowledge from two sources: hands-on study of specimens in the field, in captivity, and in collections of preserved animals; and through books. Field work without reading makes you naive; reading without the practical experience of field work leaves you shallow. With this in mind, I hereby offer a list of useful, interesting, and popular (non-technical) books helpful to the amateur herpetologist. Several of these books are out of print now, but all of them may be found at the public library, if only in the reference section.

**A FIELD GUIDE TO REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS OF EASTERN AND CENTRAL NORTH AMERICA** by Roger Conant: 2nd Edition 1975, Houghton-Mifflin Co.

This is the standard reference for indentifying any reptile or amphibian found east of the Rockies. All related species (for instance all water snakes, garter snakes, and treefrogs) are illustrated in color on a single page for easy comparison, with characteristic features pointed out. Distribution maps in the back of the book show a species' range at a glance. The text gives important facts about habitat, reproduction, and feeding, and explains how to distinguish your specimen from other species that resemble it. A 3rd Edition is now in preparation, but will not be published until 1990 or 1991. If you don't have this book, you can't afford to wait that long. 448 pages. \$16.95 hardbound, \$11.95 paper.

**HANDBOOK OF REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS OF FLORIDA** by Ray E. Ashton, Jr. and Patricia Ashton. Windward Publishers.

Despite a few flaws that worry only the experts (use of non-Florida specimens in some illustrations, minor errors in a couple of range maps), the Ashtons' book is of exceptional interest to any amateur herpetologist in Florida. While the individual portrait photographs of each species are not useful for field identification, their quality is superb. The range maps, in a great improvement over Conants, indicate whether a species occurs in a given Florida county; d the text treats each species at greater length. In two volumes: the third, on amphibians, has not been published yet. Volume 1: The Snakes. 176 pages, \$11.95 paper. Volume 2: Lizards, Turtles, and Crocodylians. 192 pages, \$16.95 paper.

**SNAKES: THE KEEPER AND THE KEPT** by Carl Kauffeld. Doubleday and Co-1969.

Out of print, but easily obtained from the pet section of the public library. The first two chapters of this book deal with the maintenance of snakes in captivity, and some practices may be outdated. However, most of the book, the best part, consists of snakehunting stories, with an emphasis on rattlesnakes. Kauffeld,, who died in 1972, was an entertaining writer, and this is a fine book to get you through the cold snakeless months of winter. The same can be said of his Snakes and Snake Hunting (1958), also out of print and hardest to find (there was a copy in the Terry Parker library fifteen years ago which may still be there). Snakes: etc. has an overly brief but useful appendix, "Food of American Snakes, their merit as captives, and their breeding habits." 237 pages.

Next month this article will conclude with brief considerations of the Comstock Handbooks and the works of Raymond Lee Ditmars, and a list of additional books that may interest some of you.

Contributed by Rex Rowan

#### AMPHIBIAN OF THE MONTH: THE GREEN TREEFROG

The genus *Hyla* (treefrogs) is represented in Duval County by six species: the southern spring peeper (*Hyla crucifer bartramiana*), the barking treefrog (*Hyla gratiosa*), the southern gray treefrog (*Hyla femoralis*), the squirrel treefrog (*Hyla squirella*), and the subject of this article, the green treefrog (*Hyla cinerea*).

The green treefrog is the most commonly encountered *Hyla* of the Southeast, and, excepting the Pine Barrens treefrog (which has a small population in the Panhandle), it is the most attractive. Ranging from 1 1/4 to 2 1/4 inches in length, this ubiquitous amphibian varies in color from dark olive to bright apple-green on the dorsal surface, with a sharply-defined white, yellow, or cream-colored stripe along each side; the underside is white or yellowish-white, with green on the sides of the throat. Often, especially in larger specimens, the green back is sparsely sprinkled with small yellow spots the size of the head of a pin. (The squirrel treefrog, a smaller species, has a green color phase, but the squirrel's side-stripe has no distinct border, and there is no green at the sides of the throat.)

Normally, the green treefrog is more aquatic than other *Hylas*, and is commonly found on leaves of aquatic vegetation at the edges of ponds and lakes. But it is not limited to this environment. It turns up in almost any moist habitat, from the eaves and flowerboxes of suburban homes to broadleaf forests. It is not uncommon to find them on saw palmettos, hidden on leaves or in the bases between two stems. James A. Oliver even reports in "North American Amphibians and Reptiles" that "adults have been found on sedges in salt marshes at considerable distances from dry land."

This species feeds mostly in late afternoon and at night. During the warmer months it sheds its skin daily, more frequently than any other amphibian; the old integument slides right up the body towards the mouth and is devoured.

Breeding occurs from April 15th to August 15th. The females attach their floating, jelly-encased egg masses to aquatic vegetation; each female lays up to 700 eggs. The tadpoles, patterned like the adults in green with a light side-stripe, hatch in two days and develop into froglets 1/2 to 11/16 inches long in a bit over a month, commonly from July to October. A study has shown a 44 % survival rate among first-year females, which are ready to breed by the following spring.

The call, described as, "quonk, quonk, quonk, quank" by Wright and "grab, grab, grabit, grabit" by Deckert, is a familiar sound of the southern summer night, especially in muggy weather, or during rain. To me it sounds like a quack with a faint metallic quality most writers liken to distant cowbells, a similarity lost on city-dwellers.

like us. In breeding season, choruses of calling males can be deafening.

Green treefrogs make hardy pets. I kept a large one for a month in a plain glass jar, feeding it grasshoppers from the back yard and moths from the porchlight. Un-doubtedly they will do better in a terrarium containing a broad-leafed plant for shelter and a daily spray of water. My specimen co-existed peacefully with gray treefrogs, though it seemed slightly more aggressive in feeding than the grays, and got a larger portion of the food. (This may have been an individual difference; I would be curious to hear other keepers' experiences in this matter.)

Contributed by Rex Rowan

#### EXOTIC CRITTER OF THE MONTH: THE BALL OR ROYAL PYTHON (Python Regius)

The Royal Python, most commonly known as the Ball Python, is one of my favorite snakes, and with good reason. It is a very shy snake (at first), it never really seems to get used to having it's head touched, but it is very gentle. I have only ever met one person who said they had been bitten by one, and I've handled dozens and never been bitten.

This snake does not get very big, 6.5 feet according to most books that can be found, but 4-5 feet is more the norm. This is one of the reasons this snake is good for beginners, because it does not require a very large cage, even when full grown. This, combined with it's gentleness make it a very attractive 'first' snake. One possible disturbing drawback to this snake is its sometimes erratic feeding habits. It is not common for a Ball python to go months at a time without eating. Most people who I have known or talked to all said that they had encountered this problem, but that it usually takes care of itself. Be sure to keep the cage at a good temperature, usually 79-90 degrees and a humidity range of 60-80%. The snake loves to bask in the sun, and this should be done as often as possible always making sure that over-exposure is avoided. To much of a good thing can be as bad or worse than not enough.

The Ball python's favorite food are mice, but larger specimens will do well on gerbils, rats, hamsters, and possibly even baby chicks. If you should find that your snake does not want to eat and it has been quite some time, there are a few options that are available to you. One, keep vitamins in the snake's water at all times. Even if the snake doesn't eat, it will have a regular intake of essential vitamins and minerals. Patience should be the rule and I recommend trying to wait the hunger strike out, because this probably is a natural occurrence in the Ball python. The second option available is force feeding. This can be quite messy and the snake is usually not very cooperative. I wouldn't be either if someone was trying to shove a dead mouse down my throat against my will. Yes, the food source will have to be killed, and you may not be willing to do this, which leads to the third option, seeking the assistance of a veterinarian. This may be the wisest of the latter two options, because along with the unpleasant task of killing a small rodent, and

the lack of cooperation of the snake, you could cause serious damage to the esophagus of your pet. I would like to re-emphasize that most hunger strikes by Ball pythons usually take care of themselves, so the first option is usually what should be done prior to any other. Force feeding as a rule, should be the last resort for the inexperienced herpetologist. Overall this snake is an excellent beginning snake for the beginning snake fancier, and should provide years of enjoyment.

The Ball python is a native of Africa, with a range from Eastern thru Western Africa. It's natural habitat is savannahs and dry forests.

Contributed by Sherry LeClair



### The Turtle Pen

The cooters are our gregarious Florida baskers often seen in large ponds, lakes, canals and sluggish rivers. The cooter (*Chrysemys Floridae*) is a large turtle that grows  $7\frac{1}{2}$  -  $15\frac{7}{8}$  inches. Their plastron is yellow and patternless. The males have elongated claws on front feet and females high domed carapaces. It is said that cooters have thick, tough shells. The reason being that they live in close quarters with the alligators. Alligators soon ignore them, once they realize that it is difficult to break their shells. The cooters take it one step further to go so far as lay their eggs in the alligator nests. Raccoon scavengers think twice to dig up the turtle eggs with mother alligator guarding the nest. Cooters nest in late May to July. They may lay 2 or more clutches of 4-22 elliptical eggs. Females sometimes dig one or more nest cavities several inches away from the main nest chamber and by a single egg in each.

Incubation: 80-150 days. Feeding: Fish, frogs, tadpoles, plants, crayfish

Males mature in 3 years  
 Females " " 6-7 years

Next Month: The Gopher Tortoises

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