

Wild Wednesday 15 July 2020

While it's Wild Wednesday in the Granite Dells, tomorrow is World Snake Day, held every year on July 16, so it's time to pay tribute to our legless neighbors. Most snakes are harmless, but even the few venomous ones are rarely a threat to humans unless picked up or accidentally contacted. Their venom evolved to help them catch prey, not to harass humans.

Our long evolutionary history, however, predisposes many of us to instinctively react in fear when we encounter a snake unexpectedly. While we tend to react positively toward the cute and cuddly, a phenomenon called biophilia, our occasionally negative reactions toward snakes (opidiophobia), spiders (arachnophobia), and other creepy crawlies is known as biophobia, which may have been selected for in our deep past. Phobias are irrational, but they can be unlearned through education and trusting contact with the objects of fear. Just look at how wolves, once demonized and feared, are now very popular and cherished animals by most (if not all) people.

When Europeans first colonized North America, they had a similar fear of wilderness, and intense efforts were made to “tame” it. Now that the frontier days are behind us, it's time to shift to **valuing** the wild. Studies have shown convincingly that contact with nature, with wild land, is good for our mental and physical health. Loss of accessible open space diminishes us as people and as communities. This is yet another strong argument for saving the land that inspires and enriches us—the Granite Dells, for example.

The Granite Dells Preservation Foundation and Save the Dells both work tirelessly to protect as much as possible of the Dells in a regional park and preserve. They are voices for the voiceless, like our mute snakes and other shy wild critters. And they are voices for all who can benefit from an intact, biodiverse landscape. We hope you'll join the chorus to “save the Dells” as decision points on land management come up. Only a strong community effort can bring this dream to reality.

If learning about snakes interests you, I highly recommend the gorgeous book by Harry Greene on *Snakes: The Evolution of Mystery n Nature*. It may well turn anyone's ophidiophobia to ophidiophilia!



Walt Anderson

The Sonoran Mountain Kingsnake is a beauty, a stunner. Some people mistake it for the much smaller Coral Snake, but “red on black, friend of Jack.” Mimicry of a coral snake may help it avoid capture by a prudent predator. Because of its beauty, it has been a victim of snake collectors who keep them in captivity completely apart from its normal ecosystem. Having a park and preserve large enough to maintain wild populations of this handsome snake is certainly our goal in the Granite Dells.



The Gopher (or Bull) Snake is one of our most commonly encountered snakes. Some individuals are so docile that they can be picked up as if a beloved pet, while others will coil, hiss, expand their necks and vibrate their tails (apparently to appear venomous), and even strike (though, as constrictors, they are harmless unless you happen to be small enough to serve as prey). Many people like to have them around to thin out populations of gophers, packrats, and mice.



The Wandering Gartersnake is a subspecies of the Western Terrestrial Gartersnake. It's active in daylight as it searches for a wide variety of prey from frogs and toads to fish to lizards to insects and to even small mammals and birds.



The Black-necked Gartersnake prefers damp environments as along streams and ponds. This one has captured a Lowland Leopard Frog along the bank of the Santa Maria River.



Walt Anderson

The Striped Whipsnake, named for its presumed resemblance to a leather whip, may easily be mistaken for a gartersnake, but its light bands are on its sides, not down the spine. This speedy snake is an active hunter, raising its head as it looks around for prey to pursue. I was lucky to get this photo in the Dells, as usually when I encounter one, it either races away or lies there dead on the road (an unfortunate consequence of development in its habitat). Saving the Dells will help save this fascinating creature.



Walt Anderson

The Ground Snake spends much of its life underground, so it is a treat to see one. These snakes are highly variable in color: banded, striped, or uniformly colored. Their diet consists of insects, scorpions, spiders, and sometimes small lizards. Sounds like a good neighbor to me!



The Black-tailed Rattlesnake is beautiful and typically quite docile. It's the rattler most likely to be seen in the Dells, but most people are lucky to see one.



The elegant "beadwork" scales of a Black-tailed Rattlesnake.



How the Black-tailed Rattlesnake got its name. The end.