Cult of the Gray-band
Ruminations of a Trans-Pecos Snake Hunter

By
Rod Dearth
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Cult of the Gray-band

Author's Note: All incidents cited in this story are true, based on my actual caffeine-clouded observations, or on interviews of eye-witnesses. No names are mentioned because the Believers prefer to maintain their anonymity for the time being, in the hope that someday their cult may achieve legitimacy in the eyes of the public, if not non-profit status with the IRS.

Imagine yourself sitting in the swank, air-conditioned office of a respected and successful investment firm. Your broker is sitting behind an impressive, polished oak desk wearing an expensive, perfectly tailored three-piece suit. His immaculate white shirt is tied with a very tasteful, imported silk tie, while the cuffs are adorned with unique-looking, and obviously expensive, jeweled cuff links. His hair is salon cut, and he has a perfect manicure. In other words, his personal grooming is impeccable. The man simply glows with an aura of financial success.

Behind him, on a carved oak credenza, two computer terminals display current financial information from various on-line sources while the broker adroitly manipulates a high-tech laptop computer resting lonesomely on the aircraft carrier-sized desk in front of him. Looking around his spacious and tastefully appointed office you notice several impressive-looking charts and diagrams depicting the firm's financial successes, along with framed documents attesting to your brokers professional bonafides. At the far end of the desk is an arrangement of family photographs depicting attractive people engaged in wholesome activities. Everything you see is just what you'd expect from someone who occupies such impressive digs. Just being in the office gives you a feeling of confidence about the firm and the gentleman in front of you. This guy obviously knows what he is doing with money and you mentally congratulate yourself on having chosen the right broker.

As you sit there, musing to yourself, the intercom on your broker's desk announces a visitor. Shortly, a gentleman shows up at the door, and that is when things begin to get weird.

The visitor is anything but nattily attired. He is wearing wrinkled and stained hiking shorts, an old tee shirt with the faded symbol of a lizard imprinted on it, and a pair of 60ish sandals. He has a big grin on his unshaven face and you notice dark circles under his thoroughly bloodshot eyes. He is carrying a number of white, cloth bags, and you think at first that they might possibly be cash bags, but another look at the visitor's appearance convinces you otherwise. Surprisingly, your swank broker greets this scruffy and smelly newcomer like an old friend and takes the cloth bag the man holds out for him. Turning to you, he says, "You are not going to believe what's in here," meaning the bag, obviously. "This little girl is a knockout." The visitor is visibly excited.

"Yeah," he says to you. "She's a real scream of a blair's." Girl? You think. Screaming blair's? The only screaming female blairs you've ever heard of was that actress from the movie The Exorcist, and she did a lot more than just scream. From the looks of the visitor, and from the way both men are now acting, you begin to silently hope that whatever is in the bag will not be something demonic.

Before you can ask what they're talking about, the broker has untied the bag and thrust his hand deep inside. Morbidly, you stare at him, your attention now riveted to the bag. The white muslin fabric appears to be moving, as though the bag contains a live thing. It has to be his hand, you think. Wrong! To your intense amazement and utter consternation, the broker slowly withdraws his hand, gripping not a demon, but the next thing to it—a snake! Yes, it is—it's a live, squirming, twisting, writhing snake!

Immediately, your whole body tenses as your brain goes on autopilot. Oh my Gawd! You stare at the two men in almost complete disbelief as your mind begins to reel. This is just too weird! Silently, your hands clutching the armrest of your chair, you watch and listen as the men in front of you examine the snake, exclaiming in childlike tones of wonder and exuberance over its apparent beauty and grace. The snake does not attempt to bite, even as the men pass it back and forth between them. One of the firm's attractive receptionists walks by the still open door and is hailed by the broker. He encourages her to come closer and examine the snake. Amazingly, she does, but her reaction is nothing like that of the two men holding the serpent. As the gray and orange-banded snake crawls up the broker's suited arm the receptionist leans close to look at it. Her face wears an expression of feigned interest; her attitude is that of someone who is bored with a procedure that has been repeated many times. It seems impossible that she would react this way, but other employees stop by, each offering comments about the snake, none showing the slightest alarm or fear. What is going on here?

The scene before you is fantastically surreal. The snake is gently placed on the thick pile carpeting while the broker produces an expensive camera. You suddenly realize that you must be in the presence of two fanatics, one disguising himself as an investment counselor, and the other, for all you know, some lunatic off the street. Obviously, they are enamored of snakes. Maybe, you think, it's part of their religion. You've heard of people like that. Maybe these guys are like them. Little do you know...

The spectacle continues and, unconsciously, you notice how the blue carpet compliments the snake's orange and gray bands very nicely. You become entranced by the snake's calm, graceful movements and its subtle, reptilian beauty. Without even realizing what is happening, you fall under its spell. Now you, too, are well on your way to becoming a Believer.

The little scenario just recounted is not fictional. It happened exactly as described. I did not mention that the two “fanatics” really are rational, commonsense men in every respect, and they don’t engage in oddball religious practices that involve snakes. They do like snakes, though, especially one kind of snake, as you’ll soon discover. And it’s not just any kind of snake, mind you, but a very special one that is so admired in certain circles it has resulted in the formation of a small group of hobbyists whose single-minded devotion to these fantastic serpents borders on the fanatical.

I realized just how fanatic this special group could be on a warm summer evening several years ago when I found myself in company of one of
its most ardent members. We were in an isolated locale in far western Texas. It was well after midnight on an overcast night. I was standing at the very edge of a sheer, eighty-foot limestone bluff. Directly opposite me, a short distance away, my companion nimbly scurried about on top of a narrow, rock wall, searching its crevices for snakes. I was supposed to be following him, but I couldn’t. You see, the rock wall he stood upon was separated from the spot my feet were glued to by an inky black abyss. Moreover, the surface my agile companion so confidently strode upon was only about two feet wide, maybe less.

Under routine circumstances, (i.e. broad daylight with no wind and at zero elevation) this would be no big deal, but not only was the darkness stygian black, the wind was blowing around thirty knots and the distance from where I stood to where I wanted to go was a bit more than I could comfortably step. In other words, I would have to jump. Not only would I have to jump, but I’d have to make darn sure I landed perfectly balanced and did not overstep the least little bit because if I did, well, my spotlight, as powerful as it was, did not penetrate the even deeper abyss on the other side of the rock wall.

Standing there, contemplating the available options, my years of military service came to mind. For over two decades as a Marine my courage had been weather-tested many times by far more dangerous and challenging events. Yet, standing on the edge of that precipice in the pitch black, my body swaying in the wind, I could not convince myself to initiate the step that might lead to finding one of those special snakes. Exploding artillery shells and machine gun fire I had dealt with, but I could not deal with leaping a yawning black chasm only to land precariously, buffeted by high winds, on a narrow sliver of rock, which I would just have to leave shortly anyway. No, common sense, discretion, and maturity dictated that I stay right where I was—on solid ground, where yes, I might trip over a clump of prickly-pear, become entangled in a sharp cholla, or even stab myself on the dagger-like sotol, but at least I wouldn’t have to worry about falling into a bottomless black crevice filled with multitudes of venomous creatures that would feast on my torn and broken body. I would just have to find some other way.

By now, you must be wondering exactly what kind of snake has been the focus of all this attention. What snake could motivate two men to prowl about in the dark in such a dangerous locale? What special Texas ophidian has the power to turn investment counselors into fanatics, and average family men into very un-average snake fanatics? The answer to these questions is, in a word, Lampropeltis altermna. Actually, that’s two words, which, for the unscientific among you, serve as the taxonomic designation of the Gray-banded Kingsnake. As I was to learn, my utterly fearless and quite agile companion of the cliffs, and the nattily attired broker, belong to an elite, but little-known, fraternity of Texas snake collectors whose principal hobby is collecting, raising, breeding, and studying this seldom-seen snake, known to these Believers as simply, altermna.

Lampropeltis altermna, and its taxonomic sibling Lampropeltis blairi, arguably two species of Gray-banded Kingsnake, are found in the United States almost exclusively on the Edwards Plateau and in the Trans-Pecos region of Texas.¹ The brilliant, highly variable orange, white, black and gray colors make these snakes standouts of beauty in the serpent world, and are largely responsible for their attractiveness to snake collectors and breeders. Gray-banded Kingsnakes are undoubtedly one of the most desirable native reptiles among amateur herpetologists and reptile hobbyists. Since my introduction to the species three years ago, I must qualify this last comment by stating that among certain snake-fanciers the desire to possess, hold, and covet the Gray-banded Kingsnake borders on fanaticism—indeed, to some, like the Believers, it is truly an addiction.

The non-venomous “gray-bands”, as they are sometimes known, are not at all rare within their range, even though at one time they were on Texas’ list of threatened and endangered species. It’s just that you don’t see them as frequently as say, bullsnakes, coachwhips, or rattlesnakes. Herpetologist Alan Tennant, in his popular book Field Guide to Texas Snakes, says that Gray-banded Kingsnakes are almost never seen except at night (my own emphasis here). After hunting the species for the last several years I have to agree with Mr. Tennant’s comment, although I would modify what he says just a bit by leaving off the last three words. In fact, since I’ve been an altermna “collector”, I believe a more accurate statement would be that they are never seen. I am personally convinced that all the gray-bands currently in captivity are descended from a single accidental mating between a pair of altermna caught some time in the 1950s by an itinerant oil-field roughneck who liked snakes—anyone who claims anything different is lying! Well, maybe not, but just the same, I have yet to catch my first wild gray-band.

It is true that altermna collecting is exclusively a nighttime activity. Snake collectors from throughout the United States and Canada, as well as many European countries, migrate annually to various locales in the southern reaches of West Texas during the spring and summer months. Once there, they employ a variety of flashlights, lamps, spotlights, and lanterns to search for these elusive, nocturnal snakes.

There are several well-known localities in this region of Texas that are habitually frequented by these gray-band collectors. In fact, should you become a Believer, you will quickly learn that gray-bands are always identified first by the locality where the animal was caught, and second by the subspecies or color phase, depending upon which school of taxonomic thought you belong to. As an example, one of the more highly sought after gray-bands would be referred to as a Davis Mountains altermna. (A snake that is literally to die for!) This designation indicates a snake captured in the Davis Mountains of West Texas, and that it has the altermna-phase colors and pattern. Another example might be a Howard Draw blairi (i.e. a gray-band caught near Howard Draw in Crockett County that possesses the blairi colors and pattern.)¹

¹Current taxonomic thinking has all Gray-banded Kingsnakes under one epithet—Lampropeltis altermna, but acknowledges two color phases—altermna and blairi. Older scientific texts separate the two snakes as different species: L. altermna and L. blairi, while some biologists claim gray-bands are simply subspecies of yet another snake: Lampropeltis mexicana, the Durango Mountain King snake. It’s a confusing situation, but one biologists and snake hobbyists love to argue about.
Any gray-band that cannot be positively identified as to its locality of origin is simply referred to as a “mutt,” as are captive-bred alterna of questionable parentage. I can assure you the Believers value a pedigreed gray-band much more than those lightweights over at the American Kennel Club value their registered dogs!

In common practice, most gray-bands are associated with a highway or road name (e.g. Highway 277 or Juno Road), as the snakes are most often caught in the cracks and crevices of limestone road cuts. The reason most alterna are taken from road cuts has more to do with the Texas laws against trespass, and certain collecting regulations set up by the state, than with the specific type of habitat preferred by the snakes. As the majority of land in Texas is private property, law permits the average snake collector to hunt for snakes only along Texas’ public roadways. This privilege is extended, according to some interpretations of the statutes, up to “first fence.” Of course, where fences do not exist, the limits of trespass are interpreted by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department’s game wardens, or by the rancher, should he be curious why someone is shining a spot lamp into one of his pastures after dark.

As you might expect, illuminating the countryside at night with a high-powered spot lamp can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and anxiety. Ranchers and game wardens worry about livestock rustling or deer poaching, while snake hunters worry about getting a ticket or getting shot. This is because the former generally do not understand the desire of the latter to wander about the roadsides at night looking for snakes. In truth, the average Texan cannot fathom even liking snakes, much less engaging in what they view as dam fool nighttime excursions to catch them. This distinctly anti-snake bias stems from the simple fact that most Texans think not of the beautiful and harmless alterna when they think of snakes. Instead, they think mostly of rattlesnakes and occasionally of copperheads. This being the case, it is no wonder that ranchers and game wardens, like most folks, don’t know the difference between a gray-band and a hatband. However, they know for a certainty precisely what to do with trespassers, which is why snake collectors worry about getting shot.

Nevertheless, these potential difficulties are, to the Believers, just minor, somewhat irritating, parts of the game. Certainly they aren’t the only problems that may be encountered while hunting the coveted gray-band. Another potential, and more obvious, hazard, but one which certainly warrants mentioning, is the presence of other snakes. Oh yes, let us not forget that Texas is home to many other kinds of snakes. The state’s diverse landforms provide suitable habitat for a wide variety of reptiles to include a substantial population of snakes, among which are fifteen or so venomous species.

It just so happens that prime alterna habitat is also prime habitat for several different species of pit vipers, some of which look amazingly like Gray-banded Kingsnakes—at least they do at night under the dim light cast by a two-cell flashlight using last year’s batteries. Imagine yourself spotting what looks like a “screaming” blair’s phase gray-band (gray with orangish bands) only to realize as you excitedly curl your fingers around it that it is in fact a decidedly nasty little Trans-Pecos copperhead! Oh yeah! Can you say snake-bite? Sure you can. Try doing the same thing with an alterna phase (gray with black bands and spots) only to find yourself up close and personal with Mr. Rock Rattler (ditto the gray and bands).

Does this potential for mistaken identity bother the Believers? Of course not, they take the presence of all those various rattlesnakes and copperheads in stride—without snake boots, chaps, or protective leggings I might add. Amazingly, the typical footwear of alterna collectors in general is a good pair of athletic shoes.

Now, you might think these after dark excursions into snake-infested areas would absolutely demand some sort of foot and leg protection, but such is not the case my friend. In reality, a good pair of Nikes is almost required equipment for collecting alterna. If you had seen, as I have, a Believer leap from a still moving car to sprint a hundred yards in order to snatch a gray-band off the road in front of an on-coming tractor-trailer, missing a particularly messy personal demise by mere inches, you would know why boots and leggings are out of the question. Yes, Nike should tap into the advertising potential of the Believers if they really want to sell some shoes.

Such daring activity is also why most alterna collectors, but especially the Believers, possess driving skills that are normally exhibited only by graduates of the FBI Academy. I fancy myself a pretty competent man behind the wheel of a fast moving Ford or Chevy, but my first trip with a Believer to hunt alterna convinced me I knew nothing about handling a car. We made more emergency tactical stops (ETS, in snake hunter parlance), bootlegger turns, and pylon slalom maneuvers than you will see in a month of watching Chuck Norris on Walker—Texas Ranger. And all of this in the name of checking out that “snakey-looking shadow,” not squishing a live snake, or identifying some petrified D.O.R. (dead on road) serpent. It’s amazing how quickly I acquired the ability to see and identify worn out ropes, broken fan belts, and discarded nylon tie-down straps while traveling down a darkened road at high speed. I had to just to protect myself from whiplash! (Believer, behind the wheel going about 70 MPH: “Heeey! Was that a snake?” Me, clutching the dashboard and bracing in fear: “No! It was a rope! I’m sure it was a rope!”) If you’re ever driving at night during snake season with a Believer, take my advice—always wear your seatbelt!

Inquisitive game wardens, irate ranchers, venomous snakes, and speeding tractor-trailer rigs are not the only hazards faced by the enthusiastic alterna collector. Since a large portion of ideal gray-band habitat is found along some fairly desolate reaches of the Rio Grande River, snake collectors must also worry about nocturnal encounters with less-than-friendly illegal aliens and drug smugglers—people who, as one can imagine, also value the rugged terrain inhabited by gray-bands, but for entirely different reasons. There are also, naturally, a variety of lesser (and decidedly noisome) creatures to contend with, such as the ubiquitous scorpions, venomous centipedes longer than a man’s boot, and hand-sized tarantula spiders (along with legs of their diminutive, but deadly, cousins the black widows). We won’t even mention
especially, particularly when the joke is at some other snake collector’s expense. The absolute ultimate in hilarity for them is watching some poor neophyte alterna collector risk life and limb, his hands full of snake hook, spot lamp, and catch bag as he climbs a sixty foot limestone cut in an attempt to catch his first ever gray-band. In the darkness, tractor-trailer rigs roar by at seventy miles per hour, mere feet away, their tailwind vortices threatening to suck the guy right off the rock. But, almost miraculously, he finally makes it to the top only to find that the snake in question is made of rubber and it has been painstakingly painted to look just like a real alterna.

Such incidents of trickery are favorite Believer “gotchas,” and they spend long hours on winter evenings, when real snakes are hibernating, preparing their little decoys. There is even a story going around about a similar incident involving a dead, six-foot boa constrictor that one Believer placed high out of reach on a cut in good alterna territory. The antics of the two rookies from Colorado who almost killed themselves attempting to “catch” this mother of all gray-bands provided a particularly gut-wrenching laugh for the Believers. I personally know one Believer who has been saving a dead, thirteen-foot albino python in his family freezer as he waits for just the right set of circumstances to pull off the ultimate alterna gag. Of course, these little practical jokes sometimes backfire, as in the case of my nimble, mountain-goat-like friend.

It seems he had picked up a D.O.R. Mottled Rock Rattlesnake (Crotalus lepidus) from the Davis Mountains area, which he carried a couple hundred miles east. Upon arriving in good alterna country near Iraan, Texas he place the dead “lep” in a conspicuous location on a road cut known to have produced many gray-bands. As most snake hobbyists in Texas know, Davis Mountain lepidus are distinctly pinkish in color and could never be mistaken for a gray-band, particularly near Iraan, where there are no pink snakes. Nevertheless, the rosy little “lep” was spotted and mistaken for an alterna by some bleary-eyed snake hunter. This poor unfortunate victim was righteously outraged when he discovered his error, but as he indignantly threw the dead snake to the ground, he spied a beautiful little genuine alterna crawling along a nearby crack in the limestone cut. The punch line to this story is that the guy would have never even looked at the cut if he hadn’t seen the conspiraciously placed dead “lep”. The perpetrator of the joke, a true Believer, is still kicking himself over it, although I don’t know why. He wasn’t even present when his “gotcha” went down. It just goes to show you what catching a gray-band means to the faithful. Truthfully, just seeing an alterna can be an emotional event.

According to the Believers, seeing gray-bands is actually a once in approximately every thirty nights of hunting occurrence. Unfortunately, most collectors, even the faithful, must hold down a job during the day to pay for their snake hobby. This sad fact, coupled with the generally uncooperative West Texas weather, can make it a very long time before a collector gets thirty nights of snake hunting under his belt. I know one Believer who hunted for seven years before he finally saw his first gray-band. Another Believer ac-
quaintance went twelve years before spotting his first *alterna*. There are exceptions though, like the little thirteen-year-old girl who, on her first night out, spotted and caught the most beautiful blinds phase gray-band you'd ever want to see (the snake in the broker's office), and repeated her performance the very next night! While the Believers publicly congratulated her success, privately they shook their heads and chuckled their tongues.

"Too bad," they said. "She's just so young," they murmured. "What has she got to look forward to for the rest of her life now?"

Apparently, from what I can gather listening to the "chosen" (i.e. those Believers who have actually caught a gray-band), catching your first *alterna* is a seminal event likened among the faithful to losing your virginity or winning the lottery—only much better. Obviously, an occasion of such great moment should not be wasted on the young. As a consequence, the Believers advise against taking children to hunt for gray-bands. And this brings up a very important bit of advice about collecting *alterna* by yourself.

For safety's sake, collecting gray-bands is a hobby one should not participate in alone. It is much too easy to lose your grasp of reality when all you can see for hours and hours is the small slice of landscape illuminated by the wan cone of light your flashlight casts. Yes, it is critically important to have a good partner if you're going to be an *alterna* hunter. And since this pastime involves a lot of nighttime driving, a good partner is necessarily defined as one who (a) will not fall asleep—ever; (b) can spot a deer in the bar ditch at the extreme limit of your headlight fan; (c) will do whatever it takes to keep you awake while you're driving, even if it means listening to old Willie Nelson tapes for hours on end; and (d) understands the Rules.

What are the Rules, you ask? Simple. The Rules are the unwritten precepts used by the Believers to determine who takes possession of any gray-bands captured during the course of the night. This might seem to be an easy decision based on whoever actually captures the snake, but this is not the case. In reality, it is a very complicated, highly ritualized matter much like the process primitive hunting societies use to divvy up a dead pig. For Believers the process is governed by a variety of factors such as who owns the hunting vehicle, who was driving at the time, who spotted the snake, who caught the snake, was it the first snake of the night, the second (Ha! Ha! Riiight!), or whatever, how much of the gas and coffee expenses were shared, and a bunch of other things such as how well you like the guy, is the snake a particularly desirable color phase of gray-band, and is either one of you carrying a gun. For me, all bets are off and the Rules be damned if a Davis Mountains *alterna* is involved.

One last tip about collecting gray-bands: Don't bother going out if the weather conditions aren't just right. I have learned through my association with the Believers that there exists a particular combination of weather elements absent which no self-respecting *alterna* will deign to show itself. It is taken as gospel among the Believers that unless the barometer reading is 29.8 and falling, humidity is 70% or higher (a very light rain is sometimes good), the sky is overcast, the moon is dark, and the wind blowing at 5 to 10 MPH from the southeast, you may as well save your gas because no *alterna* will be moving. That is, unless they are moving, in which case just record the weather conditions and make up your own gospel.

Yes indeed! Hunting gray-bands certainly ranks right up there on the list of most enjoyable things you can do at night in Texas. I've spent many a night between April and October these past three years endlessly driving and walking the back roads of West Texas in my search for the elusive *alterna*. I'm here to tell you if you like danger, excitement, intrigue, and just plain fun, not to mention hour upon hour of mind-numbing boredom, this is the hobby for you. It's sorta like trying to teach your wife how to shoot a gun, or your fifteen-year-old son how to drive—endless frustration interspersed with brief moments of extreme, heart-pounding anxiety. Still, I keep at it even though I have only once, definitely, seen a wild *alterna* and it was dead on the road, killed by the car in front of me. *Arrrgh*!

Actually, I may have come close to catching a gray-band just west of Fort Davis. It was around 1:00 A.M. when my light illuminated a cut about ten feet high and I saw the tail end of a dark-colored snake disappearing into a fissure. I climbed quickly, hook in hand, but the snake slithered deeper into the crack before I could bring steel to bear. My partners on that trip, along with several others of the faithful, were convinced it was an *alterna* and if we searched hard enough, or waited long enough, the snake would reappear. We did, but it didn't. Our failure was a heart-rending experience for me, to say the least. Salvation had been so close! Speaking of salvation...

The Believers are rumored to have a leader of sorts. This high priest of the ophidian congregation is apparently living on top of a nearly inaccessible peak somewhere in the southern reaches of the Davis Mountains. Like all wise men, he lives alone, abstaining from worldly pleasures so that he may dedicate himself to meditation and contemplation of life's higher meaning which, in this case, revolves around the mythical existence of an albino gray-band (or something like that).

Before he became shaman and spiritual advisor to the Believers, as the story goes, he was apparently a dedicated family man and upstanding citizen who made his living before the bar. Fortunately, sometime during his middle years he received a calling and so forsook his friends and neighbors and moved to an isolated locale in the heart of good *alterna* country. Legend has it that instead of handing out legal advice, he now hands down words of *alterna* wisdom such as,

"Thou shalt not quest for thy quarry among the thorns and spines. Seek them only in the breast of rock where the angel *S. poinsetti* shall guide thee."2

They say that devout followers who have gazed upon the stern, craggy visage of this spiritual leader, not to mention having drooled over his collection

2 Loosely translated, this means steer clear of the cactus flats and mesquite thickets if you're looking for gray-bands, and when you are in gray-band habitat, keep an eye open for Crevicce Spiny Lizards (*Sceloporus poinsetti poinsetti*)—when you find crevice spiny, you'll likely find the snakes that prey on them, too.
of Davis Mountain *alterna*, have come away renewed and anxious to fulfill their quest for the Holy Grail of snakes. Personally, I've never made the pilgrimage to the wise man, but perhaps I should. I could use some good *alterna* hunting advice. Besides, maybe he has some baby gray-bands to sell.

If you’re getting the idea that I’m discouraged by all my non-productive hunts for *alterna*, you’re right—I’m very discouraged. I’ve been on so many trips where I felt fortunate to see any snake, even a dead one, I can’t count them all. I have stared at limestone cuts so often, without seeing anything except spiders, scorpions, and millipedes, I’ve acquired the physiological equivalent of computer screen burn. At times, I even began to believe that somehow I was overlooking *alterna* that were lying there in plain view. Ultimately, I went through moments of complete breakdown when (gasp) I doubted that gray-bands even existed in Texas. However, along about that time, almost invariably, some wonderfully lucky guy, full of exuberance and *joie de vivre*, would pull up and cheerfully produce a neatly tied muslin bag containing a freshly caught *alterna*—taken, if you can believe it, off the cut I just hunted five minutes ago! At times like this you can only fall back on the sage advice of the seasoned gray-band collector: You just gotta believe the snakes are out there. Do you see now, why I call them the Believers?

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**Tools of the Trade—West Texas Style**

Field collecting reptiles and amphibians can be as simple as picking a toad up off the sidewalk, an act requiring no tools at all, or it may necessitate the use of various implements designed to find, catch, hold, and manipulate animals. In West Texas, field herping requires tools that run the gamut from steel snake hooks to four-wheel drive vehicles. In this article we will briefly discuss some common herping implements used by West Texas herpers. The purpose of the discussion is to introduce neophyte field collectors and regional visitors to the extensive array of equipment, improvised and otherwise, employed in the pursuit of reptiles and amphibians that inhabit the vast, poorly charted regions of the Trans-Pecos.

Among the many useful items a herper may need to collect West Texas reptiles and amphibians is a "snake" hook. This device is actually a multi-use tool that has purposes far beyond what its name implies. It can, of course, be used to catch and manipulate snakes, especially the venomous varieties, but it may also be used to push brush and cactus aside and to turn over objects under which animals may be hiding, such as rocks and well, rocks (there being not much else for herps to hide under in the Trans-Pecos). A hook can also be used to pick up things the herper wishes to examine when boredom sets in, like fly-blown road kills and similar interesting bits of highway flotsam and jetsam. A snake hook is also useful, providing it’s long enough, to retrieve that cooler full of refreshing beverages from the far end of the pickup truck’s bed.

Naturally, there are many types of hooks available, some better (and more expensive) than others. Herpers on a budget may actually improvise a snake hook by modifying any number of utilitarian implements that have been designed for other purposes. One esoteric herper of my acquaintance has even used a bright red umbrella to catch and manipulate rattlesnakes. Almost as easy, snake hooks can be manufactured at home from commonly available materials, a wire coat hanger for example (useful for ringneck snakes and other small serpents). For herpers who have money (if such people actually exist), there are many commercially manufactured hooks from which to choose. Generally speaking, you get what you pay for with the commercial brands, but all will suffice to handle virtually any West Texas herp, and most can easily lift a six-pack. Just bear in mind that the average store-bought hook is designed to manipulate reptiles—not to flip rocks, excavate burrows, or climb rock cuts.

Another useful item for West Texas herping is a hand-held source of artificial light. Many reptiles and amphibians native to the western reaches of Texas are strictly nocturnal. As inhabitants of the northern Chihuahuan Desert, nocturnality is important for survival in the face of the hot, desiccating, daytime temperatures typical of their seasonal activity period. Even normally diurnal or crepuscular creatures become nocturnal when summer temperatures climb into the high 90s or low 100s. It follows then, that if a herper expects to see these animals in their native habitats artificial light is an absolute necessity.

An ordinary flashlight can be used to search for West Texas herps, but
the amount of light produced by a few D cell batteries is really inadequate for the purpose, particularly if you're trying to identify a snake you think might be venomous. Better than flashlights are the various hand-held spot lamps powered by wet cell batteries or rechargeable battery packs. These lights start at 50,000 candlepower and go up. Some spot lamps are rated as high as 500,000 candlepower, or more, and they produce a lot of light, maybe more than is really necessary for after dark field collecting. Nevertheless, according to some West Texas herpers, there is no such thing as too much light, especially when you are looking for snakes.

The one drawback to spot lamps is the by-product of all that light—it's called heat. My herping buddy has a rechargeable spot lamp that is rated (you won't believe this) at 1,000,000 candlepower (that's one million). I've used it and I can assure you that this light will illuminate a blind snake crawling over a rock face a half mile or more distant, not that you could see the snake without binoculars. The trouble with a light this powerful is that it gets really hot. My buddy brags that his can easily burn the fur off a ringtail at twenty-five yards—even while driving at 70 miles per hour. If you slow down to 50, he confidently assures me, the ringtail will be cooked medium rare. Speaking of driving...

Herping in West Texas is, by necessity, a vehicular pastime. Distances are long in the Trans-Pecos, and good herping locales are normally separated by huge expanses of thorny, impenetrable wasteland commonly known as ranches. Accordingly, reliable transportation is an absolute necessity. Virtually any kind of vehicle can serve a herper's purposes—some early West Texas herpers actually used horse drawn wagons. The trouble with wagons, and even modern cars and trucks, is that they don't come from the factory properly equipped for "road hunting." (Please see the note at the end of this article.)

Avid West Texas herpers must acquire their vehicles with certain future modifications in mind, the most common alteration being the addition of auxiliary lights (which is in keeping with the old West Texas herper's adage mentioned above about "never having too much light"). The type of lights added will vary with individual preference, but fog lamps, driving lights, or spot lights are the norm. These lights are mounted on the front of the vehicle, naturally, but a few enterprising herpers also mount lights on the sides and rear of their vehicles. The side and rear mounted lights illuminate the shoulder area of the roads, but particularly the rock cuts, as well as the area behind the vehicle (should a drowsy herper accidentally drive past a snake and need to back up without creating yet another DOR serpent).

Vehicles with reclining seats and quick-detachable doors are particularly desirable for West Texas herping trips. Reclining seats permit sleepy herpers to catnap comfortably, preferably after pulling to the side of the road and turning the engine off. A few above average herpers, like the intrepid WTHS president, have actually learned how to sleep and drive at the same time. The pres' has eyelids as translucent as a gecko's belly so he can snooze at the wheel and still spot herps crawling on the road. At the very least his eyelids permit him to detect the glow of headlights from an oncoming eighteen wheeler in ample time to steer back into the proper lane. The pres' notwithstanding, a typical West Texas herper can't see through his eyelids and will welcome the opportunity to kick back on the side of the road for a short nap (this is particularly true of us old guys who find it harder and harder to pull "all-nighters.")

The reason detachable vehicle doors are a major convenience in West Texas is because when they are removed road-cruising collectors can easily leap from the still rolling vehicle to catch snakes, lizards, and other herps they've spotted before the animals have a chance to escape. If you've ever tried to stop in time to catch a coachwhip or a whiptail lizard, you can appreciate what I'm talking about. More importantly, the absence of doors permits Great Horned Owls (a common nocturnal roadside predator) to fly in one side of the vehicle and right out the other side, which is an important consideration for herpers who manifest a mild paranoia about four pounds of highly agitated feathers equipped with two-inch talons getting trapped inside the car (you can ask my best herpin' buddy about this malady—it's called autobubophobia).

Probably the nicest thing about removable doors though, is the ensuing breeze—even if, on a routine basis, the breeze is as hot as a convection oven (which is what you should expect at 2:00 A.M. on the River Road in Presidio County.) Should the Trans-Pecos region ever get reliable cell phone service, I'm sure some enterprising pizza delivery business will take advantage of the nice hot breezes to actually cook their pizzas in the car while enroute to the customer. Just think how fast delivery times would be. I'm sorry—we weren't talking about herping tools? Let's see... Oh yes! Once you catch something, you have to put it somewhere, naturally.

Receptacles for captured specimens are no different for West Texas herps than containers used for reptiles caught elsewhere. In other words, we use old pillowcases, too. Of course, down around Dryden and over Terlingua way West Texas herpers normally eschew brightly decorated pillowcases, especially those involving the color pink, or any having flowers imprinted on the material. It just doesn't do to be seen walking down a ranch road in cowboy country carrying a cloth bag of decidedly feminine pattern—even if the bag does happen to contain a three foot long Mojave Rattlesnake. Herpers may understand, but cowhands and oil field workers wouldn't.

Okay, it seems that I have covered most of the essential equipment for herping in West Texas. The one thing I have not mentioned that really is absolutely necessary, is a good herping partner. Since a herping partner cannot necessarily be categorized as equipment (and because the qualities that make up a "good" herping partner are so many and so diverse), I will reserve a discussion of this topic for a later date.

Note: Road hunting is a pejorative term, especially in the minds of game wardens and TPWD officials, because the phrase implies shooting from a vehicle. As used in this article road hunting means driving along the highways looking for snakes. According to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, it is illegal to drive along the public roads in Texas for the purpose of finding and collecting animals—including snakes—that may be crossing the road. Even though guns and shooting are obviously not a part of road hunting for herps, it is still illegal to do it.
Blue Lights, Big Ol’ Snakes, and the Pussy that Got Away

My herpin’ buddy, Dean, and I were road cruising his favorite stretch of herp habitat in Val Verde County when we spotted a pair of eyes reflecting brightly from the tall grass immediately adjacent to the shoulder of the road. Our first thought was ringtail, but a closer look revealed an animal of distinctly non-ringtail shape. It was only when we were nearly past it that we realized the creature skulking along the shoulder was an ordinary yellow cat, ol’ Felis housecatis, or something like that. It was evidently occupying its time by trying to catch moths and various other arthropod creatures crawling upon the road, but Dean and I both knew this feline marauder would happily dine on a small, slow-moving snake (i.e. a gray-band) if it could. Cats, especially feral cats that must hunt to survive, frequently become very efficient snake killers, even learning to take rattlesnakes. This behavior is well documented in the herpetological literature so even if our past experiences with feral cats hadn’t generated a personal animosity towards them, the scientific evidence of their unnatural and unfortunate predation of snakes would have. As you may have already guessed, we were not favorably disposed to let an actively hunting feral cat go unmolested, particularly since it was prowling in an area immediately adjacent to a rock cut well known for producing very pretty alterna.

The obvious solution to the problem would have been a quick, well-aimed shot from a small caliber pistol, such as a .22, but shooting from a roadway is illegal and besides, the armaments in our possession were designed for distinctly larger varmints—they would generate far too much noise. A quick, satisfying shot between the running lights was simply out of the question. Nevertheless, Dean pulled a bootlegger turn and cruised back past the oblivious cat. Some seventy yards down the road he turned again and immediately began to pick up speed. Ah ha! I got it! We were going to give kitty a terminal case of rubber “poisoning”—or so we thought.

This particular pussy was evidently well versed in the survival protocols necessary for hunting along a rural West Texas highway. Ignoring our rapidly approaching vehicle, it blithely continued stalking a camel cricket until the very last second, whereupon it nimbly and nonchalantly hopped into the tall grass next to the road. Needless to say, despite maneuvering Dean’s old Pathfinder like an Indy driver, we missed. Undaunted, Dean circled and we repeated our attempt—three more times—with precisely the same results. The cat appeared totally nonplussed by these “attacks.” Each time we roared down on kitty, he waited until we were committed to our final attack run—and could not easily or safely deviate from our flight path—whereupon he would simply, almost disdainfully, step aside. It was really aggravating to us, but we were there to hunt snakes, not cats, so when the nimble feline disappeared into the mountain laurel growing out of the cut, we gave up and focused our attentions on reptiles.

We decided to hunt the long cut the cat had disappeared on, and an adjacent cut just a quarter mile up the road. Dean would hunt the cut up the road, while I would focus my attentions on the one harboring the cat. After
parking sort of equidistant between the cuts, we exited the vehicle, grabbed our lights and hooks, and began walking in opposite directions, our expectations not particularly high. You see, the wind was blowing at something like twenty knots, straight out of the south, and the moon was nearly full and very bright. Temperatures were mediocre as well—in the low 70s. These were not the best conditions for snakes, but Dean was on a mission. As usual, he was looking for a Trans-Pecos Ratsnake (Boğerophis subocularis) to pair up with another he had from this same locality.

Approaching my cut, I was surprised to see the ugly yellow cat slinking along out in the open. He was still hugging the tall grass and looking for prey, but now he was actually walking right towards me from only fifty feet away. Since the wind was blowing straight up the road, from the cat to me, he couldn’t get my scent and he appeared completely unperturbed by the glow of my 100,000 candlepower spotlight lamp. Realizing fate had handed me another opportunity to protect the indigenous wildlife from this bloodthirsty killer, I look around for something to use as a weapon. Unfortunately, there was nothing within reach that would serve the purpose. I would have to make do with what I had in my hands—the spotlight lamp and my hundred and forty dollar, heavy duty, Fuhman snake hook.

Called the Stump Ripper, this hook is advertised as being strong enough to, literally, pull stumps out of the ground—or at least to flip heavily rocks. My particular version is the extreme-duty, reinforced model with a titanium hook that, theoretically, is much stronger than a regular hook. Having no empirical data regarding its actual stump pulling qualities I was, nevertheless, about to find out if my Stump Ripper was a good cat ripper, too. Unfortunately, the cat had other ideas in mind.

Before he came anywhere close enough for me to demonstrate my best cavalry saber slashing technique, a cricket on the other side of the road attracted his attention. The cat darted after it and I was left standing there frustrated, the razor edge of my unsheathed “saber” shimmering dangerously in the moonlight (a red plastic safety tip on the end of the titanium hook notwithstanding). Not to be deterred, I waited for a couple of cars to pass and then stealthily crept after the cat. By this time, kitty had taken up station on a bit of exposed bedrock some twenty-five feet off the paved portion of the road. He was alertly scanning the grass clumps in search of more bugs (or snakes), and I knew I was never going to be able to approach close enough for a killing “thrust” with the Stump Ripper. Fortunately, just a few steps away were two, lovely, fist-sized rocks imminently suitable for my purposes. I managed to acquire both of them, at which point I was only fifteen feet away from the still unaware cat. As he looked around for more prey, I noticed he had a fairly fresh wound on his forehead, just above his left eye. Obviously, he’d had a run-in with a vehicle before.

Thoughts of my old Little League coaching days passed through my mind as I reared back and aimed the rock at the bloody knot on the cat’s head. Determined to rid the world of this pest, I let fly in my best fast ball fashion producing a hard, straight, right-down-the-pipe throw that I know broke 80 miles per hour. The trouble was, the rock struck the ground three feet in front of the cat, bounced just over his head, caromed noisily through the tall dead grass, and smacked against the rusted woven-wire fence, which it jangled loudly.

All this commotion convinced the cat that it was under assault by some other creature. It let out a loud, feline Yeeeeooowwrrrr! and attacked the rock. When it suddenly realized the rock was not another creature, it pulled up short and looked quizzically around, just as I let fly with rock number two. This time I aimed better, and my throw was much harder (at least 90 mph, I’ll bet). The result was that I missed the cat yet again—by at least eight feet—but boy did I rattle the fence! For his part, the cat decided he’d had enough. He quickly decamped, fur standing on end all over his body, to disappear among the cacti (How ironic!) and sotol.

Somewhat dejected, and suddenly feeling very, very old, I crossed the road to my cut where I nursed an arm that was starting to hurt. As I walked along illuminating the limestone rocks with my lamp, I spotted a section of exposed rock substrate and realized that this was the exact spot where, three years earlier, I had discovered my first Eastern Barking Frog (Eleutherodactylus augusti latrans). No sooner had this thought crossed my mind than a sort of hopping motion caught my eye. Guess what? Yep! Another barking frog—my second! How’s that for a coincidence?

I collected the frog and had just finished putting it in a bag when I heard a southbound vehicle approaching. Since I was on the northbound side of the road I wasn’t much concerned, but the vehicle started to slow down as it got closer. Turning to see if it was stopping I was terrified to find it veering directly at me. Good God! Blinded by the headlights, I momentarily reacted like any wild animal—I froze. Had I been a Crevice Spiny Lizard I could have simply scooted into a crack. Instead, I took what evasive action I could. Without thinking, I tossed the Stump Ripper to the side, jumped out of the vehicle’s path, and had my hand on my secondary weapon before I realized I was not in danger of becoming another DOR—the vehicle had slowed considerably. Obviously, the driver was simply stopping, not actually trying to run me over, but he still scared the you-know-what out of me. My heart was pounding and my adrenalin surging. Needless to say, I felt remarkably like I’d just caught a gray-band, the only difference being that catching a gray-band ordinarily does not involve copious amounts of bathroom tissue.

As the vehicle’s tires crunched loudly on the dead grass and broken beer bottles in front of me, I heard a man’s voice say,

“Buenas noches, Senor.”

Turning slightly away from the voice so the driver wouldn’t see that I was holding a lethal weapon in my hand, I allowed the periphery of my spot lamp beam to illuminate him before I responded.

“Howdy,” I said, flatly. “What can I do for you?” I intentionally tried to make the tone of my voice gruff and unfriendly. I was very suspicious of this stranger, and more than a little perturbed at the fashion in which he had approached. Unfortunately, despite lowering my voice and attempting to
sound peevish, the words came out high pitched, in a sort of quavering falsetto that would have scared no one. Hoping the driver hadn't noticed my girlish squeakiness, I took a good look at him.

The spotlight revealed a youngish man, clearly of Mexican extraction, who was driving what looked like an older model Toyota pickup truck. He was dressed in wash-worn camouflage clothes, and his truck was dirty, battered, and obviously much abused.

"Pardon, Senor," he began politely. "But I was wondering what it is you search for at night along this road. Are you perhaps one of the snake catchers?"

Clearing my throat several times, I responded in the affirmative. The questions continued—both ways—and I decided this fellow was probably harmless. Relaxing, I shut my light off, surreptitiously holstered the pistol, and proceeded to engage in a bit of pleasant conversation.

It turned out that the driver was a government predator trapper who worked the ranches in the area. His home was in Carta Valley and he was on his way there, but curiosity had gotten the better of him when he'd seen the spot lamp. In fact, he'd passed by earlier—just as I was throwing rocks at the cat—and had circled back to investigate. He queried me about the rock-throwing.

"Were you trying to kill a snake, Senor?"

"No," I replied, somewhat sheepishly. "I was actually trying to kill a cat over there." I pointed to the other side of the road. This statement seemed to arouse the hunter's interest.

"Which kind, Senor?" he asked with excitement as he reached to retrieve a battered .30-30 carbine. "Was it a bobcat or leon, the lion?"

"Neither," I admitted. "It was just an old housecat."

"Oh, too bad," came his disappointed response. "But do not worry, there are many cats in these hills. You must be careful of leon, however. He is very strong and muy peligroso" Oh, that was just what I wanted to hear. I don't speak much Spanish, but I was definitely getting his drift. After a few more such pleasanters, followed by my emphatic assurances that I really didn't kill and eat the snakes I found, the trapper bid me good night and made his departure.

Shortly afterwards, I noticed Dean's light moving back towards the Pathfinder, so I turned back also. It was just as well, for the battery to my light died completely while I was still a couple hundred yards away from the truck. It didn't matter much. The moon was so bright it was like walking under a street lamp.

Arriving at the vehicle, I discovered Dean's luck had been no better than mine. Other than the barking frog and the predator trapper, we hadn't seen a thing. I changed my battery while Dean got the hourly pressure and humidity reading from Del Rio via his special radio. We'd been hunting for a couple hours and had seen no snakes at all. I know Dean was worried about getting skunked—he almost always worries about getting skunked (primarily because when we're herping he refuses to acknowledge herps with legs). De-

ciding it was just too darn windy to walk the cuts anymore, we got back in the Pathfinder to do a little road cruising. We hadn't traveled ten yards when we saw a huge snake stretched across our lane of travel. Bullsnake, I thought. An instant later I realized it wasn't any kind of Pituophis, but was actually a gian-
tic subocular.

Quickly, we stopped the vehicle and jumped out to catch the snake. Normally, suboculars are simply picked up by hand with complete impunity because they virtually never bite, but this snake was so big I decided I would take no chances. I tried to hook it, but it apparently didn't care that I was wielding the Cadillac of snake hooks—it kept slithering off into the grass. Finally, I got a decent grip on its tail and after that it came along peacefully.

"Well now! Dean had come looking for a subocular and by golly, this was a subocular! Unfortunately, it was about three feet longer than what Dean was looking for, not to mention being the wrong sex. We later measured it and by our combined efforts determined that it was within a fraction of an inch either way of five feet four inches. I'm sure there have been longer suboculars discovered by other herpers, but I can assure you, the one we caught that night was the biggest I've ever seen. After a snapping a few pictures, the big boy was released at the point of capture and we headed home.

The only other snake we saw alive that evening was a young Western Diamondback female that I spotted on the shoulder of the road just a quarter mile south of Eldorado. Oddly enough, the last time Dean and I passed through Eldorado on our way home from a herping trip we spotted a nearly identical little atrox just inside the city limits. The two snakes could have been twins.

We did have one other small misadventure that night. Somewhere between Sonora and Eldorado we passed three law enforcement vehicles parked on the southbound side of the highway, one beside the other. It was around 2:00 A.M. and they were obviously sitting there, lights out, shooting the breeze, or whatever it is they do at that time of the morning all together in one spot. As we passed, I noticed the outboard car was a Border Patrol vehicle. We had progressed about three quarters of a mile when Dean said,

"He's coming after us."

I looked in my rear view mirror and, sure enough, there was a car back there with flashing blue lights. Dean reluctantly pulled to the shoulder as we turned on all the interior lights, rolled down the window, and put our hands where the officer would be able to see them. It turned out we'd been pulled over by a sheriff's deputy from Sutton County. As he approached the driver's side window we made no moves at all. We didn't want to scare him in any way and perhaps end up perforated. He asked for Dean's driver's license and, after a cursory examination, told him the reason he stopped him was because he'd clocked us going 68 in a 65 mile per hour zone. Okaaaay... Dean's response was very polite and patient, using words of two syllables or less—just like you do when you speak to a child.

"Oh, really? Gee whiz, officer. I'm very sorry, but I have my cruise control set at 60 miles per hour. I don't think it's eight miles off, but maybe I
should get it checked.” (Dean deliberately runs five miles under the posted speed limit after dark.) The deputy asked if we were coming up from Del Rio, which we weren’t, of course, and Dean told him so. He didn’t ask what we had been doing out there at 2:00 A.M. and Dean didn’t volunteer the information. Obviously, we’d been stopped because the deputy was either a bored, b. showing off to his buddies, or c. both: Heh, heh! Ah b’lieve ah’ll jest check them boys out and see what they’re doin’. Betcha they been drinkin down to Acuna’. Ah’ll jest put th’ fear of God in ’em!

The deputy’s comment about why he pulled us over was a lie—he knew it and we knew it, but at 2:00 A.M. when you’re really tired, it’s sometimes better to just go along with the stupidity—providing it doesn’t get too out of hand. We played along and were soon on our way again. Thankfully, the rest of the evening proved entirely uneventful.

Even though we saw only two snakes, I counted the trip a total success. I was particularly happy to have encountered the big suboc. I hope wherever he is now, he is doing well. Perhaps he found a nice, receptive female suboc after we let him go. He certainly deserved to.

As for the cat, well... You can bet Dean and I will keep our eyes open for him. We hope you will, too. He seems to hang around those long cuts just south of the Radio Tower. Those of you who know Dean will know exactly where I’m talking about. If you do see him, just remember: Vultures have to eat, too. (I’m talking about the cat—not Dean, for Heaven’s sake!)

Oh, and don’t forget to keep your cruise set on sixty after dark. We wouldn’t want you to recklessly exceed the speed limit by two or three miles per hour. With those blue lights flashing in your rear view mirror, you might miss seeing a snake!

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**Herping with the Distaff**

*dis taff (dis taf, -tāf), n. Archaic. A woman or women collectively. Should you ever contemplate taking your spouse on a snake hunting trip, here’s a little advice from someone who has recently had the pleasure: think long and hard before making this decision. You may even want to consult your pastor, your stock broker, and the psychic hotline before actually taking a step of such enormous magnitude. Believe me, a decision like this could possibly change your life. At the very least, it might affect the sleeping arrangements in your house. Don’t think so, huh? Well, let me just offer a few anecdotal examples of what herping with the distaff can be like. Perhaps then you’ll be willing to heed my words of advice.*

When you have finally been badgered into, er... I mean, when you have consented to take your wife herping you’ll find that standing operating procedures have changed markedly from what you’ve been used to. To start with, your familiar and timeworn methods of preparing for the trip will be thrown into complete disarray. I found this out the first time I took my spouse along and made the mistake of suggesting that she wear shoes a little more substantial than the sandals that adorned her feet as she stepped up into the truck. Her response was to look at me in that way wives do when you have just proposed an idea that apparently constitutes fashion blasphemy.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “What’s wrong with my sandals? I just bought them and they match these Capris pants perfectly.”

“Well,” came my cautious response. “They may match your pants, but they’ll be absolutely useless to protect you from cactus spines and mesquite thorns.” This comment immediately raised another ugly topic.

“Are you saying that I’ll have to get out of the truck?”

“Of course not,” came my studied reply. “The snakes will simply crawl right through your open door if you call to them sweetly. You won’t have to do a thing except get your bag ready.” At this she gave me “the look”, but the sandals were eventually exchanged for tennis shoes, thus creating a major fashion faux pas. Still, I was pretty sure Joan Rivers would not be lurking along the ranch roads waiting to report this fashion misdeed. In hindsight, I probably should have let my wife find out for herself about sandals and cactus, but I was giving her the same consideration I’d have given any herping partner, although my regular herping partner would never wear sandals with Capris pants. Hmmm... Now that I think about it, I don’t believe he even owns a pair of Capris pants, although I could be mistaken. He does have a few loud Hawaiian shirts, though—but I digress...”

The important thing about this silly fashion discussion was that it resulted in an interruption of my official, pre-departure mental checklist. You know what I’m talking about—it’s when you’re sitting behind the wheel just before leaving the driveway, and you’re asking yourself if you have everything you’ll need. The unexpected comments about footwear completely ruined this mental exercise (and at my age, mental exercises are already difficult). As a result, we left home without the single most important piece of equipment a
snake hunter might need. That's right, a snake hook. Of course, I didn't come
to this realization until we were ninety miles into the trip.

Under routine circumstances, forgetting a snake hook would have
been no big deal because I have more than one. Like most guys, though, I
have a favorite and that was the one left standing comfortably in the corner of
the front foyer at home. Compounding the problem was the fact that all
the spare hooks were in my truck, which was still in the garage. We were in my
spouse's truck, which, with its comfortable leather seats, four-wheel disc
brakes, and superior lighting, actually makes a better snake-hunting vehicle
than mine. Unfortunately, since it is rarely used for snake hunting, there are no
spare snake hooks inside—or spare anything else that might reasonably serve
the same purpose. All I could do was hope that any snakes we encountered
would be non-venomous colubrids—serpents that may be captured safely by
hand. Well, you know that didn't happen.

The very first snake we saw, well before nightfall, was a young Western
Diamondback lying in the road soaking up residual warmth from the
pavement. I quickly stopped the truck and jumped out to examine it. The snake
turned out to be a healthy, young female approximately thirty inches long.

After recording all the pertinent data about locality, time, and weather, I prepared
to move her off the road so a car wouldn't kill her. Not having a hook, I
searched about for a mesquite limb or a dried sotol stalk—all I found was cactus
and rock. Then I tried nudging the snake carefully with my boot toe, but
instead of fleeing to the grassy roadside, she elected to bluff her way out—she
coiled and started to rattle. Nothing I did would make her leave, and she was
snack dab in the left tire track of the northbound lane. Despite being on a
lonesome ranch road, I was afraid an oil field truck would pass by soon
and end the dilemma for me. Urgently calling to my wife, I inquired if she had
anything at all in the truck that I could use to move the snake. An old coat
hanger, a stick, anything—I was desperate.

"Just a minute," she responded excitedly. "I've got something I think
will work!"

"Good, good!" I yelled. "But hurry up with it before a car comes!"
Within a few seconds she approached me from behind.

"Here," I heard her say. "Keeping my eyes on the snake, I reached
back to take whatever it was she'd found. I felt a hard, smooth object in my
hand.

"Thanks, honey!" I said gratefully, but when I brought the object to
bear on the snake I was flabbergasted to discover I was holding the curved
plastic handle of a bright red umbrella! Oh, for cryin' out loud! This was too
much! Quickly I flipped the snake off the road (the umbrella worked
perfectly) and dashed back to the truck. I couldn't get out of there fast enough.
I was no longer worried about oncoming cars hitting the snake. My fear was
having one of my herping buddies come along to find me dancing around in
the middle of the road with a red umbrella. I could easily imagine the taunting
chants.

"Hey, hey, Mary Poppins! Did you lose your snake?" Haw! Haw!

Or, "I say old chap, is it raining snakes out here?" B'waaa ha! Ha! Ha!

As you might have guessed, we saw a lot of atrox on the road that
trip, several more of them before it got dark. I flipped or scooped all of them
off the pavement—with the umbrella. Nevertheless, you have no idea how
thankful I was when darkness finally shrouded the landscape, yet my wife's
response to all this anxiety was typically female.

"Well, it worked, didn't it?" That was completely beside the point.
Real herpers, especially old, retired Marines, don't use umbrellas—they just
don't! Umbrellas are for sailors and other sissies.

Another snake hunting procedure that will be affected by having your
spouse along has to do with the necessity to perform bodily functions. After
miles and miles of driving, and the consumption of countless cups of coffee
(and diet Coke, too), nature will take its course. Unfortunately, there are few
public restrooms or roadside rest areas along the typical West Texas ranch or
farm to market road. This poses no problem for us guys, but it is something of
a problem for the distaff—especially at one o'clock in the morning when it's
very dark outside. Let me illustrate...

"I have to pee," comes a plaintive declaration from my wife as we
slowly cruise along a Terrell County ranch road.

"Okay, I'll stop in a minute," I respond. "There's a place right up
the road here." Two minutes later we arrive at a conveniently flat and clear spot at
the end of a nice long cut and pull over. Chivalrously, I stop where the cactus
and catclaw formed a natural little opening perfectly suited to a woman's
private "ablutions". My wife peers through the window into the blackness.

"Are you sure this is a rest stop?" she asks as she scrutinizes the
darkened thicket. "I can't see the restroom. Where is it?" Chuckling, I respond.

"Right out there, anywhere, but watch out for the cactus."

"What? You mean I'm supposed to just go out there in the dark?"

"Sure, it's not like anyone is going to see you. There hasn't been
another vehicle down this road for two hours."

"Well, what about snakes?" she asks, anxiously. Oh my Gawd! Is she
kidding? Snakes are what we came here for.

"Maybe you'll get lucky and see one," comes my deadpan response.
Silence. She ruminates for a while before asking another seemingly inane
question.

"But where do I actually, you know, go?" As a retired Marine who
has spent much of his life on bivouacs, my response is automatic.

"Just use a cat hole."

"What's a cat hole?"

"You mean you don't know what a cat hole is?" I asked, somewhat
dumbfounded.

"Well, of course I do," came her sarcastic reply. "It's what a dog sees
when it chases a cat." Needless to say, the conversation went downhill from
there. My snake hunting routes are no longer planned exclusively by plotting
good road cuts. Whenever my wife is along, the route is selected by correlating
the time/distance/caffeine factor with the availability of all night conven-
ience stores. This has changed the "combat radius" of my herping trips significantly.

Oh, and another thing, do not expect your spouse to use proper terminology or to be familiar with the scientific names of any of the animals you encounter. Distaff terms of reference are frequently somewhat vague and inaccurate. I learned this as we drove along the River Road in Presidio County one night when rodents seemed to be everywhere.

As a naturalist, I like to keep track of the different species of animals we encounter, including mammals, but sometimes you don't get a good look at the creature as it scurries out of sight. This was the case the other night when I mistook a mouse for a rabbit.

"What kind of mouse was that?" I'd ask, expecting a response on the order of Peromyscus, Reithrodontomys, or Perognathus. Instead, what I got was a bit more general.

"Oh, it was a cute wittle onefor!" or, "It was one of those fluffy-puffy psycho ones!" Right...Descriptive? Perhaps. Vague? Inaccurate? You be the judge.

Not only is distaff terminology a bit, shall we say different, you may be surprised to learn that your spouse also has an entirely different attitude about some of the creatures inhabiting your favorite herping habitat. Take, for example, the various species of lagomorpha encountered in the Trans-Pecos.

Rabbits are ubiquitous at night in West Texas, especially along the roads. The strange thing about them is their apparent propensity for committing suicide by running across the road immediately in front of oncoming vehicles. As a naturalist, I am curious about why they do this, but as a herpetologist I really don't care. It's just not that important. What is important is that a road-cruising herper quickly learn to ignore this seemingly aberrant behavior. Drivers may be conditioned to avoidance responses when someone's dog or cat runs into the road, but such responses can easily lead to accidents when you are traveling at a high rate of speed on a lonesome Trans-Pecos ranch road, especially during the wee hours. Knowing this, most experienced herpers don't even blink when a long-eared jackrabbit or fast moving cottontail suddenly darts in front of the vehicle—when the result is a soggy thump somewhere along the vehicle's undercarriage. Wives, on the other hand, may react much differently. I found this out the hard way when returning from a very long trip one night.

Entering a long, straight stretch of road in Irion County, I felt comfortable that we would encounter no snakes. I was very tired, naturally, so I decided to kick back and relax. In essence, you could say I was on autopilot. The road was straight and wide, there were no other vehicles and, for once, the deer all seemed to be hiding in the mesquite. There were, of course, many rabbits...

We had been cruising along in peaceful silence for several minutes when the quiet was suddenly shattered by a horrendous noise that sounded very much like the violent rending of metal. It was my wife.

"OH NO! LOOK OUT!" she screeched, abruptly snapping me out of my reverie. She grabbed my arm violently, digging her nails into my sensitive flesh and startling me half out of my wits. I jerked straight up in the seat, heart pounding, and immediately braked hard. With hands gripping the steering wheel tightly, I looked wildly about.

"What? What is it? Did you see a snake?" I was already pulling to the shoulder in preparation for a quick U turn.

"No, I didn't see any snakes, but you almost hit that bunny back there." Whaaaat...Her comment wasn't registering. I sort of remembered seeing a jack rabbit jinking back and forth, but did it actually enter the roadway? I had a vague mental image of it running away from the road, and even if it had come out on the pavement, so what? I was confused.

"Are you talking about that jack rabbit?" I asked, incredulously.

"Yes. Didn't you see him running so close to the road? I thought for sure you were going to hit him." Oh, for heaven's sake! My heart was still pounding and I was definitely wide-awake now. This is not happening, I thought. Pulling back onto the road, we resumed highway speed as I attempted to calm down. I then tried to explain to my sulking wife why it is always best to simply ignore the rabbits. She listened patiently, but she was having none of it.

"You're being mean!" she declared at the end of my little lecture. "You just don't like bunnies." Now, that is patently untrue! I like rabbits as well as the next guy, especially when they're rolled in flour and fried, but it's just not safe to swerve away from each idiotic "bunny" that runs in front of the truck. Unfortunately, my rationale fell on deaf ears.

"I don't care," she said, petulantly. "I want you to be more careful! Don't you run over any more of these poor little bunnies while I'm in this truck!" Oh Lord, save me. Maybe she'll fall asleep. Are you getting the picture, here? Wives just have a different perspective about some things. And speaking of sleeping...

It is an article of faith among West Texas herpers that a herping partner will never fall asleep. Naturally, falling asleep is easy to do when you've been driving for hours on end while staring at interminable miles of cactus, sotol, and rocks. Just the same, a good herping partner stays awake, if only to make sure the driver does also. Wives, however, feel no such obligation. After all, they have a special relationship with you, one established at the altar where you said you would love, honor, cherish, and take care of them in sickness and in health—and let them snooze whenever and wherever they feel sleepy. (This last part is contractually implied; read the fine print.) My wife tries to stay awake, God bless her, but not very hard and with sometimes disastrous results.

Once, rather late at night on the Pardale Paved, we'd been road-cruising the same stretch of road for several hours without seeing anything and knew she was getting bored. There had been no witty chit-chat for nearly five whole minutes and that should have been my clue that she was starting to zone out, but I was enjoying the conversational respite and wasn't about to
question the reason for it. Suddenly, I saw the crinkled, sinuous shape of a live snake (a small *atrox*) on the road directly in front of the vehicle. I knew I'd have to brake hard in order to stop so that the headlights would still illuminate it. Fortunately, the four-wheel disc brakes of my wife's truck let you stop right now! Not surprisingly, when you stop that suddenly anything in the vehicle that is not securely fastened down—like an unseated belt—has a tendency to go adrift. Such was the case this time.

As the tires squealed on the pavement, objects in the cab began to shift—rapidly. Thanks to smooth leather seats and Armor-all, my wife abruptly found herself looking through the windshield from a mere half inch away. What's more, her entire lower body was now painfully compressed into that small space on the floorboard in front of the passenger seat. Worse, the glove compartment had somehow popped open and "things" had been sort of stuffed in there—things the glove compartment was never designed to contain.

This all happened in the blink of an eye and, as you may imagine, it was not a pleasing way to end a nap. The outraged diatribe that followed was not pleasing either. Naturally, my wife accused me of stopping that way on purpose, just to "test" her (she frequently accuses me of "testing" her like this). In response, I silently indicated the *atrox* that was still lying there motionless, fully illuminated by the superb headlights on her truck. I then calmly mentioned that perhaps she'd been dozing and maybe that was why she had ended up like a bug on the inside of the windshield. At this, she became indignant. My sweet, demure wife vehemently swore up and down that she had not been sleeping, and that she actually saw the snake before I did. Stupidly, I did not let the subject drop. My smart aleck response was that if she had indeed been wide awake, there is no way she would have bumped her pretty little head, nor would she be trying on the glove-box like it was something from Victoria's Secret.

This immutable, male logic served only to increase her ire, but instead of arguing she employed the ultimate female weapon—that's right, I got "the look" again. With the weird shadows and tricky play of the nearly dimmed out dash lights, it was a truly frightening performance, especially at three o'clock in the morning. Wisely, I dropped the subject—there is no way I was getting turned into a pillar of salt, a rock, or whatever. One of these trips, however, I promise I am going to record her snoring on my Olympus recorder. It has superb fidelity and will, I'm sure, faithfully pick up every little snort and wheeze. She won't be able to argue with *that* kind of evidence. Of course, now that I think about it, if I'm ever able to prove that she falls asleep on our snake hunting trips, I might just as well move my pillow and blanket to the couch.

Author's Note: In case you're wondering, the Editorial Board (i.e. my spouse) read and approved this article before it was published (she has a sense of humor, thankfully, and even recognizes that I have one, too). The only thing the "Board" objected to was the title. The "Board" wanted it to read something like, *Herping With the Vulpineous Woman I Live With, or* *Reptiles, Romance, and Relationships*. Obviously, such titles would be more in keeping with literary offerings by Danielle Steele, and I said so. As you can imagine, I'm still paying for this indiscretion.

Hey! This Vest is Made in New York City!

In keeping with the article on herping equipment that appears elsewhere in this book, I would like to offer my comments on a specific item of raiment that I, personally, find indispensable for field herping trips. The garment I refer to is a vest. Specifically, it is a kind of vest one often associates with photographers and other persons who must carry a lot of equipment where it will be immediately at hand. The vests are sold under a variety of rubrics such as (not surprisingly) photographer's vests, or safari vests, etc., and they are all quite similar in appearance and function. They will usually be constructed of some durable, lightweight material and they offer multiple pockets for storing the things one needs to carry, be it spare film or snake bags.

Over the years, I have purchased several such vests, always in an attempt to find one that is perfectly suited to my needs. I am very particular (as I have often been told), and have found fault with all the vests I have thus far acquired. Either they don't have enough pockets, or the pockets are not properly positioned, or they don't hold objects securely. Sometimes the vest is too long, and other times it's too short, or maybe the fabric is too heavy and, therefore, too hot for the Trans-Pecos. Frequently, I have found that these utility vests (as I call them) are particularly uncomfortable when they are loaded down with the various items of equipment I like to carry. Recently, though, I found a vest that I think is nearly perfect—strange, but almost perfect nonetheless.

The vest I'm talking about is called the Traveler's Vest. It is apparently manufactured by a New York City outfit called Amerex Group under their Trail Designs division which, according to a tag attached to the vest, is located inside the Empire State Building on Fifth Avenue. This is an interesting bit of trivia that shall become more relevant momentarily.

Now, according to a large, descriptive tag that was attached to the vest when I purchased it (a tag that had been printed on recycled paper, by the way), it seems that the good folks at Amerex Group have done extensive research into just what constitutes a proper "traveler's vest". It is their belief that they have designed and developed a quality product that will give years of enjoyment and comfort. My Traveler's Vest is style number TV726, as printed right on the card. If we assume, logically, that TV stands for traveler's vest, then it seems mine is the seven hundred and twenty-sixth style they've worked with. Okay, that's a stretch, I'll admit, but I'm trying to lend some sort of credence to the company's claims for extensive research. How much research is actually involved in designing a traveler's vest, anyway? Not much, I'll wager.

The reverse side of the card I have been talking about contains information specifically about the garment it is attached to. This information makes for interesting reading, especially when you keep in mind my purpose for purchasing this vest. Let's discuss this information from an old, retired Marine who-just-happens-to-be-a-herper's perspective.

The first words on the card are, of course, the name of the garment,
which I have already told you. Underneath, is a description of the fabric used in the vest’s construction. My new vest is apparently made of Lightweight six ounce cotton sheeting, whatever that is. It feels like a light canvas material to me, but I do not have years of extensive research to back up what my fingers tell me. Underneath these entries are front and back drawings of a vest—someone else’s vest apparently. The drawings are definitely not my vest. The vest depicted in these illustrations has a sort of quilted-looking shoulder yoke, front and back, surmounted by a simple, standing collar. For those among you who are products of the 60s or early 70s, this collar is in the Nehru jacket style (there, I’ve just dated myself). The pictured vest also has four buttons, whereas mine has just three. Underneath these two drawings is a bulleted list of the vest’s special features which, naturally, are of prime importance to someone who has already wasted a lot of money on similar vests. The list of special features is entertaining reading.

Starting at the top (of the list, and of the vest, too) are the “working” epaulettes. You know what epaulettes are—they are those useless little flaps of fabric sewn to the top of the shoulder. Historically, epaulettes were designed as a decorative element on military uniforms. They were invented by the French, who have invented a lot of similar, useless stuff that still complicates our lives. I am quite familiar with epaulettes because during my military career, I wore uniforms that incorporated them in the design. Aside from pinning my rank insignia to them, the epaulettes on my uniforms had no purpose. I’m wondering what the clothiers at Amerex Group think epaulettes do for a traveler’s vest. I suppose I could break out those old oak leaves again and pin them on, but since hikers are such an independent, rebellious lot, I doubt anyone would show the slightest deference.

The epaulettes on my vest are sewn to the shoulder seam at one end, and fastened with Velcro at the other. Wonderful. This means you can now unfasten and lift this useless bit of fabric, then quickly refasten it by pressing it back into place. Why we want to do this, I don’t know.

Next on the list of special features is a “personal stereo pocket”. I’m sure in New York City this pocket serves its intended function. After all, having a stereo blasting in your ear would be useful to block out ambient noises associated with the streets of New York, such as police and fire sirens, the screams of mugging victims, and the incessant honking of taxi cabs driven by persons of Middle-eastern extraction. For my part, I will probably carry a micro-cassette recorder in this pocket. The recorder allows me to note the date, time, temperature and weather, and other pertinent environmental data, as well as the location for all the herps I observe. New Yorkers would probably not understand this. If a New Yorker ever recorded the location of a snake, it would be because he or she wished to avoid that spot in the future.

Another innovative feature offered on this traveler’s vest is one more set of seemingly useless fabric tabs sewn at one end and velcro’d in place at the other. They are located on the left side of the vest, one above the other, right next to the stereo pocket. What you do with these in New York is use them to fasten your stereo cord to the vest. This way, a stereo headset cannot easily be snatched away by a thief or, if it is, the wearer remains tethered so he or she can be easily dragged into the bushes and beaten senseless. I’m not sure what function these tabs will serve for me beyond an interesting way to start a conversation: Hey, those are some pretty useless-looking tabs on your vest. Are they fastened down with Velcro? The next item on the list of features is my favorite. It called the gratuity pocket (I am not making this up).

There are twenty or so pockets on this vest, none of which are labeled in any way, or identified on the card, so I really don’t know which pocket is the “gratuity” pocket, but the very fact that my vest has one is quite unique—I’ve never had a vest with a gratuity pocket. I’m not sure what this pocket is for, but if we operate under the assumption that a gratuity is a bonus given for services rendered, then I believe we can safely assume a gratuity pocket is where you keep the money you intend to hand to waiters, doormen, bellhops, and anyone else who has their hand out. Since everyone in New York has their hand out, from the Mayor on down, I’m guessing a gratuity pocket is a very useful feature on a vest worn in that city. Hmmm... Now that I think about it, I’ll bet the gratuity pocket is that huge pocket on the back of the vest that extends the full width of the garment—and it’s deep, too. It probably holds just the right number of twenty dollar bills to get you through the day on 5th Avenue. Well, there’s not much call for gratuities on a rock cut, but might stick a couple of snake bags and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in that pocket just so the folks at Amerex Group won’t get their feelings hurt. Let’s continue...

There are also several large “box” pockets for storage, although I won’t use my vest for storing boxes. I wouldn’t know what kind of boxes to store, anyway. Additionally, there are two “roomy handwarmer pockets” in the vest. Now these, I’m sure, will come in handy down there on the River Road during the month of July at around three o’clock in the morning. Everyone knows that the temperatures plummet in the wee hours, dropping from the low 100s into the mid-to-low 90s. I’m sure when I’m standing there with sweat running in rivulets down my back and oozing off my upper lip I’ll be grateful to the clothing designers at Amerex for giving me handwarmer pockets. My vest also sports two—count ‘em—outside eyeglass pockets. Since I do wear glasses these pockets might actually be of service, but I usually don’t carry two sets of spares eyeglasses. I’m anal, but not that anal.

In addition to all the pockets thus far mentioned, my Traveler’s Vest also provides two inside security pockets, nine inside carry-all pockets, and a partridge in a pear tree. Whew! I’ve got over twenty pockets in this one, simple garment. I’m sure this is the world’s record for the largest number of idiotically named pockets incorporated in a vest, or any garment people actually wear. The folks in New York sure are different. The card that contains all this nifty, but useless, information also provided the address for the company’s website. I actually got on the Internet and looked them up. Their web page is very nice, quite business-like, and respectable-looking. They make a lot of attractive outdoor clothes. The truth is, my Traveler’s Vest is very practical and much more comfortable than anything I have previously tried. I like it a lot. It was just that darned, stupid card that got me. I simply
can’t believe Amerex is serious about some of those pockets. I even sent them an e-mail asking about the gratuity pocket—I just gotta know, man!

If you want to purchase a vest like mine, the REI store in Austin, Texas has them, or you can order from REI’s catalog. REI also has a lot of other neat (and expensive) outdoor gear that field herpers can use. Of course, the next time you see me in the field, you’ll see my vest. DON’T laugh—I’m a very sensitive traveler. I may become greatly annoyed and leave you a cheap gratuity.

WTHS Director Receives a Letter on the Snake “Bidness”

July 30, 2001

Mr. Dean McInturff
West Texas Herpetological Society
P.O. Box 60134
San Angelo, Texas

Dear Mr. McInturff,

I heard you are a expert on snakes and could tell a body just anythin’ there was to know ‘bout snakes in Texas. That rancher up in Sutton County where they had all the snakes under the house, only they wasn’t any, said you knew more about snakes than any two fellers he ever saw. Well, I sure hope so ‘cause I live down to Val Verdy County and I got some questions ‘bout snakes.

I got a job in the oil field and I mostly work nights down there on th’ Devil’s River on that Cheyenne rig ‘cause I quit an oil outfit in Oklahoma last year—too dang cold. You prob’ly know bein’ a roughneck is tolerable hard an’ sometimes you can get hurt—like my friend Rayford done that time when a truckload of drill casing fell on him and broke both his legs. He was crippled up purt near a year ‘fore he could start back to work, but he looks dang near as good as new and you can’t hardly tell he’s three inches shorter than he was. ‘Course, Rayford wasn’t never no giant an’ now he just barely comes even with his girlfriend Lupe’s chest, which if you seen Lupe you’d know is okay. Anyway, I’m lookin’ to git into a different line a work ‘cause this here oil field bidness is plumb hard an’ after twenty-five years it ain’t gittin’ any easier.

This summer, I seen a bunch a guys ridin’ up an’ down the highway ever’ night between here and Del Rio and they was shinin’ spotlights all over the place. It looked like they was spotlightin’ deer an’ I wondered how come the game warden didn’t git ‘em. When I ast somebody about it, the fellers over to the store at Loma told me them spotlighters was lookin’ for snakes. That guy behind the counter, the one with all the tattoos (only he never was in the navy), he said there’s a passel of money to be made catchin’ and sellin’ snakes. Said you knew all ‘bout it. Wall, I figger I can catch snakes as good as the next one, even if I don’t like ‘em. Heck, it’s gotta be easier than workin’ the rig if you got to do is ride up and down the blacktop an’ git your winters off for deer huntin’. Anyway, I done went out an’ got me a coupla snakes already an’ what I want to ast you is what they’re worth and where do you go to sell ’em? I figger since you are an expert on snakes you’d know how much any kind a’ snake is worth.

One is a big ol’ rattler—one of them di’mond kind—an I figger he’s worth the most. He oughta be ‘cause it took a heap o’ work to git him into the 5 gallon bucket I keep my tar chains in. I didn’t have none of them fancy, long-handled, grabbin’ pliers like I seen on TV oncet, but I did have some water pump pliers an’ a piece of two by four ‘bout as long as my arm. I jist hauled
off an' whacked him with that two by four sorts soft like, right between the runnin' lights. Wall, he calmed down considerable. Used them water pump pliers to pick him up and put him in the bucket. He ain't buzzed once since I put the lid on.

That other'n is a real long, kinda greenish lookin' thing an' I'll be danged if it wasn't meaner'n that rattler. Them boys over t' Loma tol me it's a whip-somethin' or other. Anyway, I found it under Mr. Dillard's trailer—he's the foreman—when I was cleanin' out all them beer cans from last Saturday. I made a grab for it (the snake) and it like to nailed me good. It latched on to my hand 'bout four times so fast I wanted to let go, but couldn't 'cause it was still bitin' me (I didn't know snakes could chew). After it quit rearin' up and strikin', it lit out. I had to run faster than I did that time I stole them goats just to keep an eye on it—an I ain't as young as I used to be. I 'bout dang near give up on achchully catchin' it, but derned if it didn't git out onto the blacktop—right in front of a dooly pullin' a goose neck trailer fulla sheep. I almost fowled it out on the road myself. I was runnin' so hard. Lucky I got stopped 'fore I left the shoulder. Anyway, them sheep ranchers wasn't as mad as they pretended.

After we got their rig out of th' cedars and beat the fender out so's it didn't rub the tar so much, they started to reck kinder friendly. Heck, by the time we drunk most of a case of Coors and finished up that bottle of Jack Daniels they had in the golve box, they finely put their rifle and tar iron down and was ready to help me fetch some more snakes, only we couldn't find none. I did go back an' git that green one off the road. It turned out them sheep men only hit it with the tars on one side a they truck. Heck, it wasn't messed up near as bad as some of them sheep in the trailer (we cut one up and barbecued it—a sheep, not a snake).

I threwed the snake in the beer cooler an' I been puttin' ice in 'bout every other day. Them fellers on the rig that use to steal my beer ain't had they hand in the cooler since. They said them whip snakes c'n sting you with they tail—even dead un's—and the pi'sen will leak out an git on the beer, only it still tastes good to me—the beer, not the snake. I don't eat snakes.

Anyway, I need you to tell me what is a good price for these two snakes—they's both pretty fair size. Also, kin you tell me where to sell 'em? I figger if I get a good deal on these 'uns I can buy some tow sacks an' put a full tank of gas in my truck 'cause I know a dang good place west of here where I seen lots snakes an' I oughta be able to make some good money pretty easy. Do you think this snake bidness is a good idear?

William J. Jessup
(everybody just calls me Wildcat Willie)

P.S. I need to know a place to sell these snakes right quick. I think that di'mond rattler done went an' died on me 'cause they's a power a' flies buzzin' round that bucket. I hope bein' a might spoil won't hurt the price none. The way I heard it, some folks likes they snakes a bit high. I ain't never eat a snake an' I ain't agoin' to! Write back quick.

August 5, 2001

Mr. William J. Jessup
C/O Cheyenne Oil Rig
P.O. Box 32654
Loma Alta, Texas

Dear Mr. Jessup,

Thank you for your kind letter of the 30th July. I'm flattered that you would consider me an expert on the subject of snakes. While I do know quite a bit about certain species, I'm afraid your perceptions of my overall expertise may be somewhat misplaced. Further, I do not feel at all qualified to comment on your proposed business venture catching and selling snakes, at least not rattlesnakes and coachwhips. By the way, coachwhips cannot sting you with their tail and they are completely non-venomous. They will bite viciously when molested, as you've discovered.

You should know that the snake commonly sought by those "spotlighters" in Val Verde County is the Gray-banded Kingsnake, not coachwhips or rattlesnakes. This species of kingsnake is found almost exclusively after dark, hence the spot lamps. Furthermore, while I wouldn't want to comment specifically on how much gray-bands may be worth, I can assure you they are worth absolutely nothing if they are dead. Incidentally, one does not eat gray-bands—ever.

From what I have been able to determine through long, personal experience, catching and selling snakes does not appear to be a reliable or lucrative venture when done on a limited basis. It is seasonal work, at best, and success depends on many factors. Moreover, snake hunting is fraught with drawbacks and hazards of its own, particularly if you intend to hunt gray-bands. Gasoline prices being what they are, you would probably not even break even on expenses. I once almost worked on an oil rig myself so I am well aware of the rugged, dangerous nature of your occupation. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties encountered in your present profession, you would be well advised not to quit in favor of snake hunting. In fact, as a financial consultant I must advise strongly against it.

Cordially yours,

Dean McHiurff

and Willie's response...

August 18, 2001
Dear Mr. McInturff,

I got yore letter and many thanks. You was right—they ain’t no money in di’mond rattlers or them whip snakes. I tried to sell mine down to Lake Amistad to a bait shop and the man in there just laughed. Finally threw that big rattler in the bar ditch, it was mighty high and the buzzards kept sittin’ on my truck tryin’ to find it. Did you know that buzzard manure will take the paint right off’n your truck—I sure didn’t.

Went to one of them fancy pet stores over to San Antone to sell that whip snake, but they didn’t want it neither. Got to lookin’ around in there and duned if they didn’t have some of those gray-banded you was talkin’ ‘bout. Whooee, brother! They was proud of them snakes—least ways, it sure seemed like it, what with them $300 price tags! I don’t know why you said they wasn’t no money in snakes when they git that much for just one of ‘em. I ast the owner where he gits his’n and he says some feller raises ‘em up and brings ‘em in. Wal, I figured catchin’ is better’n rearin’ so I ast him if I caught some would he buy ‘em. He tol’ me he’d buy every one I brought in. That was just what I wanted to hear.

Went back to Loma and tol’ Mr. Dillard I was givin’ up the oil biddiness. He tried to talk me out of it, but for $300 a snake, I figger I can make more in one month in the snake biddiness than I did all year workin’ the rig. Went down there and collected my last month’s pay and spent the whole she-bang on a snake catchin’ outfit. To my way of thinkin’, if you’re gonna do somethin’ you might’s well go at it whole hog. Got me a set of them fancy grabin’ pliers, some heavy duty snake chaps, and a carbide miner’s lamp. That left me with about a double sawbuck for gas and food. I reckon I c’n make it all up the first trip. After that, it’ll be clear sailin’ and jist rakin’ in the profits. Thanks for your advice.

Sincerely yours,

Wildcat Willie

Editor’s Note: The correspondence between “Wildcat Willie” Jessup and WTHS board member, Dean McInturff, runs to several additional pages of interesting reading. Dean has graciously consented to allow selected letters to be published in the Report as a means to illustrate what can happen when someone decides to take up snakes as a living. Due to space constraints, the bulk of Mr. Jessup’s letters since July, as well as Dean’s return correspondence, could not be published in this issue. Barring something totally unforeseen (such as an angry letter to the editor or a lawsuit), we will continue to devote a modicum of editorial space in future issues to Mr. Jessup’s letters and Dean’s responses.

The Herpin’ Season 2001—a Personal Look Back

This season was notable for me for a variety of reasons. For one, I started much earlier this year than usual, and I really haven’t quit yet (even though my last trip, on October 10th, resulted in getting completely skunked). I don’t know how many more trips I’ll make—if any, but because I’ve had so much fun this year I’m loathe to give up the season. Besides, a gray-band was once caught in October when the temperature was only 63 degrees! Anyway, I thought some of you readers might enjoy reading about a few of my herpin’ highlights (and low lights) for the year 2001. Here, in abbreviated format, are some of this year’s herpin’ events:

3/31/01 First herp of the season—a huge AOR female Bullsnake on old Hwy 90 at the Pecos River high bridge. Temperature a balmy 73 degrees.
4/14/01 I get shot at by deer poachers on the West Nueces River after shining my spotlight on their truck. I had the advantage of terrain, but they had the advantage of weaponry. Results: Poachers 1, Rod Dearth 0.
4/28/01 Hunted 277 with Dean McInturff and nearly every draw and arroyo was flooded. Good to see rain at last. No snakes, but lotsa frogs and toads.
5/6/01 First herp collected—a beautiful, bright orange male Trans-Pecos copperhead from Pandale Paved in Crockett County.
5/20/01 I sight 9 Baird’s Ratsnakes—all on the same long cut in Edwards County—setting the tone for the rest of the season as it seemed every trip I saw at least one bairdi.
6/9/01 Collected my second ever Mottled Rock Rattlesnake in Edwards County, a male.
6/11/01 Fell off a 20 foot cut and rolled onto the shoulder of the road—miraculously, no physical injuries—just a majorly bruised ego.
7/28/01 Spent 4 days herpin’ in the Davis Mts. with my family. Saw over 50 herps (15 different species) including two rare Trans-Pecos Blackhead snakes (Tanantia culexus). Spotted a genuine “Rooshian” boar on Mt. Locke.
8/14/01 Fell off another cut—only a 15 footer this time. Picked up a few extra cactus spines and got smashed in the head by my snake light battery (which weighs about 3 pounds) during this tumble.
8/17/01 Hatched two clutches of Texas Cooter eggs—34 turtles that all survived. They were released in Lake Nasworthy.
8/16/01 Lifetime highest number of single species sighted in one night—389 Texas toads (B. speciosus) on FM 765 in Tom Green and Concho counties. Second highest lifetime number for single species: 214 Spadefoot toads (S. couchii) on same trip. Needless to say, we’d gotten some rain.
8/18/01 Caught a gravid female lizards in Edwards County and fell off yet another cut. Rolled right into the side of my truck—no permanent damage to me or the truck. Didn’t drop the snake either.
9/5/01 Second trip to Davis Mts.—saw only one snake there, a Blacktail Rattlesnake, AOR at 12:30 A.M. right in front of Buzz Ross’s rattlesnake museum on Highway 17 in Fort Davis. Hope it wasn’t one of his exhibits!
9/6/01 Discovered that raccoons in Davis Mts. State Park know all about cooler latches. Chased big male 'coon out of the back of my truck at 02:15 in the morning—ran down the road after him. 'coon up oak tree. Disgusted—gave up and let him keep brand new, unopened package of bagels.

9/7/01 Met a Jack Russell terrier that eats lizards and can open the cooler (and sits inside it) to get his own beer (in Iraan, TX)

9/8/01 Witnessed a giant meteorite flashing through the atmosphere in Terrell County around 01:30. It was awesome!

9/11/01 My female Lepidus gave birth to 6 babies on that day. I hardly noticed.

9/28/01 Saw my whole life flash before me in one split second on Iwy 67 west of the Mertzlon gas plant—whew!

10/4/01 Just at dusk saw a bear, no...Wait! A really hairy wild pig! (in Real county) Also saw yet another Bairdi—a male well over 4 feet long.

10/21/01 Last snake of the season—a big male Bullsnake on Arden Road in Tom Green County. Unfortunately, it was DOR.

As you can see, barring a couple of near-death experiences, my herpin’ season was pretty good. It sure wasn’t boring! Despite the drought, I saw more snakes this year than I have in years past. Interestingly, I saw far fewer Western Diamondbacks than I’ve ever seen—only seven. I observed nearly twice that many rock rattlesnakes. I also didn’t see many coachwhips—dead or otherwise. Lizards sightings were way down, too. Toads and frogs were plentiful whenever and wherever it was wet. I must have seen thousands of juvenile Canyon Tree frogs in Madera Creek during my second trip to the Davis Mountains. (Guess which species of snake all these froglets attracted.) Unfortunately, my hay fever made that trip pretty miserable and I went home early.

My herp log shows 134 entries between 3-31-01 and 10-21-01, for a total of 44 species broken down as follows: 3 chelonians, 9 anurans, 12 lacertilians, and 20 serpents. Actually, I saw far more snakes than is indicated here because on some trips I did not record multiple sightings of the same species—an omission that I now regret. Likewise, with anurans and some chelonians I did not record each animal. The Texas Toads and Couch’s spadefoots I recorded on FM 765 was done as a lark just to see how many there were (and I really didn’t count them all). If I had recorded every herp I saw my log book would have nearly 2000 entries. Geez...I had hoped to do better than this! Unfortunately, the drought worked against me, especially with respect to the lizards. Oh well, there’s always next year!

Wildlife, Money, and Good Ol’ Boys

"The last word in ignorance is the man who looks at a plant or animal and says, what good is it?"

Aldo Leopold

If you’ve ever wondered why Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Commissioners seem to care so little about the egregious killing of rattlesnakes at the annual rattlesnake “round-ups” across the state, you’re not alone. Many serious naturalists have asked themselves why the state continues to allow the senseless, unregulated slaughter of these important predators. A while back I became privy to an incident that may give us a clue regarding why some people in the TPWD couldn’t care less what happens to a bunch of snakes.

In late May two years ago, a lady approached me with some questions regarding snakes. It seems she had found one in her house a few days earlier and then later spotted another one outside. To her, it seemed as though her property had become infested with snakes and, since she was completely incapable of identifying them (as well as being very much afraid of them), she sought my assistance. She wanted to know if I could show her some of the snakes that are found locally, particularly the poisonous (sic) ones. I assured her that I could, and we proceeded to the snake room. On the way, I asked her if she had any idea of what species of snake she had found in her house. With a tinge of anxiety in her voice she informed me that it was a water moccasin. I was quite surprised by this information as it is highly unusual in this part of Texas for someone to find an honest to goodness water moccasin, much less have one in the house. Questioning her more closely, I asked if she meant Cottonmouth. Oh yes, she was very sure that’s what it was for the snake had been identified by an expert.

She then proceeded to give me all the details of the incident, including the fact that she had called a game warden to remove the snake. The warden and a snake "expert" had arrived to corral the animal, which had taken refuge in her laundry room. With some little difficulty, according to the woman, the warden and his assistant removed the snake from her home, informing her in the process that it was, indeed, a water moccasin. They told her she was very lucky not to have been bitten by it, a conclusion I’m sure she had already reached.

When I asked her what became of the snake, she said, "Oh, they took it outside and cut its head off." Naturally, I was somewhat chagrined to hear this, even though I’ve come to expect such behavior from ordinary citizens. I was a bit surprised, however, that an officer from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department’s law enforcement division would summarily execute an uninjured, wild animal, even if it was a water moccasin. As I was digesting this last comment, the lady reached into her purse, asking if I would like to see pictures of the snake they’d caught in her house. Of course I would.
She produced several nice photographs, laying them on the counter in front of me. There were a number of shots depicting the game warden along with his "expert" assistant. The assistant wielded a set of grabber tongs of the kind you see employed when the user doesn't know much (and cares even less) about snakes. One photo in particular immediately caught me eye. It was a reasonably good close-up shot of the snake, gripped just behind the head by the tongs. The animal was obviously in distress as it appeared to be writhing, and it had its mouth open in defense. I felt very sorry for it, but that wasn't what really annoyed me about the photograph. No, what really annoyed me was the fact that the snake wasn't a water moccasin at all. In fact, it wasn't any kind of water snake. It was an ordinary Texas Rat Snake (Elaphe obsoleta lindheimeri).

Now, to be absolutely fair, a Texas rat snake can put on quite a little defensive show. In fact, they are well known among Texas herpetologists for their aggressive displays and for biting vigorously if molested, although their bite is not at all dangerous. Not only are they not venomous, they don't look anything like water moccasins.

Accordingly, I was very surprised that the game warden and his snake expert assistant both mis-identified this benign serpent, but that wasn't all (and here's the part that really aggravates me). These two "experts" even went so far as to tell the already quite anxious woman that if she had been bitten by this "water moccasin" she would never make it to the hospital (which in her case, would be about 20 minutes away). Even more disappointing was the fact that instead of releasing the animal in suitable habitat elsewhere, they decided to kill it. Assuming both men honestly believed they were dealing with a cottonmouth (and I have no reason to think they believed otherwise), there was still no reason to kill the snake once they had captured it. In doing so, their actions reflected an attitude common in a lot of rural West Texans, but not the attitude I would have expected in a representative of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Moreover, their demonstrated callousness towards this animal sent a message to the woman they were helping. What was the message? Why, that it's okay to kill any snake that bothers you.

Naturally, I informed the woman of the error in identification. I also told her that even if it had been a water moccasin, there was no real reason to kill it. To her credit, she said that she hadn't wanted it killed, but she trusted the judgment of the warden and his assistant. When I questioned her regarding the identity of the snake expert, she told me he was one of those rattlesnake round-up guys and a friend of the warden's. Well, that certainly answered a lot of questions for me, but the incident itself begs additional questions.

First, why would a long time, experienced game warden feel it necessary to bring in non-departmental help to handle a simple thing like a snake? I can't imagine too many situations involving Texas wildlife of any species that would necessitate a warden bringing an assistant for a single animal, unless we're talking about a mature mountain lion, a bear, an alligator, or one of the larger ungulates.

Second, why did the warden and his assistant further excite an already fearful woman by telling her that if she were bitten by this "water moccasin" she "wouldn't make it to town?" The truth is really quite the opposite. Statistically speaking, death from snake bite usually takes place hours or even days after the bite, and it's usually people who do not seek medical assistance that die. While a lot of ordinary people living in Texas erroneously believe that death follows shortly after any snake bite, you would expect a game warden to know better. Sure, it may be unfair to expect the average game warden to know actual snake bite mortality statistics, but you might at least expect him to know that very, very few snake bites result in death of the victim.

Thirdly, why did the snake have to be killed? The homeowner didn't ask for the animal to be dispatched. In fact, she told me later she is against the needless killing of any animal. Once the snake was captured and under control, it could have easily been released far from the homeowner's residence. After all, water moccasins do have a place in the environment as useful and important predators. This fact you would expect even the average game warden to know. Besides, I thought game wardens were charged with protecting the state's natural resources—not destroying them.

Fourth, why didn't the game warden know that the habitat around the woman's home really wasn't suitable for water moccasins? Why didn't he know that regional water moccasins are largely nocturnal and it would be highly unlikely for one to be crawling along, out in the open in broad daylight on a very hot day? Why didn't he know that any brown and black blotched snake over 4 feet in length with round pupils and no loreal pits couldn't possibly be venomous? Why didn't this officer, who is charged with enforcing the wildlife laws of the state, which includes the laws pertaining to reptiles and amphibians, know the difference between a Texas rat snake (one of the most common terrestrial snakes of the region) and a Western cottonmouth (one of the least common semi-aquatic snakes of the region)? I'll tell you why.

You see, the game warden in this incident is apparently representative of a common breed of Texan that views all snakes the same way. To these folks the only good snake is a dead snake. They make no attempt whatsoever to differentiate between a benign, non-threatening serpent and one that is potentially dangerous. And this attitude usually doesn't stop with our paleolithic forebears.

For such Texans, all wildlife is categorized by a hierarchy that determines which creatures deserve our protection and which ones can be killed outright, at any time, for any reason, and in any fashion. For them, animals are either "worth something or they ain't." The typical good ol' boy (as I like to call these primitive thinkers) certainly recognizes the value of say, a whitetailed deer because you enjoy hunting them during the proper season and you can eat the resulting venison. And besides, they're "perty"—they are just before you shoot them, anyway. More importantly, (and here's the kicker) you can make money from deer. Yes, indeed! There is money—and lots of it—in selling hunting leases, and quite a few Texans make even more money by selling equipment to deer hunters, and by renting them rooms, selling them gasso-
line and food, mounting their trophies and so on. So, not only are the deer valued for their meat, and for being "purty," they can earn you money—they're big business. This puts white-tails high up in the good ol' boy hierarchy of desirable native animals.

Snakes, on the other hand, aren't worth much (except to certain promoters of rattlesnake round-ups). You can't sell a snake lease to some rich, big city doctor or lawyer. Snakes don't produce trophy antlers that can be hung on a wall, and most people wouldn't dream of eating a snake (except maybe on a bet). It sure doesn't take any fancy, expensive equipment to kill a snake, either. No $1500 Weatherby rifle with a $1000 dollar scope is needed to dispatch even the biggest, most dangerous Texas snake (although a lot of guns and ammunition are sold every year for just this purpose). An ordinary $5 garden hoe will put paid to any snake's account, and do it very well. You can make a living selling garden tools, but not many people buy a hoe to hunt snakes. And who wants to sit in an expensive, custom "snake" blind during the hot summer on the off chance a snake will crawl by (and snakes can't be baited with corn like deer can). Besides all this, some of these Texas snakes can deliver a dangerous bite. In fact, if you're not careful, certain snakes could kill you. Obviously then, snakes are at the bottom of the good ol' boy hierarchy of "useful and worthless" animals.

Sadly, this good ol' boy attitude about wildlife is pervasive in Texas, and it's not restricted to snakes. It's just that snakes bear the burden more than any other animal because it is much easier to get away with killing them. It's perfectly okay to hate and revile snakes, even in politically correct circles, because no one says a thing about it. Such callous attitudes about certain kinds of wildlife are particularly pervasive among older generations of Texans who often do not have the sophisticated perspectives of ecology necessary for the proper management of our land and its resources today. Many of them care only for what they can earn from the land and its resources. They don't want to expend a dime or shed a drop of sweat in an effort to protect it. People who harbor these attitudes couldn't care less about snakes, armadillos, coyotes, bobcats, skunks, opossums, turtles and a host of lesser species they consider useless, or even harmful. And if it's useless, they think, or might cause harm, why do we need to know anything about it? Let's just kill it. (Hence our game warden's inability to identify a harmless Texas Ratsnake.)

A lot of Texans of this ilk are not unsophisticated or lacking in academic credentials. They are not itinerant farm workers, oil-field roughnecks, or cowboys, many of whom actually understand the state's ecology better than the people in charge of managing it. No, we're talking about learned men and women, possessing advanced academic degrees, who have access to up-to-date educational resources on a daily basis. Yet, these same folks don't bother to become intellectually informed about matters over which they have cognizance. Unfortunately for the rest of us Texans, quite a few of these throwbacks to earlier days hold top positions in the state and county bureaucracies that determine policy and establish rules, regulations, and laws governing wildlife. Their attitudes about our native wildlife are colored by their inability to see animals as anything other than a financial resource. Even more unfortunate, such attitudes and perspectives, especially as far as snakes are concerned, seem to be permanently fixed, fossilized you might say, which is too bad for the rest of us.

Texas is a grand and wonderful state, so ecologically diverse it boggles the mind. But if we continue to let these antiquarian attitudes about the relative goodness of this species or that species rule our thinking, then you can say good-bye to diversity. When that happens, the state of Texas, as we know and love it today, will no longer exist. It will have become an ecological wasteland that might just as well be paved over and used as a parking lot.

At the beginning of this article is a quote by noted conservationist Aldo Leopold, who did much to enlighten this country's thinking on the proper use of our wildlife and natural resources. This particular statement seems tailor-made for the folks I have been talking about, although I would have to modify it a bit by saying that here in Texas the last word in ignorance is the man who looks at any plant or animal and says, how much can I make from it?
February 1, 2001

Handloader Magazine
ATTN: Dave Scovill, Editor
6471 Airpark Dr.
Prescott, Arizona 86301

Dear Editor,

I just finished reading the February 2001 issue of Handloader magazine. One article in particular caught my attention and it is the reason I'm writing this letter. I'm talking about Al Miller's article on handgun shotshells.

When I saw the title I was pretty certain there would be something about killing snakes in the text. I don't know Miller and truthfully, I don't remember if I've read anything else he's written (although I read Handloader and Rifle religiously, but killing snakes is such a familiar refrain in articles about handgun shotshells, I figured Miller would mention it. Well, he certainly didn't disappoint me. In fact, his whole article seems focused on just one thing-building effective shotshell/handgun combinations to kill snakes. To say that I was upset by thrust of this article is putting it mildly.

The trouble with Miller (and a lot of folks like him) is that he can't see a snake as anything other than something to be destroyed. It's quite obvious that he has no idea of the ecological importance serpents have for the habitats they exist in. I'm going to guess that Miller is older than I am, probably by several years, because his apparent attitude about snakes reflects a way of thinking about them that is quite typical of older generations. I run into this anti-snake prejudice a lot in my job and it really bothers me, but Miller certainly falls into a category all his own.

I'm 46 years old and have been hunting, shooting, and hand loading ever since I was 16. Over the years, I have read everything about these activities I could get my hands on and have subscribed, at one time or another, to most of the industry's periodicals and journals. As a result, I consider myself a pretty knowledgeable gun enthusiast—probably at least as knowledgeable as Miller. One area I'm sure that my knowledge surpasses his is on the subject of snakes—particularly venomous snakes.

Unlike Miller, I've done considerable research into the statistics of snakebites incidents across the United States and what I've learned is that the threat of snakebite is mostly imagined. Further, my years of serving in the field as a wildlife officer, a government trapper, and a naturalist (not to mention being an avid hunter and fisherman) have demonstrated to me that venomous snakes pose very little threat to the average outdoorsman. My experience has shown me that if you see a venomous snake before it strikes, ninety-nine times out of a hundred you are in no danger—you're usually able to easily move away from the animal. And that's just what you should do. Most people who are bitten by venomous snakes are deliberately interfering with the snake's activity.

Miller may disagree with all this, and that's okay, but his article reveals an ignorance on his part for laws and regulations he should be familiar with. For instance, the small "timber rattler" he describes in the beginning of his article was, in all probability, a Banded Rock Rattlesnake (Crotalus lepidus klauberi). In New Mexico, this shy, retiring snake is listed as a threatened species. If he had killed it he would have been in bigger trouble with the New Mexico Department of Fish and Game than he would have been as a result of possessing a modern handgun on a muzzleloader-only hunt. Ironically, this anecdote of Miller's illustrates perfectly what I stated earlier: If you see a snake before it strikes, you are in no danger. Since Miller didn't molest the little serpent, it simply crawled away—without biting him. Incidentally, there are no Timber rattlesnakes (Crotalus horridus torridus) in New Mexico.

As for Miller's encounter with the prairie rattlesnake, one wonders why he simply didn't back away. I guess killing the snake was more important than stalking the antelope. More important to your readers is the fact that in many jurisdictions it is illegal to carry a sidearm while hunting big game. I don't know if that's the case where Miller was hunting antelope, but it befores any hunter to become thoroughly familiar with such laws before strapping on a "snake pistol."

Moreover, many other states now protect certain species of reptiles and amphibians. In my own home state of Texas (which has more venomous snakes than any other state except Arizona) Timber rattlesnakes and Canecrake rattlesnakes are protected by law. If you shoot one of these animals under circumstances similar to those described by Miller in his article, get ready to pay a big fine and have your firearm confiscated. New Mexico, as I already mentioned, offers protection to many reptiles and amphibians, among them at least three rattlesnake species. Miller better look carefully the next time he has a rattler in his sights. If it's a protected animal and he shoots it, he may find himself standing in front of a magistrate explaining his actions.

Shotshells in pistols do have a certain utility. I have used them myself to shoot rats and feral pigeons in the barn. However, the implied need for outdoorsmen to have a handgun loaded with snake shot just isn't supported when you rationally examine the facts. I think articles like Miller's, which encourage this kind of wanton and callous destruction of wildlife, have no place in Handloader magazine.

Sincerely yours,

R.L. Dearth

P.S. I'm sure Mr. Miller will be happy to know that those "hefty" sidewinders he's been killing are worth between $75 and $100 each—alive and unharmed. Better check the fish and game regulations before collecting them, though.

Note: This letter started a brief correspondence with the editor of Handloader magazine. It was pretty much a one-sided correspondence, as you will see. I have not included the editor's response to this letter, but his comments will be apparent by my return letter to him on the following pages.
March 14, 2001

Dear Mr. Scovill:

Thank you for responding to my letter concerning Al Miller's article on handgun shotgun reloading. You're absolutely right—I made a number of assumptions about Mr. Miller based solely on what he wrote in that article, and that's a very important distinction for you to point out.

My assumptions about Mr. Miller had to do with his attitude and knowledge about poisonous (sic) snakes. The only assumption I made about his expertise in the field of firearms was that I believed I am probably at least as knowledgeable a gun enthusiast as he is. I will admit that his age (I'm making another assumption here—this time based on your comments) probably gives him an advantage in this area. That he may have been writing articles about firearms-related topics before I began reloading does not grant him implicit superiority on such topics. I will concede the point, nonetheless.

What's important is that I did not criticize Miller's knowledge of firearms, handgunning, and related topics. My comments were aimed specifically at his apparent attitude, and lack of knowledge, about venomous snakes. I say apparent because even though he did not tell us what his true feelings and qualifications are, his comments do give evidence of his relative knowledge and his attitude (whether you wish to admit it or not). Consequently, I feel more than justified in making assumptions about him along these lines. Furthermore, I do not feel at all constrained to "prove" my assumptions, especially when Miller is so accommodating.

I have no doubt that Miller's article will lead many of your less informed readers to believe that snakes may be killed indiscriminately whenever they're encountered. His choice of words reflects a built-in bias against snakes that I have encountered many times, especially when dealing with generations older than my own. You may think I'm making another assumption here and perhaps I am, but it is one based entirely on Miller's own words. And that, after all, is what counts isn't it? If you will not allow readers to judge your authors by what they write, how then will we judge them?

Look, when Miller makes a comment about seeing a timber rattler while hunting in New Mexico, I realize immediately that his knowledge of venomous snakes is suspect (notwithstanding his affiliation with the New Mexico Dept. of Fish and Game). When he then speaks of killing a few "hefty" sidewinders, a species of rattlesnake that rarely grows longer than 24 inches and might weigh a pound, my opinions of his reptile expertise are reinforced. His attitude about snakes is made apparent in the anecdotes contained in the article. He specifically mentions 3 species of snakes that he has killed, or wished he could. The fact that one particular snake he wished to shoot wasn't even aware of his presence (and therefore posed no threat) is especially telling as far as I'm concerned. Of course, I'm making the reasonable assumption all of these anecdotes are true.

Maybe Mr. Miller really does like rattlesnakes, and it's entirely possible that he has a deep understanding of their ecological importance. Perhaps, like you, he realizes a better way to dispatch "problem snakes" is with a sharpened garden implement. If this is the case, then the whole premise of his article must be a mere artifice, designed to take advantage of the average person's fears and ignorance of snakes. As a journalistic approach, that's not very honest, is it? Obviously, I don't believe his premise was an artifice. He could have written an article about building better handgun shotshells to kill songbirds, but he didn't. He chose snakes, and we both know why he did. Moreover, neither you, as the editor, nor Miller as the author, thought anyone who read the article would actually defend the snakes.

I'm sorry if you thought my letter unfair, but I was merely pointing out several salient facts regarding venomous snakes, the true danger they pose, and their protected status in many states. Snakes are not whitetails. As an editor of a shooting magazine, you may reasonably expect your readers to know that whitetails and other game animals are hunted only in season. With snakes, it's different. Most folks have no idea that laws protect many reptiles—especially serpents. It has been my experience that the average man or woman is genuinely surprised when he or she learns it is illegal to wantonly kill certain snakes—even dangerous ones.

As the editor of Handloader, you could have added a simple two or three line caveat to Miller's article mentioning the law and protected reptiles. I'm sure Mr. Miller wouldn't have minded. If you had added such comments, I would have had a lot more respect for the magazine and could have dismissed Miller's article as just another attempt to resurrect and sensationalize an otherwise tired topic. More importantly, the rest of your readers would have been clued in to the fact that many snakes are protected by law.

Finally, let me say that I really don't understand why you perceived my letter as an ambush, or an attempt to crucify Miller. The letter was addressed only to you and appears in no public venue that I'm aware of. Therefore, I don't think you can fairly characterize it as either an ambush or a crucifixion. Since you must occasionally receive other letters of criticism, I'm assuming my letter struck a sensitive chord with you. I'm sorry about that, but look on the bright side: As far as the rest of your readership is concerned, Miller remains the experienced handgunning editor and author you say he is. Therefore, his reputation (and Handloader's) is undamaged.

Sincerely yours,
R.L. Dearth

P.S. I have just looked through about 3 years worth of Rifleman and Handloader back issues. I find that Miller has articles in virtually all of them. I also realized that, with one exception (an article about iron sights that I found hackneyed), I didn't read his material; the subject matter was of no interest to me. Do you suppose this explains why I couldn't remember reading his stuff?
October 2, 2001

Mr. Dave Scovill
6471 Airpark Drive
Fresno, Arizona 85301

Dear Mr. Scovill:

Yesterday I visited my local newsstand to purchase several monthly periodicals and I noticed they had the October issue of Handloader magazine on hand. I picked it up (it’s been a while since I looked at an issue) and turned to the contents page where I perused the by-lines. I was gratified to see that Al Miller had only one article in the magazine. On a whim, I turned to it and lo and behold, there’s a picture of him with one of his “snake pistols” strapped to his waist, or so I infer from the photo caption.

I decided to skim the text to see if he’d written some more of his anti-snake dogma and I wasn’t disappointed. It was the same old stuff. Miller certainly has a fixation on killing snakes. I gathered by his comments that the bulk of his snake killing is taking place in Arizona these days. My only hope is that he will someday soon shoot one of the many protected reptile species in that state and the diligent Arizona Fish and Game officers will haul him off to court. (Or does he also have a connection to that agency as well?)

In the interim, I offer a quote taken from the pages of one of your competitor’s magazines, which I purchased (along with several others) on the day I looked at—but didn’t buy—the issue of Handloader I’ve been referring to. I think it’s quite instructive, not only for the message, but for who said it. Here’s the quote:

“Actually, the idea of a ‘snake pistol’ eludes me. If you see a dangerous snake first, stay out of his reach. If you don’t, what good is your pistol?” September 1963

These words represent my sentiments, exactly. Who offered them? Why, none other than Colonel Jeff Cooper, someone whose opinions and ideas carry a lot more weight than Al Miller’s. Let me offer one other quote from the good Colonel (taken from the same source). These words go directly to something else Miller said in his article:

“I have never felt that the idea of a ‘back-up’ pistol for a big-game hunter was a sound one. If you can’t do the job with a .300 Winchester, I don’t see how you can do it with any sort of pistol. This is rather like using a speed boat to back up a battleship.” October 1969.

Personally, I think a back-up pistol might be in order for dangerous game, but for whitetails and antelope? I don’t think so. It’s been my experience that folks who carry back-up pistols when hunting typical big game are the same people who wear knives with foot long blades and carry their spare ammunition in a bandolier. They live in some sort of fantasyland (or in Miller’s case, back in the “olden days”).

I have no objection to sidearms carried as a means to pot small game, or even as the primary arm when hunting larger game animals. What I object to is Miller’s apparent campaign of vengeance against an animal that has never hurt him, and doesn’t want to. His article mentions that two of his friends suffered bites from rattlesnakes, as if this were justification for snake killing. I’m sorry about that, but what so? Dogs bite people occasionally, too. Do we shoot every dog we see because of it? No, of course not. What I object most to is Handloader providing Miller with a venue to inculcate others with his irrational hatred of serpents. We are destroying nature fast enough without deliberately breeding a whole new crop of people who think it’s okay to kill an animal just because they don’t like it and are afraid of it.

Miller needs to realize that he is now living in the 21st Century. These days, outdoorsmen (and women) are far more sophisticated than his writing gives them credit for. They are both educated and informed, and most are not interested in egregiously destroying any kind of wildlife. In fact, many of today’s hunters view the non-game animals as an integral and enjoyable part of the total hunt experience. Accordingly, I respectfully suggest that Miller expand his intellectual horizons a bit. Based on his writing, I think he needs to abandon the stacks of 30-year-old hunting and shooting magazines that apparently serve as his principal reference material, and focus on something more contemporary.

Sincerely,
R.L. Dearth

P.S. Both of Cooper’s statements quoted above (published by Guns & Ammo magazine) were originally made “well before” I started reloading. That should give them a measure of validity for you. Colonel Cooper is in his eighties now, I believe, and still offering erudite and germane discussions on firearms related topics.
How Some Snake Hunters Cure Cabin Fever

Winter in the Trans-Pecos is not a particularly unpleasant season. Temperatures average about fifty degrees, with most days starting out a bit chillier, though usually warming up nicely by late afternoon. There are also frequent short periods of genuinely nice shirtsleeve weather, and the general lack of precipitation ensures that snow does not become the burdensome presence it does in the arctic regions, such as the Panhandle and around Dallas. Still, the short days and cool-to-cold nights of a West Texas winter keep most reptiles and amphibians of the Trans-Pecos hidden well out of reach in the many cracks and fissures that permeate the limestone substrate of favorite herping grounds. Accordingly, even the most ardent herpers stay off the ranch roads and away from the rock cuts we find so attractive during the warmer months of the year. Unfortunately, the cold, herp-less, conditions of winter can quickly lead to a severe form of herper depression known as cabin fever.

There is one, traditional, fool-proof cure for the herper strain of cabin fever—a snake hunting trip. Of course, one simply cannot go snake hunting in the dead of winter—unless one wishes to be branded a mental incompetent. Nevertheless, a road trip through herp habitat is a well-known cure for this particularly virulent type of depression. However, before heading out to cruise the rock cuts during the off season one must first come up with an excuse for a long, winter drive through snake country. In my former life as an intelligence officer, such an excuse was known as “plausible cover.” Plausible cover is simply the excuse one gives that offers a reasonable, acceptable, rationale for doing something that would otherwise arouse great suspicion, especially if the suspicious parties are wives who, by definition, never suffer from cabin fever. Fortunately, my best herpin’ buddy is amazingly imaginative in developing “plausible cover” for winter “herping” trips. Let me cite a recent example.

Just before Christmas this winter, when everyone else was energetically occupied with holiday preparations, I received a call from my buddy soliciting my participation in a long road trip through some favored herpin’ locales. I had been feeling the first painful symptoms of cabin fever and, not wishing to suffer a full-blown case of the herper variety right at Christmas, I readily agreed. Of course, I naturally inquired about plausible cover (after all, I didn’t want to look like an idiot). No problem—he had it all figured out. Our cover would be that we were going to visit a liquor store. What?

Now, I’m no teetotaler, but I’m really not a drinking man either. My limited needs for alcoholic beverages are easily satisfied by a visit to the nearest convenience store or, if I want something really exotic, like Mad Dog 20-20, the local liquor stores suffice. Was he really serious? Oh yes, he was really serious, but he wouldn’t tell me why we had to drive all the way to Fort Stockton, of all places, to visit a liquor store—at least he wouldn’t until we were well on our way. Fifty miles or so out of town the next day, the real story unfolded.

It seems my buddy had been reading an article in one of those esoteric publications that cater to people with highly refined epicurean sensitivities (I believe he acquired the magazine at Bubba’s barber shop). In this genteel periodical he discovered an article extolling the many virtues of a certain vintage of distilled liquor produced, the article said, only in a remote village of southern Mexico. Elite connoisseurs had rated this beverage—the refined and aged essence of the local maguey—as the primo vintage of its kind. So good was this particular issue, it was claimed to produce sensual pleasures, for those individuals lucky enough to obtain a sip of its aromatic delight, that were indescribable. But, there was bad news: the ancient family-operated distillery had produced only limited amounts of this last, and most superlative, liquor whereupon the facility had been shut down by government troops! No more of the exquisite nectar would be produced—ever! You can’t imagine the effect this shocking news had on my friend. Though he had never sampled the beverage in question, now that it was unavailable he had to have some. He immediately began a desperate quest to locate as many bottles of this sublime substance as possible, searching by phone, Internet, and personal contact, every retailer of spirits in the entire civilized world (meaning Texas, of course). Utterly determined, he left no stone unturned. After almost five minutes of frantic effort he managed to locate two—that’s right, just two—bottles of the rare, vintage brew—one in Fort Worth, and the other in Fort Stockton.

The bottle in Fort Worth, I learned, was being acquired by an operative who would spirit it (pardon the pun) out of Fort Worth and into the hands of another operative. Ultimately, it would be delivered via cargadores into the anxious hands of my buddy. The bottle in Fort Stockton was another matter. It resided on the dusty shelves of a non-descript liquor store located somewhere along the main drag of that remote, West Texas town. Having no personal contacts in Fort Stockton, my buddy had been in direct contact with this establishment and had extracted the owner’s firm promise to hold the bottle in reserve for him until we could arrive to take possession. Needless to say, the proprietors hadn’t a clue as to the true value, either esthetic or monetary, of their possession. They only knew that some crackpot...um, I mean connoisseur, was on his way from San Angelo to buy that bottle of booze they hadn’t been able to unload for over a year.

Naturally, my buddy had waited until we were far from civilization on a lonesome ranch road before telling me all this, the reason being that he did not want to risk me inadvertently spilling the beans to some competitor. This was also the apparent reason I was directed to leave my cell phone at home, and likely also the reason he had frisked me before our departure. Suffice to say, security was tight.

Upon arrival at the liquor store, and before going in, we shoved our armament (weapons were deemed necessary on this trip) under the floor mats of his vehicle as we carefully cased the establishment. Only after my buddy was absolutely sure there were no suspicious hangers-on, and that all customers had departed, did we make our entrance.

We, that is, he did not immediately approach the store clerk. Instead, we wandered around the establishment looking at things while trying to appear casual. Now, I’m sure that most visitors to the liquor store in Fort Stockton do
not come in to browse. This fact undoubtedly accounted for the clerk's suspicious glances in our direction. After pretending to check the prices on the discount wine rack for about the fifth time, we finally approached the nervous and edgy employee. I'm sure she thought we were getting ready to rob the place.

Fortunately, the instant my buddy introduced himself, the clerk relaxed and put the phone back on the receiver. She smiled and became quite friendly—as people will do after a perceived physical threat has suddenly disappeared. When my friend inquired if she had the "goods" he had called about, she indicated that she did indeed. Reaching behind the counter, she produced a dusty, non-descript-looking bottle of liquor that I would not have given a second glance. Not only was the container itself singularly unattractive, (it looked like it had been recycled—many times) the fluid inside had a kind of viscous, cloudy appearance that did not look at all appetizing. I was not impressed. My buddy, on the other hand, was ecstatic. His hands were actually shaking with excitement as he counted out the many twenty-dollar bills necessary to compensate the storekeeper. I won't tell you how much he paid, but it was far more than any bottle of tequila should ever cost. In any case, I'm sure you wouldn't believe the amount—I nearly didn't believe it myself, but you can't argue with a stack of new twenties still bound by the wrapper. Who would have imagined that a liquor store in Fort Stockton would possess a bottle of anything that cost so much?

After the purchase was carefully packed in an insulated and padded aluminum chest labeled "Whole Blood", we repaired to a local Tex-Mex restaurant where we sampled Fort Stockton's finest fajitas, served up by an attractive young waitress named Ruby. She had lovely green eyes and other attributes pertinent to her gender that made the restaurant's ambience quite pleasant, but my buddy never even noticed—his eyes rarely left the vehicle we had parked immediately in front of the establishment, within easy view. Once, when a couple of scruffy oil-field workers lingered in conversation too near the back of his vehicle, I saw his hand slide unconsciously to the waistband of his trousers and the .45 automatic pistol he had concealed there. Fortunately, the two roughnecks departed and my buddy relaxed a little. For my part, I quickly gulped the remainder of my meal as I was anxious to leave before any gunplay ensued.

The three hour trip home was uneventful. Aside from allowing no stops whatsoever, even for passengers who complained of severe bladder pains, the drive was almost normal. We passed by several familiar herping haunts and even had a number of brief discussions on the various attributes of this locality or that locality as they pertained to snakes. Still, there was a palpable undercurrent of suspicion and anxiety in my buddy's demeanor. Several times I detected him scrutinizing me warily from the corner of his eye. Rest assured I did nothing, and said nothing, that he would interpret as overt. Once, when I casually stretched my arm over the back of the seat in the general direction of the box containing his prize, I saw him stiffen, his eyes visibly widening. With an image of his loaded pistol suddenly in my mind, I slowly placed both hands in my lap where he could see them, and kept them there until we reached San Angelo.

Our good-byes were brief after this trip, consisting on my buddy's part of a mumbled thanks for accompanying him, followed by the abrupt slamming of the door and the sound of deadbolts and other locks clicking into place. For my part, I was glad the trip was over. Needless to say, my cabin fever was definitely in remission, although I don't know what kind of fever my buddy may still be suffering from. All I know is that as I write this, I'm very sure I will make it to the regular herping season without another bout of this depressing malady. Barring some really unusual circumstance, cabin fever should not revisit me for quite a while. If it does, I believe I'll eschew the traditional remedy and just pop a couple Prozac tablets.

Author's Note: This story is absolutely, 100 proof...er, percent true. It really happened just the way I've described it, and I even left out some of the good parts. I couldn't make this stuff up! If you don't believe me, just ask Dean—but stay away from his liquor cabinet—remember the .45?
Herpetological Lessons in Child Rearing

Never underestimate the powers of a determined twelve-year-old boy. This maxim I offer free of charge to those of you who may be sharing living accommodations with just such a person. Remembering these words may someday give you a clue regarding the potential behavior of your particular twelve-year-old, regardless of circumstances, and they may save you much heartache and anxiety. They do for me, anyway. To illustrate, let me recount a family herping incident that involved my youngest son, a very special snake, and yours truly. There is a lesson here, so please pay attention.

It was one of those herping trips where you just know something special is going to happen. We were in Jeff Davis County, of course, deep within the mountain range of the same name. The whole family had come to escape the scorching mid-summer heat of the Edwards Plateau. It was the tail end of the rainy season in the mountains, so that would make it the end of July or the beginning of August. Just two days before our arrival the area had received three inches of rain, and it had rained for about forty-five minutes on the day the incident I'm about to recount occurred. By nightfall the surface water had evaporated from paved roads and rock faces, though the surrounding earth was still quite moist. Temperatures were on the cool side—in the middle seventies—and slowing growing cooler. There was a bit of cloud cover to hide the stars, and my farmer's almanac said it was going to be a moonless night. In other words, conditions were just about perfect for a little nocturnal field herping.

Ostensibly, we were searching for serpents—my sons were anyway. Being less picky, I was looking for anything cold-blooded, be it a toad, lizard, frog, or even a Gray-banded king snake. Cruising slowly through the mountain-groves and oak groves at dusk, we anticipated finding reptiles far different from those we normally encountered in the hot, arid mesquite near our home. My two sons, Mark and Matthew, sat in the back seat trading jibes and insults. The person in charge (my wife) sat in front, enjoying the spectacular scenery and dispensing orders. Like all good privates, I saluted smartly and drove.

For once, we were able to travel with the windows down and the AC turned off. Doing so, we discovered that the early afternoon rains had left a lot of unfamiliar moisture in the equally unfamiliar cool mountain air. These rare (to us) summertime atmospheric conditions, coupled with the tall basalt outcrops and the sharp mountain peaks standing in silhouette against a setting sun, gave our excursion an exotic flavor, thereby heightening the anticipation of finding something new and interesting.

At about fifteen minutes past full dark we rolled to a stop at a likely looking spot. It was situated near the bottom of a deep defile between mountain peaks that showed up on my topo map as Elbow Canyon. Habitat at the location chosen for our first foray consisted of a small cutout in the rocky hillside flanked by boulder-strewn earth embankments that were thinly covered with grass and a loose layer of oak leaf litter. Here and there a small cholla cactus raised its prickly arms to remind us that we were still in West Texas.

Further along the road were several long rock cuts and more vegetation. The rock cuts were the focus of our intentions, but overall the area looked good to us—very good.

Like Marines charging out of an amtrac, the boys quickly exited the truck and began grabbing spot lamps, snake hooks, and sundry other items useful for knocking about in search of herps. Their mother, who liked to come along, but who did not relish stumbling about in the dark where venomous snakes are known to prowl, turned on her reading lamp and picked up the latest military field manual on romance, something by Danielle Steele I believe. She also turned on one of the small, hand-held radios we employed to maintain contact with her when our wanderings eventually took us out of sight of the truck. Her command post thus established, she dispensed last minute bits of motherly advice, mostly to Matthew and mostly about rattlesnakes. Our preparations nearly completed, I heard Matthew's voice suddenly register a discordant note.

"Oh, man!" came the disgusted refrain. "My light isn't working." Uh oh, I thought. "Dad! Can you fix this thing?"

As he held the recalcitrant lamp in his hands, I took a look at it. The connections all seemed tight and swapping batteries didn't help. The bulb was brand new so that couldn't be the problem. Besides, the light had checked out fine just before loading it into the truck. Despite having no clue as to what was wrong, I continued to fiddle with wires and switches, my impatient and frustrated twelve-year-old son watching closely. The fact that his brother was already hunting the cuts didn't help much. Meanwhile, the cool temperatures were growing cooler, causing me to silently fret about what that could mean for our herping success. Finally, my own anxiety building, I decided that whatever was wrong with the light was not going to get fixed right there along the side of the road.

"Matthew," I said in my most placating tone. "I don't know what's wrong with this light, and we're wasting time trying to figure it out. I've got a very good flashlight in the truck. Why don't you use it instead?" His nose wrinkled in disgust.

"No way! That stinks! Make Mark give me his spot lamp," he whined. Oh, right. Like that was an option. My seventeen-year-old son would not willingly give up his lamp, and anyway he was already a hundred yards up the road. I certainly wasn't going to give up my lamp, either. Matthew, realizing the futility of further whining, began performing his usual stomp and pout it's not fair routine as I retrieved a five cell light from the cab of the truck.

* Amtrac is short for amphibious tractor, an armored vehicle employed by the U.S. Marine Corps to carry men from assault ships to the landing beaches. Even a short ride in the cramped, diesel fume filled troop compartment of one makes you feel like killing people when you finally get out, and that's providing the seas are calm on the way in. A similar psychology, without the fumes, is generally at work in the Dearth family truck, where the seas are never calm.
pants off me in this first, unofficial, father-son foot race of the night. Huffing and puffing, I finally rounded the last bend where a familiar spectacle came into view. I could see my younger son, holding a jar high over his head, doing a little victory dance just out of reach of his brother. His accompanying chant echoed off the canyon walls.

"Oh yeah! I'm the man! I'm the man!" the refrain went. "Who got the first snake, huh? Who's the best herper now?" Arriving on the scene, I breathlessly asked, "Where's the snake?" With that, his mother shoved a clear plastic specimen jar through the open truck window, causing Matthew to laugh uproariously at his brother who had been reaching and grabbing for an empty jar.

"Here it is," she announced. "We don't know what kind it is, though." Thinking it probably a garter snake or something equally innocuous I took the jar and illuminated the contents with my spot lamp.

"Well, I'll be darned!" (I think that's what I said.) "Matthew, you've found something really, really special." This comment captured everyone's attention. My oldest son was especially curious.

"This snake is very rare—so rare it's on the list of threatened and endangered species for the state of Texas." Turning the jar so everyone could see the slender little serpent, I went on.

"What you've got here is a Trans-Pecos Blackhood snake, or *Tanilla cucullata*!"

OOOOOOH! came the collective response, followed immediately by Matthew's detailed accounting (i.e. bragging) of just how he had discovered and captured the rare specimen. To hear him tell it, you'd think he'd planned the entire event. It was almost as if the faulty spot lamp had been a ruse to get his brother and me out of the area so he could have the glory all to himself. Of course, reality was somewhat different than Matthew's version of events.

Obviously, he had finally concluded that a flashlight was better than nothing, and had decided to use it to investigate the small dirt cutout near our vehicle. Doing so took only a minute or two and revealed nothing. Frustrated, he began to methodically flip rocks, carefully returning them to their original resting position just as he has been taught. In this mundane fashion, he had ultimately discovered the little Tanilla and managed to scoop it into the jar. Matthew's exaggerated version of events, while far more elaborate than the truth, was forgivable—at least I thought so.

What Matthew did not tell his brother and me, but what I later learned from my wife, was that he had determinedly examined the undersides of nearly a hundred rocks of all sizes before making his momentous discovery. The periodic negative reports he received about his brother's and my searches seemed to fuel his efforts. Each time he learned that we had not seen anything, he would resume his rock turning with a vengeance—or so said his mother, who is apparently able to see what a person is thinking, even in the dark (a trait possessed by all good field commanders, I'm told).

Later that night we saw another, even larger, Blackhood, as well as several other kinds of snakes, along with some lizards, toads and frogs, but
none of these herps were as important as that very first one caught by a determined twelve-year-old.¹

Obviously, Matthew was ecstatic about capturing the unusual snake. His success was made sweeter by the fact that his little serpent was the first herp of the night, and he had found it using “inferior” equipment (I believe “haggard” was the adjective he used—don’t ask me why. All summer he applied the term to anything he found objectionable).

In truth, I was probably happier than Matthew. His success taught me not to be too anxious about “shaky” conditions in the future. I also learned that Matthew seems always to prevail. If anyone can turn a sow’s ear into a silk purse, he can. The fact that his snake turned out to be a very rare species, one that even dad had never seen, only added icing to the cake we were both enjoying. More importantly, Matthew’s blatant happiness completely cleansed my psyche of guilt. Just the same, the most important lesson I learned that night was to always carry a spare snake light—if only to prevent the whining. In the immortal words of Sean Connery, here endeth the lesson!

¹ For wildlife officers who may take an official interest in the herping adventure described here, let me emphasize that Matthew did not know the snake he captured was a threatened species—he’d never seen a Tanilla before. Once it was identified, the little snake was immediately released unharmed to the same rock he found it under.

A Long, Cold Winter for Wildcat Willie

Willie discovers that being a gray-banded collector has its ups and downs

March 26, 2002

Mr. Dean McInturff
C/O West Texas Herpetological Society
P.O. Box 60134
San Angelo, Texas 76906

Dear Mr. McInturff,

I shore do need yore advice on this snake bidness. It has been one long durn winter and, since I didn’t find none of them gray-bandeds last year, I ain’t had no store bought groceries in quite a spell. I been livin’ on road-killed venison and cactus apples since last November when my money run out. I prob’y shoulda took your advice and stayed on in the oil field, but when I seen how much that San Antone feller was gittin’ for them snakes I just couldn’t pass up the chance t’ make some easy money. Like you said, they’s hazards and pitfalls in the snake bidness, jest like ever’ thing else.

For one thing, no one tol’ me you had to have a license to hunt snakes. Shoot, I figured I was doin’ folks a favor by whittlin’ the poppalay-shun down some, but the first night I went to look for them gray-bandeds I got stopped by that game warden from Del Rio. He gave me a ticket that cost me over a hunnert dollars. Said I was huntin’ without a license. I tol’ him I wasn’t huntin’ an’ didn’t even have no gun or nuthin’, but he said I was still gonna get a ticket. I had to go to court and I tried to tell the judge I wasn’t huntin’. I was jest lookin’ for snakes, and I wasn’t gonna shoot ‘em, but he wouldn’t listen. I reckon he’s too sensitive to be a judge ‘cause he got mighty riled when I told him I didn’t know how a feller who wears a dress to work could know anything ‘bout huntin’. Anyway, he said I was contempt-ed, or something like that, and made them throw me in the hoosegow for a spell.

When they let me go ‘bout thirty days later it was startin’ to git cold, but some ol’ boy down to the store at Loma tol’ me them gray-banded’s really only start comin’ out when it gits cold. Said he was from up north some’eres, Abilene I think, an’ has been huntin’ gray-bandeds his whole, natchural life. Claimed he was more of a snake expert than you are. Even volunteered to let me ride along with him to see how you look for ‘em. We drove up and down the road from Loma to Del Rio all dang night and never saw so much as a horny toad. Whooeee, brother! That feller can talk! All he talks about is snakes, though. He tol’ me windy nights was best for gray-bandeds—an the way he talks we shoulda seen a power of ‘em. He also said no moon is best for snake huntin’. Wish I’d known that before ‘cause I only hunted when it was moon bright on account of my headlamp wasn’t so good.

I finally found a snake near ‘bout the end of November when the Loma Volunteer Fire Department was puttin’ out that bad brush fire. I figgered it was gonna be a good
night for snakes 'cause the wind was blowin' pretty hard. There was so much tumbleweed on the road it looked like a fence was down an' the sheep had got out. Right there where Buffalo Creek crosses the highway I was down on hands and knees lookin' under some dead sotol 'cause I heard baby gray-bandedes hide under 'em. I musta to close to the brush or somethin' 'cause my carbide light lit a cedar bush on fire. 'Fore I knew what was happenin' the whole bar ditch and crick bottom was burnin'. By the time the fire trucks got there 'bout two miles of brush had went up in smoke, and them tumbleweeds was throwin' sparks like fleas jumpin' off a dead dog. The volunteer fire guys was cuissin' and sweatin' gittin' that fire out, but I pitched right in there, stompin' and beatin' with my bedroll, but it wasn't no use. They finally had to bring a 'dozer in to blade a firebreak. That helped.

'Bout two days later, after the fire was pretty much out, was when I found that snake. It was right where the dozer had scraped some rocks and brush into a pile. I thought it was one of them 'spensive, black phase gray-bandedes, but turned out it was just black from the fire. I guess I had been under one of them sotols and wasn't fast enough to git away—it was deader'n my Aunt Sally and burnt near to a crisp. Anyway, I got me a new battery powered light now—one a them VFD fellers stomped my carbide light and broke it. He said it was an accident, but I don't think so.

Anyway, what I want to ast you is do you think them rattlesnake roundup fellers could use a good snakeman like me? This gray-banded huntin' isn't pannin' out like I thought it would, and I heard there was a ol' boy up in Sweetwater that would pay a lot of money for rattlesnakes—dead or alive. Since most of my snakes have been dead ones, I'm thinkin' I might have a corner on that part of the market. What do you think? Write back soon 'cause I ain't found a good roadkill in about a week and cactus apples give out in December.

Sincerely yours,

Wildcat Willie Jessup

P.S. I ast that ol' boy from Abilene about the roundup and he said if I wanted dead snakes to just wait until May or June when he comes down to Val Verdy County a lot. He said I'd be sure to find a lot of dead ones then.

Here's Dean's response...

April 5, 2002

Mr. William J. Jessup
C/O Postmaster
Loma Alta, Texas

Dear Willie,

I'm sorry to hear you've had such a rough winter. I hope by the time this letter arrives you find yourself in a better situation.

I was aware of the brush fire you mentioned in your letter, having seen the aftermath from it when I was enroute to Del Rio a while back. It looked like it had been a bad one so I'm not surprised to learn that it took some time to put it out. As you've obviously discovered, carbide lanterns have many drawbacks besides the inadequate amount of light they produce. They simply are not suitable for snake hunting—unless you do all of your hunting in a cave.

I was also very sorry to hear about your troubles with the legal system. Please do yourself a favor and purchase a hunting license before you go out to look for snakes again. You might also want to purchase the special non-game collector's permit, which is a requirement if you intend to possess more than ten snakes of a single species, or twenty-five in the aggregate. Given your relative success to date, this permit may seem like an unnecessary expenditure, but having it in your possession the next time a game warden stops you might preclude another visit to the county jail (although I've heard the sheriff of Val Verde County serves up some decent grub).

As for collecting rattlesnakes for the roundup, I must advise against it. First of all, the money paid by the roundup promoters for snakes brought in by hunters is a paltry sum. It is hardly an incentive to risk life and limb collecting these important, but dangerous, natural predators. Secondly, to even meet expenses you would have to take snakes directly from their dens, which means employing capture methods that are unethical, if not actually illegal. Moreover, to catch enough snakes to pay for food and gasoline, you would actually have to start in September or October, and then hunt again at different locations in February and March. During this whole time, all the snakes you caught would have to be kept alive.

Despite what your friend from Abilene said, I don't think the promoters of the roundups are interested in dead rattlesnakes—except for the ones they kill during their festivities. The bottom line is that while there may be money to be made at the rattlesnake roundups, snake hunters are not the people making it.

Warm regards,

Dean McInturff

P.S. I've heard that Michael Price, a rich entrepreneur living in San Angelo, made his fortune selling gray-bandedes. He can be reached through the WTHS as well. Since I plan to pursue a cat ranching venture in Argentina for the next two or three years, beginning immediately, you should probably direct future correspondence to Mike. He's a really nice guy and you definitely speak his lingo.
Advice for Bad Boys on Choosing the Ultimate Pet

Bad Boy (bad boi), n. Slang: A male, usually between the ages of 18 and 35, recognizable by an affection for clothing and possessions that impart a superficial impression of extreme masculinity. Tattoos, large, vicious dogs, high performance motor vehicles, and frequent use of foul language are the usual trappings associated with Bad Boys.

Okaaay... So you’ve kept a ten foot Burmese Python and an even bigger retic’ for a couple of years now and you’re ready to graduate to the dangerous stuff. You’ve decided you want to keep a fish snake. What’s that? You say you can’t decide between spitting cobras and Black Mambas? Well heck, what about a North American snake? Something from the states should be easier to obtain and to care for, but nothing wimpy, right? Well, how about a full grown, twenty pound Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake? Or, how about a super-toxic Mojave Rattlesnake from southern Arizona? Mojave’s are pretty nasty mamba-jammers aren’t they? It’s really hard to make up your mind because whatever you choose it’s just gotta be baad, right? Well, as long as you’re going to get into hot stuff, you might as well go the whole mile. You know—get something so dangerous nobody else would want it. If you want my advice, and you really want to impress your friends, don’t piddle around with cobras, mambas, or rattlers. Get something really awesome—like a fish. Say what? Say whaat?

Yes, I know fish aren’t snakes, and there’s no way our buddies are gonna be impressed by a bowl of goldfish or some frou-frou, multi-colored tropical thing, but who’s writing this story anyway? Besides, if you really are one of those macho, I-got-more-testosterone-than-I-know-what-to-do-with types who simply must have something particularly nasty to wow his friends and scare the cat with, you should be looking at fish, not snakes. Read on to find out why.

Now, I’m not denying that venomous snakes can produce painful and dangerous bites (which is why Bad Boys think they are so cool), but they really don’t hold a candle to some of their venomous cousins in other vertebrate orders. In fact, among all the venomous vertebrates, perhaps no other group can deliver as painful a wound as certain species of venomous fish. Of course, most of the really dangerous fish are found in tropical waters—far from the shores of Texas—and they rarely show up in a home aquarium, but that’s just because there hasn’t been much demand for them—until now, that is. I predict you will see pet stores all over the United States stocking them very soon, particularly after all you bad Boys find out how completely “over the edge” one of these special denizens of the deep is. I’m talking about the Stonefish.

Three species of this nasty fish are known, and all three are decidedly ugly with broad, flat heads, sharply tapered bodies, and a blunt tail (all you pit bull owners should love a fish that looks just like your dog). Further, stonefish are not covered with scales, like most fish, instead they are quite warty and encased in slime (a fact that is gar-un-teed to make your girlfriend or spouse wrinkle her nose and go yeeech!!) This supreme ugliness is a definite advantage in the shallow water, coral reef milieu the stonefish inhabits. When abso-
Okay, okay. I know it's a pretty lame description, but gimme a break—the guy was a doctor who probably really thinks that an injection only "pinches" a little. More descriptive is the record of an incident of stonefish envenomation that caused pain so severe the victim amputated the affected part of his own body in an attempt to gain respite from the torment (after which, he ran up and down the beach waving his knife like some crack addicted version of Norman Bates). So, just what can you do to relieve the pain of stonefish envenomation? Well, not much.

It should go without saying that calamine lotion is not going to help any campers who get poked by this fishie. Nor will a couple Benadryl tablets do much. Fortunately, there is an effective antivenin for stonefish toxins but, unless it is immediately at hand, nothing else a victim can do will prevent the terrible pain stonefish venom causes. Even massive doses of morphine will not dull the maddening torment. One authority on the clinical treatment of stonefish envenomation makes this comment about the use of pain-relieving drugs: "...attempts to control the acute pain...by administration of narcotic analgesics...may produce respiratory depression and impaired consciousness." In other words, the drugs may actually kill you before the terrible pain from the venom stops.

Anyway, if you simply must keep something really, really dangerous, something that can cause pain so bad even mega-doses of testosterone won't overcome it, then a stonefish is likely the pet for you. When you finally get one, you should also try to locate some antivenin (somewhere in Africa or Australia, I think) so your friends can administer first aid to you after you get finned—and you will get finned. Oh yes, it's inevitable 'cause when your pals come over for a beer and a look at the baaaaddest fish in the world, and your wary ghoul is just sitting there in the tank, perfectly camouflaged and invisible, you'll feel obligated to brazenly stick a hand in there with it to make it move. I just hope the pet store sold you the right size straight jacket.

Oh, one last bit of advice: Be sure to set your stonefish aquarium up well away from the kitchen or any other place knives are kept. Remember the Norman Bates guy who severed part of his own body after being finned? We wouldn't want you to do the same. Lord knows what you might accidentally cut off! Of course, if you're a particularly manly man (and I know you are), you might actually want to go the Norman Bates route. Just think about how impressed your buddies would be as you chop and slash at your own body. In that case, scouts, remember: A sharp knife cuts clean. Dull knives hurt like...

It is the middle of May as these words are written, and that means it's *alterna* season. On the southern Edwards Plateau and in the Trans-Pecos, April, May, June, and July are the premier months for fanciers of *Lampropeltis alterna*, the Gray-banded Kingsnake. Each weekend night, from now until practically the fourth of July, many of the back roads in the southern reaches of these two regions will be illuminated by lights of all kinds as snake hobbyists search diligently for the coveted gray-bands.

While I do not claim to be a Believer, as these *alterna* fanciers are called, I do occasionally take time out from my crotalid hunts to search for this mystical colubrid. In truth, because so many of my friends are faithful Believers, it is hard not to get caught up in the fever of the chase. Amazingly, I sometimes find myself actually getting excited about the prospects of finding one of these colorful snakes, even if they don't have fangs.

So it was on a recent Saturday evening, when in the company of my herpin' buddy Dean, I found myself cruising a stretch of Juno Road some six miles north of Baker's Crossing on the Devil's River. As darkness fell, so did our road speed, and all manner of vehicular running lights were switched on in an attempt to pierce the darkness and allow us to see a snake. The weather was perfect: barometer at 29.77 and falling, temperature 82 degrees, an overcast sky threatening rain, south wind, and a dark moon. Just exactly the right conditions for *alterna* to be on the move.

Naturally, we were not the only hunters cruising that stretch of road. There were two vehicles from Dallas, another van load of hunters from somewhere in Kansas, and a mysterious driver in a pickup truck who never stopped to exchange pleasantries, apparently preferring to maintain his anonymity.

While my partner and I saw plenty of snakes during the night, we were not fortunate enough to encounter the object of our trip. For me, this was business as usual for I have never even seen a wild *alterna*, much less captured one. I was really hoping this particular hunt would be the exception, what with the perfect conditions and all, and my being in the company of a true Believer. It just did not work out that way.

The two gents from Dallas were not so unlucky. At different times of the night these fortunate guys each caught a gray-band—from right in front of us! I mean, talk about heartbreak—for me! For three years I've been hunting *alterna* (albeit, not diligently as my partner sagely pointed out) without so much as a glimpse of gray, orange, and black scales, and to have two *alterna* caught right under my nose on the same night well, it just doesn't seem fair!

Still, there are a few more weekends of "prime time" left and, of course, there's still the September season to look forward to. Maybe the next time I return from a hunt, I'll be a true Believer, having caught my first ever gray-band. Yeah... Right.
Bullsnakes are not Boring!

For some reason, Bullsnakes seem to be particularly prevalent this year, at least if the many sighting reports from West Texas herpers are any indication. It may be that the on-going regional drought conditions have affected the snakes. Lack of forage for rodents over the past two years has reduced numbers of this favorite Bullsnake prey dramatically, and this year has been worse due to minimal rainfall in most areas. As a result, rats and mice are probably few and far between for these voracious snakes, forcing them to search more actively and over greater range than is normal. Perhaps the increased sightings of Bullsnakes are simply due to these more extensive searches for food, it's really very hard to tell. One thing I do know for certain, most of the Bullsnakes seen this year have been large specimens, and by that I means something six feet, or better. Take for example the one captured by John Hollister in May.

John was out hunting snakes one weekend and apparently caught the Bullsnake somewhere near Van Horn, Texas. He showed it to Dean McInturff and me about 1:00 A.M. on a recent Sunday morning when we were cruising Highway 277 in Val Verde County hunting snakes. Dean and I were looking for *alterna* and John had just come up from Del Rio. Though we were traveling in opposite directions on a dark, muggy night, our vehicles exhibited the characteristic travel pattern for snake hunters, prompting both drivers to pull over slightly, roll down a window, and ask, "Had any luck?" With John, such a question invariably leads to long, detailed discussions of the weather conditions, water table, zodiacal data, and even the market information from ever locale he's visited—and on this particular trip it seemed he had traversed the entire Trans-Pecos. Such conversations with John are always entertaining and informative. I was particularly amazed at his ability to rattle off current gasoline prices for nearly every town within a 500-mile radius of the radio tower on 277. He is such a wealth of valuable information—shoot, even I didn't know that moon phases affect the circular rhythms of Val Verde County dung beetles! (And I still don't understand why an *alterna* collector needs to know that Corpus Christi is experiencing a neap tide this year.) Anyway, count on John to keep you informed.

While he usually travels alone, John had two companions with him on this trip. One was a coyote-looking mutt he called Twinkie. It was a reclusive dog that John claimed he was trying to break in for snake hunting. I'm not sure exactly what that meant—how do you break a dog in for snake hunting? Anyway, Twinkie had been relegated to riding in the bed of John's pickup for the passenger seat of the cab John had installed a sad-eyed, no-name beagle that he'd picked up along with the snakes he'd collected for the trip. Speaking of snakes (and that's what this story is really about), John had a couple of specimens he wanted Dean and me to see.

Moving to the back of his bug-splattered truck and opening a battle worn cooler, he pulled a tightly tied bag from within, congenially offering it for our examination. Ever the prudent savage, Dean immediately shifted to stealth mode, making no move whatsoever to take the offered bag. In fact, his whole body suddenly seemed to blend, chameleon-like, with the habitat, making him quite difficult to see. Being somewhat less circumspect, and not knowing John as well as Dean does, I happily accepted the bag and proceeded to work the knot loose. As I opened the heavy sack, I saw from the corner of my eye that Dean was now gripping his snake hook in a way vaguely reminiscent of an Olympic fencing champion. Never being one to let such subtle hints register, I blithely held the bag wide open and stuck my face into the opening to get a good look at whatever was in there.

The 100,000 candlepower glow of Dean's snake light shining through the frayed muslin bag illuminated an enormous, pale yellow and tan Bullsnake. It was undoubtedly the prettiest, and the biggest, Bullsnake I've seen in a long, long time and it appeared to be in excellent condition. Of course, these were only my initial visual impressions, made in the nano second before the snake transformed into an ophidian torpedo and launched itself—hissing all the way—directly at my face. The noise it was making was both loud and discomfiting, and the fact that my face was at point blank range when the snake's subconscious U-boote commander said *Los!* Made it feel even more so. Not having developed the protective coloration and defensive behavior of my partner, my face undoubtedly looked like a 10,000 gross register ton oil tanker to the snake. In other words, it was a perfect target.

The good news is that while age may have dulled my mental capacity, my physical reactions (coupled with my own animal-like instincts for self-preservation) have not slowed overmuch. My head snapped back like I'd been punched, and I choked that bag double quick! It's a good thing I did, too. You see, in the two split seconds I had the bag open, Dean had not only taken in the beauty of the snake, its excellent physical condition, and its irascible disposition, his keen warrior's eye had also spotted a long, sharp cactus spine projecting from the snake's chin. Even if the snake hadn't grabbed me, that thorn coulda poked my eye out! When Dean mentioned the thorn to John (after they had both stopped laughing and dried their yes) his laconic response was something like, "Yeah, maybe if I took it out the snake wouldn't be so **** off all the time." Thanks again, John!

Another, even larger, Bullsnake has recently come into my temporary possession. It is equally irascible, but for a very good reason—its tummy hurts! How do I know that? Simple—shortly after I acquired it, the snake regurgitated a lot of broken glass in the form of a 100-watt light bulb!

It seems that this particular Bullsnake, which is over seven feet long, was captured in a chicken coop here in Tom Green County where it had ingested eight of nine eggs in one nest. For reasons that cannot be determined, the snake then proceeded to swallow a light bulb, perhaps mistaking it for a very large, smooth chicken egg. Subsequently, the snake was captured by the owner of the chicken coop who brought it to me to determine its sex and, hopefully, to see if it was gravid. Somewhere between capture and arrival at my location, the light bulb broke. I'm sure the discomfort of having broken glass churning around in its stomach is what prompted the snake to regurgitate.
I have the remnants of Mr. Edison’s “revenge,” and the snake seems to be doing okay, although she hasn’t eaten anything yet. It may be some time before she feels like another meal, poor thing! I she does recover from her electrifying snack, and is, in fact, gravid, I will keep her until she lays her eggs. She will then be returned to the lady who captured her to be released back into the wild. Any offspring that result from the eggs will also be released—far from all artificial light sources!

Echoes from the Den

The herping season in West Texas is over for the year. For all practical purposes, it was over at the end of July, due mostly to the drought and extremely hot temperatures. A few of us die-hards continued to visit some of our favorite herpin’ haunts through the latter part of the summer, but there really wasn’t much to see. One trip with my herpin’ partner Dean was so completely uneventful, we found ourselves standing alongside the road at 1:00 o’clock in the morning trying to take pictures of the full moon rising over a cut. We had convinced ourselves that the effort was a worthwhile experiment in artistic photography. What a crock! Ansel Adams we ain’t! Shoot, I was using 200 ASA film and the camera was set for 800 ASA. Dean tried to take a photo of me standing next to a road sign with the moon coming up in front and all he got was a giant reflected glare from his flash bouncing off the sign. Man, you know we were bored! As I recall, we didn’t see a blessed thing that night—not even a ringtail.

An occasional *atrox* was about all there was to be seen on most collecting trips after the middle of July, but there were times when even these ubiquitous snakes were absent. As a result, hard-core herpers had to get their “fixes” in non-traditional ways (non-traditional for West Texas, anyway).

As an example, I got a call from Mike Price one scorching Friday afternoon in early August inviting me to go snake hunting on the Concho River. The Concho River? Yes, he was so desperate he actually thought we should meet below the Lake Nasworthy dam about an hour after dark and wade the shallows looking for cottonmouths! I couldn’t believe he was seriously asking me to join him in a nocturnal prowl for pit vipers! After all, we’d have to wade around in the weed-choked shallows to find them and I was sure Mike wouldn’t be wearing much in the way of leg protection—probably just old blue jeans and worn out tennis shoes. If, by some great good luck, we didn’t get nailed by the water moccasins I knew clouds of voracious mosquitoes would eat us alive. It sounded like an exercise in utter stupidity. Naturally, I jumped at the chance to participate. I guess I was desperate, too.

As it turns out, we never did rendezvous as planned. Oh, I showed up on schedule, and so did Mike, but we got our wires crossed somehow and ended up waiting for each other on opposite ends of the dam. Eventually, I gave up and went home. Mike stayed and hunted, as I later learned, but didn’t see a thing.

In September, the region finally received some rain. Naturally, the sudden onset of evening thunderstorms produced biological changes that forced me to pull an unplanned, all-night herpin’ trip. Unfortunately, my favorite *alterna* hunting spot was inaccessible due to highway construction. They actually have a herper-proof fence with gates and locks on it across the road! I knew this, but the falling barometer had my herpin’ hormones raging so I just had to go somewhere. I chose to visit Concho County—specifically the Lake O. H. Ivie environs. There are no *alterna* in Concho County, but there are other things a desperate herper can look for. The rain, which started
just at dusk, came down in torrents most of the night, forcing me to navigate a long circuitous route using many obscure farm to market highways and ranch roads to get there (because of flooded low-water crossings), but it was worth the trouble.

I found several species of snakes along the road, among which were Western Massasaugas (Sistrurus catenatus tergeminus)—a snake I had not seen in the wild. The rain seemed to have them moving pretty good and I was able to record a total of six in my log book, along with checkered garters, Bullsnakes, and, of course, a brown toad. Not the usualBeliever fare, to be sure, but sufficient to ward off the impending end-of-season ennui that hits all snake hunters. The most important thing about that wet Saturday night was that I learned I am way too old for all-nighters, and when you pull one unexpectedly (as I did) it wreaks havoc with your bio-rhythms. Not only that, it makes your spouse really mad! (Whereupon she wreaks havoc with a totally different kind.)

More recently, I visited the Davis Mountains in one last, all-or-nothing, effort to hunt alticina. My rationale was that the mountains, being cooler, would offer a greater opportunity to find an end-of-season snake. I knew from research (I asked a couple of my Believer pals) that alticina had been caught in the Davis Mountains as late as October, so I was optimistic.

Well, my logic proved correct. It was cooler in the mountains—thirty-two degrees, to be exact. Of course, that was with the wind chill. Actual ambient temperature was thirty-nine degrees—not exactly optimum for alticina, or anything else with scales. Consequently, my herping efforts paid few dividends. I found myself driving aimlessly at night, bored out of my gourd, in a desperate attempt to find some kind of cold-blooded creature just so the trip wouldn’t be a total bust. As a result, I ended up cruising the flats—far from any mountains or road cuts—looking for crotalids.

Somewhere between Alpine and Marfa I wound up at a roadside pull-off with a bunch of other folks that I thought at first were snake hunters like me. After all, who but a snake hunter would be out in the wee hours of the morning? As it turned out, these folks were not looking for snakes. Instead, they were checking out a weird phenomenon the locale is famous for—the Marfa lights.

Marfa is a tiny little town west of Alpine and its only notoriety stems from a series of unexplained nocturnal lights that are visible many evenings of the year. During my conversations with the slightly strange folks at the pull-off, I learned that September is one of the best months to observe these odd lights and, as luck would have it, I had arrived at an opportune time. The lights were not only visible they were quite active.

Believe it or not, I spent a couple of hours there observing the lights (and the whackos who came and went from the parking area). It was an interesting experience, to say the least. The lights appeared on the distant horizon, sometimes closelier, and did all manner of unexplainable things—blinking on and off, moving rapidly across the horizon or straight up in the air, dancing, merging with one another, changing color—it was quite a show. Naturally, no one knows just what causes these lights to appear. Some folks say it’s all atmospherics. A few locals claim the lights are the spirits of long-dead Apaches. Others claim they are simply car headlights (even though there are no roads in the vicinity). Personally, I believe the lights are the souls of lost snake hunters who went into the mountains looking for alticina and never came out. (Hey, my explanation is just as good as anybody else’s!)"
A Snake Hunter’s Christmas List

Dear Santa,

I haven’t written to you in quite a while—not since I was ten years old and that was about thirty years ago. Since I haven’t asked for anything in such a long, long time (and I’ve been really, really good) please be nice and bring me at least a few of things on this list. I sure do need them.

1. A year’s supply of unleaded gasoline for my truck (which I will use up entirely during May and June).

2. A reusable “kitchen pass” with unlimited “credit” so I can get out of the house without the usual spousal disturbance.

3. A 500,000 candle power, hand-held spot light that does not weigh 10 pounds, or come with a 20 pound battery that dies ten minutes after you turn on the light.

4. A two quart thermos that will keep my coffee hot for at least an hour.

5. An almanac that projects every date the moon is dark, the wind is less than 12 mph from the southeast, the barometer is falling at 29.8, and the temperature is 82 degrees—all at the same time.

6. A map, GPS receiver, and a computer that will instantaneously show me the exact location and distance to the nearest Town and Country convenience store.

7. An easy-going, intelligent, and enthusiastic snake hunting partner. Preferably one that smells nice. (If it’s not too much to ask, can she be a bosomy brunette with shapely legs, a nice round bottom, and have her own truck?)

8. A new truck, preferably one that’s easy on gas and doesn’t look like my last one, which the game wardens know on sight.

9. A map that shows the exact location of at least a dozen good cuts that have never been “touched” by a snake hunter’s light.

10. Last, and this is really important, can you fix it so I catch a gray-band this year?

Anatomy of a Snake Bite

As much as we worry about the incidence and effect of snakebite, few of us have ever had such an experience. That’s good. Let’s hope it stays that way. Nevertheless, there are those unfortunate individuals among us who have had the ultimate encounter with a venomous snake. This story will relate the experience of one such individual in the hopes that the facts may prove enlightening and instructive to keepers who worry about envenomanation, and who may wish to try their hand at captive husbandry of “hot” snakes.

The bite documented here was legitimate. That is, the victim was bitten while involved in an activity unrelated to the snake. Many bites by venomous snakes are illegitimate, the victims receiving their wounds while needlessly handling a snake or in some way deliberately putting their body in harm’s way for no good reason. Often, in the case of illegitimate bites, alcohol is a factor. In the case of the bite described here, the victim was performing yard work and had no idea a snake was nearby.

Speaking of the victim, in this incident it was a thirty-four year old, female schoolteacher. She had not been drinking and she was obviously smart enough not to mess with a venomous snake. Since she was also completely unaware of the snake’s presence until it bit her, we can say with surety that the bite was legitimate.

The incident occurred during July in northeast Texas while the victim was visiting her mother. During the course of the visit she elected to help out with some general lawn and garden work. One of the chores to be accomplished was moving a stack of old bricks. Apparently, the bricks had been in one place for a very long time and had not been stacked very neatly. There were a few crack and crevices between the individual bricks, especially at the bottom—perfect for snakes. A growth of uncut grass and weeds provided the screening and concealing growth necessary to make the bricks a perfect habitat for snakes.

Work proceeded without incident and for ten minutes everything was fine—until the last layer of bricks was reached. As the woman curled her fingers under the bottom bricks she suddenly felt a sharp pain in her right hand. She described it as feeling like being stabbed by a hot needle. Her first thought was that a scorpion had stung her. As she was bent over at the time, she stood up to examine her finger. In the fraction of second between recognizing something dreadful had happened, and standing erect to investigate, she was overcome by severe pain and sudden nausea. Her whole arm felt as if it were on fire. At this point, the snake crawled out from under the bricks. She recognized the serpent as a venomous one. Realizing a dangerous snake had bitten her, she called to her husband, who was working nearby, to come and help her.

Immediately he applied what first aid he knew. Unfortunately, the measures he employed are now universally recognized as doing more harm than good. First, he packed his wife’s hand in ice, and then he had her hold it over her head. The ice may have helped to deaden the pain a bit, but that’s all
it would do. Holding her hand over her head only served to allow gravity to assist the lymphatic fluids in her body to distribute the venom through her finger and into the surrounding tissues of her hand. Fortunately, she was also taken to a hospital, which she reached some fifteen minutes after the bite.

Throughout the short trip to the hospital, and for some time after her arrival, she continued to experience severe pain and nausea. The physicians did not administer antivenin. They did provide antibiotics and she was given strong painkillers, but she did not remember what type they were. Additionally, a rubber, constricting band was placed on her arm and moved periodically up and down in an effort to inhibit the spread of venom. Her whole arm and hand eventually became quite swollen. Nevertheless, after five days she was deemed recovered enough to return to her home in San Angelo.

A local physician provided follow-up medical care. During her first visit she begged him to amputate the bitten finger. The pain in her digit was still so severe she just wanted it to stop—even if it meant cutting the finger off. The doctor would not comply with her wishes, even though she had turned black and necrosis had destroyed a considerable amount of tissue. With the doctor’s help, she did not lose her finger. The necrosis caused by the venom’s cytotoxins did result in the loss of a tendon along the top of her finger, but with skin grafts taken from under her wrist, the doctor was able to return her finger to a semblance of its normal condition. Still, after fourteen years, the finger is permanently flexed and she does not have full use of it. What’s more, it has continued to give her pain since the day of the bite, although it is a pain more akin to arthritis than to the pain experienced when she was bitten.

The facts of this incident illustrate what is statistically the classic bite by one of our more urban vipers—the copperhead. Most people bitten by copperheads are working in the yard, as this lady was. Further, the bite comes from a snake that is unseen until it strikes. Also consistent with this statistically classic bite, the wound was to an extremity—in this case, her hand. The only place on the human body more frequently bitten by copperheads is the foot.

The snake in the incident just related was either a Southern Copperhead (Agristodon contortrix contortrix) or, more likely, a Broad-banded Copperhead (A. c. laticinctus). According to the victim, it was approximately 24 to 30 inches long—and adult in other words. She probably received a reasonably large dose of venom, considering the size of the snake. What is not typical of this bite are the rather severe symptoms the victim experienced. We are often told that copperheads have the least toxic venom of all our North American crotalids. While it is true the LD50 for copperheads is greater than for other pit vipers, it is obvious from this woman’s experience that a copperhead bite is not something to be taken lightly.

Salvation—at last!

Dear Readers,

Those of you who know me well will know that I am an inveterate snake collector. In this pastime, I am mostly interested in the various species of pit vipers that can be found throughout the United States and Texas, but for the last four years I’ve also devoted a considerable amount of my herpin’ time, energy, and money to seeking one, certain colubrid that lives almost exclusively here in West Texas. I refer, of course, to the Gray-banded Kingsnake, a serpent I have patiently, diligently, steadfastly hunted—with absolutely no success whatsoever.

My hours and hours of after dark prowling along the rural roads of the Trans-Pecos searching for the elusive Lampropeltis alternata have resulted in not one, single, solitary snake. The only Lampropeltis I’ve seen has been Lampropeltis fanbelitis, which is what my partner calls the many broken automotive fan belts littering the roadsides (and I have screeched to a halt and performed many an illegal turn for L. fanbelitis). Actually, I did see a real alternata last year, but the sighting doesn’t count since the snake was D-E-A-D, dead! It was a DOR on Juno Road, yet I was deliriously happy to find even itssmelly, flyblown carcass.

As an alternata hunter then, you would have to say I have been a complete and utter failure—until very recently, that is. Things are much different now, oh yes indeed! You see, today I stand before you (figuratively speaking, of course) a changed man, a new man. Oh yes, I have seen the light! I know the secret handshake. I am reborn! Yes! Yes! I am a Believer, for I have finally caught my first gray-band! I say, amen brother, Aaaa-MEN!!! (Chorus: Hallelujah! Hallelujah!)

On a night in May this year, when the conditions of weather, moon, and tides were absolutely all wrong for alternata, I finally found the Holy Grail of Texas snakes. Do you want to know how it happened? Do you want to hear the exciting story in excruciating detail? Of course you do, and even if you don’t, I want to tell you! Here goes…

As usual, I was trudging along a darkened road, this time in Val Verde County, shining my spotlight into the cracks and crevices of yet one more unremarkable limestone road cut, all the while dodging eighteen wheelers and the occasional F-350 driven by a half-lit cowboy. I had decided to hunt this particular cut because the weekend before my hunting partner had spotted a very nice Baird’s Ratsnake on it and we had watched it disappear so completely into a tiny crevice, I felt sure the snake must be an entry into a subterranean chamber. Perhaps, my logic ran, that chamber also contained a gray-band or two (well, one, anyway). As I trudged along, my hopes high, I worried nevertheless, particularly about the weather conditions.

For one thing, the barometer was all wrong. The latest reading from Del Rio said it was at 29.96 and rising. That, I knew, was bad—very bad. Everyone who’s anyone knows that when it comes to hunting alternata the barometric pressure must be no higher than 29.8 and it must be falling. Here I was,
hunting on a rising barometer. How stupid! Then there was the temperature. It was cool—too cool. At 72.9 degrees it was too cold for anything but atriox (of which I had seen only one—a DOR). For alternas the temperature needs to be between 79 and 82. Humidity was also low, only sixty-six percent, and alternas, being essentially subterranean animals, prefer higher humidity. The only good weather feature was the wind. It was coming out of the southeast at twelve miles per hour, which is okay, but not optimum for alternas hunting. Then, unfortunately, there was also the moon to consider.

The moon phase that Saturday night was bad (everything else was, why not the moon, too). It was a “killer owl” moon as my snake hunting partner calls it. In other words, it was perfectly full and very bright. It was the kind of moon that makes it easy for owls to spot snakes and catch them—another very bad thing for alternas hunting. My only saving grace was that the dreadful lunar orb had not reached a point in the sky where it could fully illuminate the pests we were hunting, but it would shortly. I could see its glow behind the rocks and mountain laurel—and there were no clouds to obscure the light. Cloudless nights are bad, very bad for snake hunting. Alternas hunting should be done only on overcast nights because gray-bands seem to know all about owls. With these many negative factors you can see why I was pessimistic—as I eternally am when hunting gray-bands.

Yet, despite all of the conditions being against me, I continued the search. The lure of the gray-band is a powerful one—so powerful that it can overcome even a strong man’s good judgment and common sense (and I make no claims to being strong or being overly endowed with those other qualities). How else could I explain the last four years of fruitless hunting; the mile after mile of walking endless limestone cuts without seeing so much as a pale, torn, shed skin? One wonders why I did not give up in disgust to try my hand at some more rewarding and less stressful pastime such as building huge, intricate, and inane displays consisting of thousands of dominos set up on end. Maybe I should try my hand at something easier and more relaxing like breaking World War Two Japanese diplomatic codes all over again, from scratch, without benefit of keys, machines, or trained cryptologists. No, I blindly persisted in my dogged searches for the elusive gray-band, but I had my doubts about ever achieving success.

Yes, even as I was driving to the cut my snake light now illuminated with such pale brilliancy, I had silently cried out in frustration. Lord, what have I done? What was my sin that you have punished me these many years by not letting me find a gray-band? The Lord didn’t answer—I hadn’t expected him to. Whatever my transgressions were, they were obviously too great for me to count on His blessings. I was so busy wallowing in self-pity that I forgot that the ways of the Lord are subtle and mysterious, his mercy infinite.

So, there I was, shuffling along, my eyes downcast staring at the same old rocks, the same old cactus, the same old everything when suddenly, I heard a voice—a deep, other-worldly, commanding voice—and it was calling my name.

“Rod! Rod!” it intoned. “Come here!” I responded immediately for it could only be my snake hunting partner, Dean, who was walking right along behind, just twenty feet back. He must have seen something, although I don’t know what it could have been, for I had just thoroughly hunted the cut in front of him. Responding to the tone of his voice, which demanded obedience, I thought, Maybe it’s a weird new spider or a rock rattler.

“What is it?” I asked as I jogged the few paces to where he stood. “Is it another Baird’s?” His response was unemotional, totally lacking the usual tone of excitement Dean exhibits when he’s spotted something neat. Again, his voice seemed almost other-worldly.

“Look!” he commanded. “Look behind the bush!” I turned to look where he was pointing and saw a small acacia bush that seemed to be glowing with a warm, ethereal luminescence, almost as if it were burning (although it may have simply been the illumination of Dean’s powerful snake light). Immediately behind the bush I saw a large, flat, vaguely altered-shape limestone outcropping (which, in retrospect, seemed to be shaped more like an ark—an ark of covenant—but I be mistaken). The normally rough, calcareous stone seemed oddly smooth and pearlescent in the angelic light, which only grew brighter and more intense. There, on the perfectly flat, unblemished stone surface I saw the object of my desires! Wonder of wonders! Stretched out in all its orange, black, gray and white splendor lay the most perfect, the most sublime, the most beautiful Lampropeltis alternas I have ever seen—the only one I have ever seen (alive).

My knees felt weak and I was struck dumb. I couldn’t move! (I was standing on a boot lace that had come untied.) Was it real, or was this just another cruel Believer “gotcha” that someone was pulling? Ah, it was probably made of rubber. Then I saw the snake move, its gentle undulations causing the colors to shimmer and glow in the light. Simultaneously, a deep voice, seemingly from far above, (Or was it right behind me?) commanded me to “TAKE IT” Or, words to that effect—it’s hard to remember. I do vaguely remember some other words that may have sounded sorta like, HURRYUPDAMMITBEFOREITGETSINTOTHATCRACK!

Mesmerized, I approached on bended knee (mostly because I tripped over a rock in my hurry to catch the snake) and gently, reverently picked up my first, ever, wild gray-band. As if it knew its destiny was allowing me to catch it, the snake remained calm, never striking, musking, or even writhing. Instead, it slowly began crawling up my arm and into a pocket on my vest (which henceforth shall be my lucky snake huntin’ vest). Frantically, I rummaged in my other pockets searching for the brand new, unused, snake bag I’ve been carrying these last four years. Meanwhile, the snake was exploring my upper torso, looking for lizards no doubt.

Eventually, the snake was securely bagged, its slender body forming a comforting heft in the muslin sack as I walked back to the truck with my prize. My excitement know no bounds. I had caught my first alternas!

Driving home that night, still excited from the episode, I naturally re-lived the event by going over and over it in my mind. Eventually I decided, after much reflection, that the Lord had not forsaken me. Sensing my need and
taking pity on me, he sent his messenger only instead of being clad in a camel hair shirt, the messenger was wearing his usual bright, Hawaiian print shirt. Yes, Dean had been my salvation. Like John the Baptist coming out of the wilderness, he had led me to salvation on that lovely cut in Val Verde County. In retrospect, I realized that Dean could have easily picked up the snake himself. Shoot, I had walked right by it without even noticing. Dean saw it after I missed it. Rightfully then, it was his snake. Yes, he already has several wild-caught alterna in his collection, and doesn’t need another, but the opportunity to collect an alterna is so infrequent, it is so rare and delicious a moment, it takes a very special person to pass it up, to sacrifice and let someone more unfortunate (and desperate) have the opportunity. Yes, it takes a very, very special person—or a completely insane one! Based on our long-standing friendship, I’d say Dean is no mutt. This leaves only the other thing, which I shall not repeat because if I say it one more time Dean may decide I’m “special” and find himself another hunting partner.

So, you ask, now that I’ve got my wild alterna, am I going to stop hunting them? Heck no! Mine is a male and now I’ve just got to have a female from the same locale. And what about Dean—will he continue to share my hunting adventures? Well, I’m not sure. I’ve heard that he’s been called to the Vatican—something about an audience with the Pope (Dean’s a Baptist, but they’re making an exception). There’s even a rumor of sainthood—he’ll be known as Saint Dean, patron saint of gray-band hunters. If such rumors are true, he will have to quit wearing those Hawaiian shirts and get some real camel hair ones (which should be fun since Dean always wears his shirts tucked).

Sincerely yours,

Rod Deardr

P.S. It is considered polite among the Believers to publish the location of capture for all newly acquired alterna. I will tell you now that it was taken from a cut along Highway 277 north of Buffalo Creek in Val Verde County on May 20, 2000 at 10:41 P.M. You can find the exact spot by looking for a small cairn of rocks built on top of a flat out-cropping of white limestone. Like my aboriginal ancestors, I’ve created a totem to commemorate a successful hunt. Feel free to leave votive offerings or sacrifices on this “altar” if you think it will improve your chances of finding a gray-band.

Snakes and Color—Is it brown or tilleul buff?

There are many excellent field guides describing the reptiles and amphibians of the United States. Snakes, in particular, have received a great deal of attention in publications that describe the species, their ranges, and so on. Texas herpers are particularly lucky to have two most excellent field guides and natural history books specifically covering the serpent populations of this state. However, one of the best handbooks for herpers interested primarily in snakes remains The Handbook of Snakes of the United States and Canada written by Albert and Anna Wright. It comprises a two-volume set of books first published in 1957 and, while it does not include the extensive color photography of some of the more recent field guides, the technical descriptions, natural history data, and anecdotal information are very, very good. Perhaps most interesting are the artful, highly imaginative, descriptions of snake colors provided by the Wrights. More recent field guides are quite prosaic by comparison. Let me illustrate.

What follows are color descriptions of two very common snakes. Each description is quoted verbatim from first, The Peterson Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern and Central North America by Roger Conant and Joseph Collins, followed by a description of the same snake as given by the Wrights. See if you can determine what kind of snake is described.

Snake No. 1

Conant and Collins: “The belly is boldly checkered with black on whitish, and the underside of the tail is usually striped. A beautiful red or orange snake, but subject to considerable individual variation in color. Some specimens tend strongly to browns, especially those from upland habitats. Ground color variable from orange to gray. Dorsal spots and blotches boldly outlined with black.”

The Wrights: “The dorsal saddle spots are hay’s russet or mahogany red. The intervals between the saddles vary from vinaceous-rufous to vinaceous-tawny. The spots along the side are orange-rufous in front varying to English red in the rear. The top of the head is burnt sienna. The iris is burnt sienna with a slightly lighter area of tawny near the pupil. The labials are white with dark edges. The vent is checkered with spots of slate-blue to deep slate-blue, on a background in the cephalic (two fifths) of white, in the caudal (three fifths) of ochraceous-salmon, flesh ochre, or light salmon-orange. The caudal portion may grow progressively brighter through light cadmium and light orange-yellow to deep chrome.”

Snake No. 2

Conant and Collins: “Four dusky longitudinal strips may be present. Blotches of dark gray, brown, or olive-brown on a ground color of light gray.”
Flows of color, pale drab-gray or ecru-drab. The edges of the scales are pale smoke gray with drab-gray centers. The large spots on the sides and the dorsal rhombs are olive-brown, black-encircled. Some of the lateral spots, the cephalic spots, and stripes on the head are buffy brown. The light strips on the head are tilleul buff, drab, or deep olive-buff. The iris is fawn color, cinnamon, or pinkish cinnamon faintly speckled with dark or black. The narrow rim of the pupil is cartridge buff. Outside the fawn color is a little hay’s lilac and citrine-drab. The ventrals are white with rear edges of pale congo pink and checkered with deep dutch blue squares." 4

From a purely artistic standpoint, the Wright’s descriptions beat Conant and Collins hands down. But then, the Wright’s had to be more detailed and imaginative—their book is not filled with accurate color pictures of the serpents in question. For herpetologists and hobbyists with an artistic bent, the eloquent descriptions provided by the Wrights are hard to beat—even without color pictures. Oh, and just what are the snake described here? You mean you couldn’t guess? Snake No. 1 is the Corn Snake (Elaphe guttata guttata), while Snake No. 2 is its cousin, the Great Plains Ratsnake (Elaphe guttata emoryi).


3 Conant and Collins, Page 355.

4 Wright and Wright, Page 220.

Trouble and Treasure on the Pandale!

Some field collectors are so single-minded and dedicated they border on the fanatical. My herpin’ partner, Dean, is one such collector. When he sets his mind to a task you can bet it’s going to get accomplished, particularly if it has anything to do with herpin’. Such was the case recently when Dean decided he needed a little female "suboc" from Pandale Road in Crockett County.

It seems Dean had acquired a male Trans-Pecos Ratsnake (Bogertophis subocularis) from a little known locality on RM 2083 during one of his highly infrequent herpin’ trips to the area. What prompted him to forsake his favorite haunts in Val Verde County will never be known, but the end result was the capture of this young male suboc from a long cut near Howard Draw along the “Pandale Paved.” Having the handsome little snake, with no suitable mate for him, was preying on Dean’s mind. Oh sure, any number of suitable female subocs were available from the collections of his friends, but Dean is single-minded in his approach to breeding snakes. Nothing but a female from the same locality would do—and only one he, personally, had captured. The end result was a herpin’ campaign to acquire his “little boy” a mate.

Dean approached the task methodically and thoroughly (in true, type A fashion, some might say). Not only did he take several days of vacation so he could spend many evenings on the target cut, he built a number of snake traps that he intended to leave behind, hopefully to do his work during the hours when he would be home sleeping. Having planned the operation down to a gnat’s you-know-what, and having had it approved by the Supreme Allied Commander, Southwest Texas Command (his wife), Dean then drafted your truly to help him carry it out. Since I had intended to focus my field collecting efforts a couple of hundred miles eastward, you can imagine what an imposition this was for me, but Dean is an old campaigner who won’t be denied!

Arriving just before civil twilight on the first night (so we would have light enough to hide the traps and see any lurking rock rattlers), we installed eight snake traps along various cuts in the target area. Dean wanted me for this job for two reasons: 1. My twenty-three years of Marine Corps experience makes me adept at camouflaging objects that look remarkably like land mines. 2. I always wear long pants on snake hunting trips so the catclaw and agarito don’t rip my legs to shreds. Only after closely supervising the installation of the traps would Dean allow the actual hunting to begin. When I had carefully placed the last little bit of camouflaging grass just so, he said, “I guess it’ll do, let’s hunt.” Gingerly, I extricated myself from the cactus clump and we started our (his) search.

That first night there were no subocs, only a lone male Trans-Pecos Copperhead that I collected. Despite hours of walking, road cruising, and checking traps, Dean ended up going home empty-handed. He was not a happy camper.

I did not go with him the next night, which was just as well, for there were no subocs on that night. Nor were there any on the next night, or the
next. In fact, Dean was fast using up his allotted time with no hint of success. Worse, Headquarters, SWT Command was beginning to ask questions, putting pressure on Dean to complete the mission. Meanwhile, I had been hunting selected areas in Edwards and Real counties. On one night in southeastern Edwards County I saw nine Baird’s Rattlesnakes—all on the same cut. As a lark, I even took my spouse with me to hunt Fort Lancaster and Iraan (which is a story all be itself), where we saw more bairdi, and I was able to find a mate for my new Trans-Pecos Copperhead. The news of all this relative success was ripping Dean’s insides out. Here he was, an alterna fancier, indeed a believer, wasting prime, spring hunting time in an area he had no real interest in, in an effort to acquire a snake he wasn’t really all that excited about in the first place. It’s just that he had to have a pair of subocs—one just wouldn’t do. And they had to be locality specific.

On his next to last night of hunting, events on Pandale Road took a dramatic turn for Dean. No, he did not catch a suboc. Sadly, he encountered no snakes at all. What he did encounter were several, shady individuals who, apparently, did not take kindly to Dean’s presence in the vicinity of their isolated retreat. For several hours, a sleek, new, dark-colored pickup truck shadowed him wherever he went in the area. The passengers did not stop to exchange pleasantries, as other herpers do. Instead, they played a silent game of tag. If Dean cruised to one end of the draw, the truck did also. When he cruised to the Pandale “dirt,” so also cruised the dark truck. It was unnerving to Dean, who was hunting alone (in violation of strictly patrol order not to operate solo).

Eventually, the truck joined several other decidedly un-ranch-like vehicles at an isolated cabin not far from Dean’s target cut. By this time he was quite nervous, and more than just a little suspicious. Were these guys drug runners of some sort? Were they some kind of rural, ranch-land gang-bangers? He just had to know what they were up to. Stopping his vehicle on the road about three hundred yards from the cabin, he could see several individuals standing around in the dark. It was well after midnight—a time when all real ranchers are usually in bed. These guys were definitely not ranchers. Dean needed a closer look. Breaking out his binoculars he focused them on the group. You might as well know that Dean is one of those gadget guys who can’t be satisfied with just ordinary binoculars. No, his binoculars are equipped with a sophisticated gyrostabilizer to ensure that the normal, small hand movements a viewer makes are not transmitted to the viewed image—it remains perfectly clear and stable. This is a wonderful feature to have in a binocular, especially when your hands are shaking like you have Parkinson’s disease, or because you are scared witless!

Watching the group of individuals from his tactically superior location—right out in the open, in full view of God and everybody—Dean suddenly found himself illuminated by a high-powered spotlight! At nearly the same time, he saw a perfectly stabilized image of a slaaved-headed, neo-Nazi looking dude running to the cabin. Not waiting to see if he was running for a gun, and with his vehicle “targeted,” Dean decided he’d had enough. He took off, heading north to safety. Within minutes, the dark-colored pickup truck was right behind him. Running at speeds sane individuals would never attempt on that road, the two vehicles raced towards the interstate. Eventually, Dean reached Ozona and the safety of a lighted Town and Country parking lot. The dark pickup truck had disappeared.

The next day, Dean visited me at work. Relating the events of the previous evening, he asked if I would make the last trip with him that night. Reinforcements, he decided, were necessary. He also asked me to take my truck. His, he said, was too recognizable. Naturally, I said yes. After all, Dean is my best friend and besides, if somebody was harassing herpers, I wanted to know whom.

When we arrive in the area, I immediately drove to the hideout of the suspected gang. If there was going to be trouble on the Pandale, I wanted to deal with it during daylight hours. We parked off the road just south of the cabin and blantly scrutinized it with binoculars—my ordinary ones and Dean’s high-tech pair. We saw nothing, not even a stray cat. After several minutes of uneventful “spying” we decided we might as well hunt. My seventeen-year-old son, Mark, had come along (as additional reinforcements) and he wanted to look for snakes. Dean had originally planned for us to just collect his traps and go home, but with no activity at the cabin, he issued orders to go ahead and hunt.

Driving my wife’s truck (I didn’t want any bullet holes in mine) we cruised a little until it got real dark, then parked about in the middle of a fairly long, low cut. Dean was a bit dejected, having seen no subocs in nearly a week’s worth of hunting. I could tell he wasn’t really all that enthusiastic about walking the cuts. It was hot, there was no wind, and the built up fatigue was beginning to tell on him. Nevertheless, he put on a good face, heading north, while Mark and I headed south.

We hadn’t been walking five minutes when I heard a piercing whistle come from Dean’s end of the cut. Immediately it repeated, and I said to Mark, “Come on, Dean’s spotted something!” We started running up the road as hard as we could go. By the time we reached him, three hundred yards later, I could only breathlessly ask, “What is it? Did you find a suboc?” His answer was a revelation. “Look right here!” Dean held up his right hand and in it was one of the most beautiful dark blues phase alternas I’ve ever seen—and it was a female! We were quite excited, to say the least. Dean was too, but then he lamented, “This was supposed to be my last trip down here, darn it! Now I’ll have to keep coming to find her mate!”

We were all very, very happy about his good luck, and quite enthusiastic about finding more alterna. After bagging the snake, Mark and I headed south again only to be interrupted two minutes later by another whistle from Dean. This time the sprint was just a short, one hundred yards. “What is it?” I asked. “Look on the cut,” he responded. Shining my light on the head-high cut revealed a virtual twin of the snake we had just bagged. Oh my gosh! And guess what? It was a male! Dean now had a pair of alterna, and all in the space of about ten minutes.
We never did see a suboc, despite hunting two more hours. For Dean, I don’t think it mattered much. After all, catching a pair of the most gorgeous gray-bands you’ve ever seen, from a pretty obscure locality, is enough to distract even the most dedicated herper. We didn’t catch any other gray-bands that night either, but we did check out the cabin again. Around midnight, there were lights on in two rooms and, an hour later, additional rooms were illuminated, yet we saw no other people. Maybe they’re ranchers and maybe they’re not. If they’re not, and you visit the Pandale “paved” around Howard Draw, keep your eyes open for a dark-colored, late model Ford pickup. You’ll also want to keep your eyes open for a female suboc. Believe it or not, Dean still wants one. Is he anal, or what?

Note: In the interest of preserving marital tranquility within the household of certain individuals named in this story, I would just like to say that I have taken literary license with a number of “facts” related here. In other words, I exaggerated a bit to make the story more exciting (although, I don’t know how anything could be more exciting than catching a pair of gray-bands). In the event certain high-level commanders from the SWTC read this, they should not hold members of their headquarters staff (Dean) accountable for violating patrol orders—or for any other transgressions he may have committed since the day they got married.

Baird’s Ratsnakes and the Buffalo Creek Bomb

June is a busy month at night on Highway 277 in Val Verde County. Falling, as it does, right in the middle of “prime time” for gray-bands, it is a month when alterna collectors are cruising on a nightly basis up and down that stretch of road between the intersection of Highway 377 and a spot just north of Buffalo Creek. This year has been no different and, as these words are written, something like two dozen gray-bands have been collected along this section of ‘277 since the last week of May.

Just the same, not everyone who travels to this alterna hotspot is lucky enough to find a gray-band. In fact, Highway 277 can be a fickle and treacherous “mistress” for snake collectors. Some people travel from far away to reach her, then cruise all night long and see nothing along her shapely length, while other collectors come upon things—distinctly non-snake-like things—they would never, in their wildest dreams, expect to find on a rock out. Still other hopefuls find snakes, but not the kind of snakes they are looking for. Recently, I had the pleasure of doing a little herping along ‘277 on a night when a few collectors learned first-hand about the vagaries of Val Verde County’s “road to Mecca.”

My trip started, as usual, with an “operation order” from herpin’ buddy, Dean. In good military fashion, Dean’s order was simply stated and “loose” enough to leave the details of execution up to me. As I recall, the actual “op” order was preceded by a verbal warning order with words to the effect of, Hey, man! (Translation: stand-by—operation order follows) Are you up for a little drive south tonight? (you are about to undertake a mission of extreme importance) I need to find a little male suboc (Headquarters has ordered me to capture a prisoner). Once I indicated my willingness to participate, I received what amounts to a traditional five paragraph, military operations order:

Situation: “Well compadre, the barometer is through the roof, and it’s hotter than a green chili. It’s gonna be a “killer owl” moon—eighty-eight percent full, according to the lunar tables—and hell, it’s already up and won’t set until after daylight tomorrow. Worse, it’s Friday night and that means the traffic heading to Del Rio will be heavy. Were gonna be dodgin’ roughnecks and cowboys all night, likely. There’s bound to be other snake hunters, too. I know for sure a guy out of Louisiana, driving a black Honda Civic, is going to be down there looking for alterna, and there may be other nutcases, like us, who don’t know when they’re better off staying at home.”

Mission: “Call me anal, but I’m still lookin’ for that male suboc. Maybe we’ll get lucky and find one that’s just about two feet long. That would be ideal.”

Execution: “Since it’s so hot, we’ll probably need to stay until well after midnight so things have a chance to cool off. I figure we can just road cruise and shine cuts until things get comfortable. Besides, it seems like most of the
snakes caught this year have been taken towards morning. You’d better plan for a late night.”

Administration & Logistics: “I’ll bring my big spot lamp, and I’ve got plenty of water and energy drinks to keep us goin’, but you might want to bring somethin’ to munch on. If you want to take your vehicle that’s okay with me, but I can drive mine—it’s all ready to go. Don’t forget your runnin’ back down the road light, and your spare batteries. Mine are all charged up.”

Command & Signal: “I won’t need a “kitchen pass” tonight ‘cause the “boss” is visiting her mother—we can stay out all night if we want to. Oh yeah, almost forgot… I’m bringin’ my new GPS unit so we can plot the exact coordinates of any snakes we find. Oh, and don’t forget your VHF radios, in case we get separated walking the cuts.”

We left San Angelo about 7:00 P.M. and by dark we were cruising past the courthouse square at Loma Alta. For those of you who don’t know, Loma (as it is affectionately known to the Believers) is a fair-sized city smack dab in the middle of the stretch of ‘277 that produces the most alterna. In fact, gray-bands are the town’s biggest draw and the city fathers have capitalized on the tourism aspects of this natural resource by having an annual alterna festival during the first dark moon after May (which in West Texas is sometimes not until mid-July). The festival always includes a big Spam barbecue accompanied by lots of harmonica music played by a one-armed septuagenarian. They even pick a Miss Gray-band from a bevy of attractive local sheep and cowgirls (this year was the first time a cowgirl has won).

The highlight of the festival is when the mayor of Loma consults the “oracle” (who is none other than a well-known alterna collector from Abilene) to determine whether it’s going to be a good year for gray-bands. It always is, of course, and everyone cheers as the mayor and the game warden fire a salute using the vintage 75mm artillery piece that sits on the courthouse lawn. Live ammo is fired, the object being to hit any eighteen-wheeled “snake crusher” coming up from Del Rio. In thirty years they’ve hit a lot of Val Verde County landscape—which is why some of those cuts south of Loma are really pock marked—but the only vehicle they ever hit belonged to the “oracle.”

Three years ago they loaded a round that had gotten wet, and when the gun was fired the projectile bloomed out in a high arc, landing short, smack on top of the “oracle’s” Toyota, which he had parked on the outskirts of town. The “oracle” was outraged and sued for damages. The Loma city fathers counter-sued for misrepresentation, peddling gris-gris charms to snake hunters without a permit, and a bunch of other stuff. The whole thing was quite a mess with aggrieved parties on both sides making wild threats. The case is still tied up in litigation down at the Federal District Court in Comstock. (It’s a federal case because the ammunition was from surplus stocks maintained at the U.S. Arsenal there in Loma.)

Anyway, the festival finale comes when Miss Gray-band rides, Godiva-like (and you know what I mean), out of town in the back of a Ford dually, headed down to Lake Amistad where she and her retinue catch grunion and have a huge annual fish fry (in previous years it was a sheep barbecue) for the under privileged children of Acuna, Mexico.

Of course, the Gray-band festival was the weekend before our trip, so as Dean and I drove through downtown Loma the courtyard exhibited the normal amount of mid-alterna season activity, which is to say no activity at all—the place was deserted. We were actually surprised to find the light on in the restroom at the Loma Grocery and Mercantile—guess somebody had a late head call and forget to hit the light switch on the way out. After that excitement, we cruised on down to Red Bluff Creek, planning to shine the cuts, but another hunter was already there. No matter, there are lots of cuts so we headed further down past the radio tower and Carruthers Draw. We decided to walk the last good cuts before the intersection of Highway 377.

Predictably, we saw nothing, not even arthropods. Despite two passes down each side of the road we came up with a big fat goose egg. Well, it was early, we decided. And it was probably also too hot—or so we rationalized. With nothing better to do, we got in the truck and cruised back towards Loma. On the way we stopped at Red Bluff, the other hunter having departed. Several passes down the cuts later, we had seen exactly the same thing as we’d seen below Carruthers—zip, nada, zee-roh.

Continuing northward, our next stop was Chaney Creek. There’s a really long, high cut just south of the creek and Dean said it was well known for producing suboos. We parked across the highway and did our usual you walk north, I’ll walk south routine. I didn’t see anything except a huge, ugly orb-weaving spider. I’d seen it two weeks earlier and it was ugly then, too. My end of the cut was short so I spent some time sitting on a guardrail post waiting for Dean. Finally, I saw him walking back towards me and almost immediately the other hunter’s vehicle appeared behind him—they were shining the cut. Actually, they were so close behind Dean I thought they’d run over him if he didn’t hurry up. Obviously, they weren’t locals because if they had been, they’d have known there is a certain prescribed etiquette for hunting the cuts. One does not, ever, shine a cut being hunted by another collector, even if the cut is a quarter mile long and the collector is at the far end. It is his cut, in its entirety, until he leaves.

Dean, a little out of breath from being “goosed” off the cut by the other hunters, walked up to where I was sitting. He had seen exactly the same thing I’d seen, minus the spider, so our luck was holding—unfortunately, it was all bad. We discussed the rude behavior of the collectors in the other vehicle, which was a late model, gray Chevy Blazer. I said we should just shoot ‘em and dump their bodies in Buffalo Creek. By the time anyone missed them, their corpses would have washed fifty miles downstream to Amistad. They’d probably be found snugged on the dam and authorities would simply assume they’d been killed in Mexico while trying to smuggle drugs. It was a good idea, but Dean didn’t want to have to clean his pistol (he’s lazy like that sometimes), so we just let ‘em go.
By this time, it was well after midnight and temperatures had actually started to cool down. We decided to head south again because the “rude” hunters had gone north—but not before they had thoroughly hunted all around us while we were standing there on the cut. About the only place they did not shine their spotlight was in our pockets. As we slowly “road-hunted” our way back towards the radio tower, we spied yet another snake collector—the guy from Louisiana driving the late model Honda. He was spotlighting a cut not far from Red Bluff Creek. We decided not to interrupt him to be cordial (even though a polite snake hunter is always cordial) because we figured that anybody who had driven all the way from Louisiana to hunt gray-bands wouldn’t want to waste time yakking about it.

About two o’clock Dean finally saw a snake. No, it wasn’t the suboc he was looking for. Instead, it turned out to be a nice little Baird’s Ratsnake (*Elaphe bairdii*), a snake that at one time was considered rare in Texas. Of course, I’m sure there was a time when even coachwhips were considered rare, so I guess it all depends on your perspective and relative place in herpetological history. Dean’s little snake was the prettiest Baird’s I’ve ever seen. It still had a lot of its juvenile colors and pattern, and the blotches were quite orange—unusual for Val Verde County *bairdii*.

Just before Dean found his snake, I spotted a little rock rattler (*Crotalus lepidus lepidus*) sitting quietly in a deep cavity of a cut on the other side of the road. I did not disturb it, having no use for additional *lepidus* in my collection.

Before we left the cut Dean pulled out a rubber “copperhead” and stuck it on a prominent rock for the boys in the Blazer to find on their next pass. We wanted to give them a subtle message and this was a good way to do it without actually having to “bust a cap.” Heading north, we planned to road cruise until we hit Buffalo Creek where we would get out and walk the cuts before calling it a night.

About twenty minutes later, having seen nothing in the way of herps except a skinny little tree lizard clinging for dear life to a wire fence, we arrived at the first of the Buffalo Creek cuts we intended to walk. The trouble was, the Louisiana collector was already there. Naturally, we didn’t intrude on “his” cut, instead cruising to the next one up the road, about a half-mile away. As our vehicle slowly passed the black Honda, Dean looked intensely at it through the window.

“Go back,” he said. “I saw something.”

“Was it a snake?”

“No...” he replied. “That guy is doing something funny over at the bottom of the cut. I wanna see what he’s up to.”

So as not to arouse the guy’s suspicions, I drove a bit further, then circled around like we’d seen something. After briefly illuminating some rocks at the side of the road, we drove back past the guy in the Honda. Taking my foot off the gas, I let the vehicle idle down until we were barely moving. Dean and I craned our necks to see what he was doing. It was hard to tell, but it looked like he was piling rocks on something right at the base of the cut.

This was too much for Dean. He had to know what going on, so he told me to pull over. I did, and we got out and ambled back up the highway to introduce ourselves and see if the guy needed any “help.” As we got close, Dean was the first to speak.

“How ya doin’?” he asked, all friendly like. “Do you need some help?” The collector was still bent over, placing rocks on what was, by now, a substantial little pile. Without even looking up he responded.

“Naw, I got it covered. Anyway, I’m just about done.” With that, he stood up and turned around. He had an eight-inch spool of insulated wire in his hand and he started to walk sideways with it, letting the wire unwind as he walked. This seemed an odd behavior, but we let on like everything was normal.

“Had any luck?” I inquired as we watched him continue unraveling the wire.

“Are you guys snake hunters?” he asked in response, without stopping or answering our question.

“Yes,” Dean responded. “From San Angelo. We’ve been lookin’ for subocs. Have you seen any?” When the guy was about a hundred yards away, he finally stopped walking.

“Nope, haven’t seen any subocs.” He yelled. We waited until he walked back to where we were standing.

“What about *alterna*?”

“Well, I saw a gray-band just a little bit ago, but before I could get the car stopped it went into a crack.”

“Was that back at Red Bluff where we first saw you?”

“No, man. It was right here, and it was a nice one.” Shining our lights on the cut, which was pretty smooth, we looked for a crack.

“You mean on this cut?” Dean asked.

“Yeah, dude—right where you’re standing.” Dean and I looked at each other in the darkness. There wasn’t any crack where we were standing. There was just a smooth rock face and the three-foot pile of rocks with wires coming out of it. The guy stopped at his car, opened the hatch back, and took out a small, wooden box. He continued his description.

“It looked like a light blairs phase,” he said as he began walking back down the cut. “I’ve been waiting here over an hour for it to come back out, but I’ve run out of time.” Our curiosity driving us crazy, we followed him to continue the conversation, but also to find out what the wires and the box were all about.

“We didn’t see any crack,” Dean said. “Maybe if you show it to us we can figure out a way to help you get the snake.”

“I’ve already figured out a way to get it,” the collector replied. “Besides, you can’t see the crack anymore—it’s hidden by that pile of rocks.” We had reached the spool of wire and the guy knelt beside it as he opened the small wooden box he’d been carrying. Reaching inside, he retrieved an object that I instantly recognized. Oh, shit! I thought, if you will excuse my language. The man was holding a Firing Device, Electrical, M57 or, as it is some-
times known, a “hell” box. It is called a hell box because when it is connected by wires to a small metallic shell of non-corrosive material some two and a half inches long and one-quarter inch in diameter containing RDX—also known as an electric blasting cap—which itself is inserted into any number of common, highly combustible materials such as C4 or TNT, the holder of the box can create “hell” on earth with a simple squeeze of a hinged handle. As a Marine, I found such devices very useful, even comforting at times, while standing here on the rock cut next to a slightly oddball snake hunter who was hooking wires to one, I felt anything but comforted.

Dean, who has no personal experience with military explosives, naively watched with avid interest as the man hooked one of the wires to a terminal on the firing device. I was getting ready to run, but something made me stay there. I started talking to the guy—in my calmest tone of voice.

“Uh, excuse me,” I said, almost in a whisper. “You’re not actually thinking of blowing something up are you?” Dean’s eyeballs suddenly grew large and his head turned with a near audible snap as he looked at me incredulously.

“Yep,” the guy affirmed. “This is my fifth year coming to Val Verde County from New Orleans to hunt gray-bands, and it’s the first time I’ve actually seen one. I’ve been here a week and this is my last night of hunting. I’m not gonna let that snake get away, even if it means blasting it out.”

“Yeah, but aren’t you afraid of killing the snake—or another snake hunter even?”

“Naw,” he replied. “I’m only using a quarter pound of C4 and I’ve piled about two hundred pounds of rocks over it. All that’s gonna happen is that crack gonna get wider and a little deeper.”

At this remark, Dean began to slowly edge away from the kneeling demo man. I did not actually see him leave, but at some point I realized he was gone, and I vaguely remember hearing feet sprinting down the road while I continued talking to the snake “hunter.” The guy had already finished tightening the thumbscrew on the first wire and, after checking the safety to make sure it was on, began fastening the other wire to the “hell” box. I knew I had to think fast if I was going to prevent this guy from blowing rocks and snakes all over the highway, not to mention blowing a couple of snake hunters into little bitty pieces. The trouble is, I don’t think fast under pressure. All my life, when I’ve found myself in such situations, I usually say or do the wrong thing. Put me in a situation where sweat beads on my upper lip, and I crumble—hell, it’s what got me married. I just can’t function under pressure.

I looked around for Dean, but he was nowhere in sight. Trying to think of something to say, I blurted the first thing that came into my mind.

“Uh, did you know that an M57 has two safeties on it?” Oh good. Rod, real good.

“Yeah,” the guy replied, “But thanks for reminding me ’cause I almost forgot.” Carefully, he moved both safeties to the firing position. Looking back down the road, I suddenly realized the guy had left his car parked right next to the pile of rocks.

“Hey,” I said in desperation. “What about your car? Aren’t you gonna move it out of the way.” The guy stood up and brushed the dust off his jeans. Taking his hat off and running his hand over his sweaty, buzz cut head, he replied.

“Ya know, I don’t think anything is gonna happen to it. If I left that charge correctly—and I know I did—the car will be okay. We’ll be lucky to even see a little flash of light.”

“Yeah, but what if you’re wrong,” I pleaded. “Your car is gonna look like it’s been through the mother of all hail storms.” He scratched his head in silence for a moment, and then started walking towards the car.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he said with a sigh. “If I did miscalculate, that car is gonna look like Swiss cheese on wheels.”

Now was my chance. All I had to do was wait for him to get far enough away so he wouldn’t be able to stop me as I grabbed the firing device and jerked the wires off it. As soon as I had it disconnected, I’d throw it as hard as I could into the nearby Devil’s River. Then I’d get on the phone and call the Loma police department and let them send their SWAT guys up here to deal with this guy. I knew the captain of the SWAT team, Clint, and he was one bad dude. He’d handle this nut.

The guy was more than halfway back to his car, and I had just started to pick up the “hell” box, when I heard a freight train-like roaring sound approaching from behind me. Before I knew what was happening it was right next to me and I found myself bathed in a light so bright it seemed as though the sun had risen. At the same time I heard a blaring of trumpets that filled the night air all around. At that instant the sweat popped out on my upper lip, and you know the rest. I did what I always do in such situations—something really stupid. In this case, I involuntarily squeezed the handle on the “hell” box.

You may as well know, the guy miscalculated. The explosive charge was way too big. There was a sudden roar, a blinding flash that lasted for a brief second, and then I felt myself flying through the air. I remember wondering if I’d died and become an angel already. Fat chance. I was still in Val Verde County when I hit the ground with a bone jarring thump. Oooof!

All was quiet except for the sounds of limestone fragments rolling down the cut and onto the road, and my painful, labored breathing. Carefully, slowly, I picked myself up out of the bar ditch and began brushing dirt and rocks from my hair and clothing. Looking around, I saw that the Honda was no longer parked beside the cut. In fact, it was no longer parked anywhere—it was gone! There was a huge, black hole in the cut and the ground, but there was no sign of the guy or his car. OHMIGOD! I thought. I blew him up! My legs started to go weak and my hands were shaking as I walked slowly up the road. From out of the darkness, I heard Dean’s cheery voice calling me.

“Hey, man!” What a welcome sound those words were, even though I could barely hear them through the ringing in my ears. I looked at Dean and was surprised to see that he wasn’t the least bit mussed. His hair wasn’t even ruffled. How could that be? As shaken as I was, I had to have Dean help me get back into the truck, which, miraculously, was completely undamaged—
not a mark on it! We sat there for a moment looking at each other, then Dean burst out laughing.

"Man! What did you do to those guys!" Whaaat? What was he talking about—those guys? I was clueless. I started the truck and, as we drove north, out of Val Verde County, Dean explained what had happened.

The reason he came out of the blast so completely unruffled was because he'd been hiding in that new culvert just north of the Buffalo Creek cut. It was the perfect bomb shelter and the second he realized the guy in the Honda had planted an explosive device he very wisely headed for it. Crouching in the darkness, he kept waiting for the blast, but when he didn't hear anything, he stuck his head out to have a look—just in time to see me bending down to pick up the "hell" box.

At that exact instant, the "rude" hunters came roaring up the road, their horn blaring, and their spotlights illuminating me and the cut. According to Dean, the guys were hanging out of the Blazer's windows yelling and shaking their fists. One guy looked like he was waving a rubber snake. They whooshed by me, Dean said, and almost ran over the guy driving the Honda, just as he was opening the driver's side door of his car. At that precise instant, the explosive charge went off, vaporizing both vehicles and their occupants. He saw me flying through the air like a rag doll and thought for sure I was dead.

Well, dang! I couldn't believe it, but if Dean said it happened that way, then by golly, that's the way it happened. Anyway, that's the way he wrote up our end of mission report, and since I have no memory of events past stopping to see what the guy was doing on the cut, I have to go with Dean's story. Whoopee, brother! What a night! And I hardly got a scratch, although my ears are still ringing as I write this. Too bad we never found that guy's gray-band, though. I really would like to have a nice, tight breakfast with my Buffalo Creek mate. I wonder if his was a female? What the heck, she's snake soup now, anyway.

Author's note: As you have probably guessed, this story is largely fictional. Some things related in it are true, though. Dean and I did go snake hunting on Highway 277 in June—several times, in fact. We were looking for a small, male subco, among other things (it seems that Dean is always looking for a small subco of one persuasion or another). On the night in question, I did see a rock rattler and Dean did see, and collect, a very pretty Baird's Rattlesnake. We did encounter some other collectors who were not too polite, and there was a guy in a black Honda hunting the cuts. Dean did put out some rubber snakes, which disappeared the next time the guys in the gray Chevy Blazer showed those cuts, and there actually was an explosive device on a cut just north of Buffalo Creek. Dean found the "bomb" (as he recorded it on his GPS) and he reported it to the authorities the next week. We actually had to drive back down the following Friday to show Val Verde County Deputy Sheriff James Riddle, just exactly where it was, but that was all there was to it. Nobody got blown up, at least not on Dean's and my watch. The rest of the story is largely the product of too much caffeine and not enough snakes. I told you, 277 is a treacherous mistress for snake collectors... Oh, and just to be absolutely clear, it is not true that this is the first year a cowgirl has been chosen as Miss Gray-band during the Aliens festival at Loma. They actually picked a girl twice before: Once, in 1994, when a New York state gray-band hunter bribed the judges into picking his new Texas girl friend, and even before that when the very first mail-order bride arrived in Loma (I believe the year was 1989).

A Newspaper Editorial

The following article was published as a guest editorial in the March 9, 2001 edition of the San Angelo Standard Times newspaper. For several days after it appeared, the newspaper published letters to the editor from people who had read the article and wanted to comment. The majority of the letters were very positive and supportive—a few were not. The editors at the newspaper kindly forwarded one of the more strident, non-supportive, letters directly to me, and it is included here for your edification. As an aside, I would like to mention that I also received a number of phone calls about my editorial, one of which came from the the wife of State Representative Rob Junell. Mrs. Junell offered her whole-hearted support for what I was saying in my article, and thanked me for saying it. Here's what I wrote...

Ever since Texas' favorite son moved into the White House, the media have been having a field day poking fun at Texans. Recent articles have discussed everything from how Texans talk to the size of female hairstyles.

Some writers seem convinced that Texas is populated entirely ignorant, redneck cowpokes. This isn't true, of course, but unfortunately a few of our neighbors in Nolan County are about to once again reinforce the stereotype. I am referring to the folks who promote and condone that annual debacle known as the Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup.

Sweetwater's rattlesnake roundup is a cruel spectacle made even more barbarous by the fact that it is perpetuated solely out of greed. That it is a "tradition" of some forty years duration makes it even more abhorrent to me. These people say they are helping by destroying the snakes, but the truth is that it is the rattlesnakes that do the "helping."

Texas is home to some sixty species of rodents and with their prolific breeding habits they can, in good years, quickly achieve population levels that become a problem, particularly for farmers and ranchers. What is more, rodents are vectors for diseases communicable to humans such as plague and hantavirus. Rattlesnakes are one of Texas' most important predators because they consume rodents in large numbers. Along with Bullsnakes, hawks, foxes, owls, bobcats, coyotes, and several other vertebrate creatures, rattlesnakes serve to keep the abundant rodent populations at tolerable levels.

But, you may be thinking, we have tons of rattlesnakes, so what does it matter that a few thousand are killed every year at Sweetwater? Well, the truth is, we don't really know how many rattlesnakes we have in Texas.

The roundup promoters will tell you that the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has done research on rattlesnake populations and discovered that there are perhaps a million and a half western diamondbacks in Texas. The trouble is, the so-called research that produced this number is not widely accepted as legitimate. The population totals are estimates based on what some biologists consider to be an unprofessional and meaningless population survey conducted during the early 90s. The fact is, TPWD really has no reasonable idea how many Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes there are in this
that precedes it. It is reproduced here because I think it is a rather eloquent representation of the emotions many West Texans have about rattlesnakes. I have left it largely as written, editing it only slightly.

Dear Mr. Dearth,

I suppose I am one of those ignorant, redneck cowpokes you referred to in your recent article in the standard times concerning rattlesnakes.

You only mentioned western diamondbacks estimated at approx. one and one half million population and compared them to Buffalo.

There was and are still only one strain of Buffalo; not so with rattlers, as you well know, and I believe purposefully neglected to mention the other species of rattlers beside the diamond back—ergo—Sidewinder, pygmy, etc etc: the numbers increase dramatically, don’t they? I have been struck twice by the sweet little reptiles in the wild while hiking & hunting, also once in my own backyard mowing my lawn; fortunately I wasn’t hurt because of protective clothing I was wearing.

I want you to look up the stats on how many children and adults these threatened babies of yours have bitten, severely destroyed body tissue and even killed many and most were not “rounding them up.”

Death by venom is not pretty.

A friend of mine who worked for Lone Star gas in Abilene was bitten on the hand by a rattler “not a diamond snake,” just an ordinary pit viper kind. Phillip didn’t kill the snake, in his panic he left it to bite someone else later on probably. Anyway 3 skin grafts later Phil was able to use his hand a little bit—Phillip use to be a painter of portraits with that hand that your precious need to be protected rattlers took from him.

God created the balance of nature and doesn’t need you or I or anyone to take care of it for him; Buffalo, snakes or dinosaurs; used to be lots of them too, but I don’t miss them do you? (dinosaurs that is).

Yes, I taught my kids to hate & kill rattlesnakes because they are a danger to human and animal life, I have lost 3 cats & 1 dog to rattlers: however I also taught my kids the difference in pit vipers and non poisonous snakes and taught them to protect Bull snakes, coach whips, grass snakes etc etc—because we need them to eat the rodents.

Nothing that is done to a rattler at a round up can match the cruelty done to a human body bitten by a rattler. Medical stats bear me out on that statement.

Sweetwater TX is not the only place round ups are held there are a startling number of them all over the USA where there are rattles, been having them long as I can remember and im 59 yrs old and we still have way more of them than we really need “rattlers that is”.

You accuse roundups of being greedy: What is wrong with making $ $ from a God given resource, snakes, cattle, oil, diamonds, gold etc etc.

Read the Book of Genesis “and God gave man dominion over the animals”

Rod Dearth
Executive Director, San Angelo Nature Center

The letter that follows was written in response to the guest editorial
Snakes are not rounded up & slaughtered—only rattlesnakes and other dangerous reptiles.

I respect your right to have an opinion, but I am afraid your agenda is based on a zeal, not according to knowledge. People still harvest, sell & eat Buffalo they are not extinct at all rattlers may become extinct someday, but not soon enough to suit me and I'm not alone, plus people don't board trains & shoot rattlers do they?

I have withheld the author's name because I think most folks will have the same opinion and attitude about this writer that I do after reading what he wrote. In some respects, I think people like this should be identified, if only so that the rest of us may steer clear of them. However, my sense of propriety and soft heart prevents me from deliberately embarrassing this gent by telling you his name.

A Three Minute Rock Rattler

One of West Texas' most interesting rattlesnakes is the Mottled Rock Rattlesnake (Crotalus lepidus lepidus), which is found on the southern Edwards Plateau and in the Trans-Pecos region. This diminutive crotalid ranges from Edwards and Real counties west, all the way to the Franklin Mountains where a cousin supplants it, the Banded Rock Rattlesnake (C. l. kluberi).

Found only in rocky, elevated terrain, rock rattlers are attractive little snakes that very in appearance according to geography. Specimens found within their eastern distribution are typically a light gray with darker gray mottling. They may even exhibit a series of charcoal gray bands along the posterior portion of their body. This is perfect camouflage on the limestone ledges and outcroppings that form the snake's micro-habitat in Edwards, Val Verde, Crockett, and Terrell counties. Where these snakes occur in their western distribution, but especially in the Davis Mountains of West Texas, specimens exhibit an overall rusty or distinctly pinkish tone, matching exactly the basalt substrate of the area. Recently, I had occasion to collect one of these Davis Mountains lepidus to add to a representative collection of Texas rattlesnakes. Find the snake was not hard. Catching it proved to be quite a challenge.

On the last Saturday of July, my family and I traveled to the Madera Canyon area of the Davis Mountains where we had rented a lovely little cabin and studio for several days. The purpose of the trip was to get away from the maddening one hundred plus degree temperatures of San Angelo, and enjoy a little quality time with each other, as well as do some herpin'. The principal herp goal of the trip was to collect a Davis Mountains lep—preferably a pair. In years past, I had managed to collect one other rock rattler from the region, but it was from west of Alpine in Culberson County. The leps from the Davis Mountains had always eluded me. Hopefully, this trip would be different.

We arrived at our isolated mountain retreat late on a Saturday afternoon, right after a brief rain shower. Clouds still hung over portions of the mountains, especially the area traversed by Ranch Road 1832, or the Boy Scout Road, as it is locally known. It was raining quite hard there, actually, disappointing my oldest son and me, for we had intended to focus out lep collection efforts along that road. The rain ruined our plans for the evening. With no other location in mind, we decided to cruise along Highway 118, towards Mount Locke, in the hopes of finding some suitable rocky habitat.

The entire family headed out around 9:15 P.M. and it wasn't long before we spotted some interesting-looking habitat. Finding a suitable place, we parked the truck and got out to hunt. A half hour's worth of searching revealed no rock rattlers. Still, we were not discouraged because the evening was young. Unfortunately, the temperature was dropping rapidly with the onset of darkness. At sunset it had been 75 degrees. A half hour later it was only 70 degrees. We were worried that the cool temperatures would foul things up.

Traveling a mile or two further east, we encountered additional rocky habitat. It was fully dark now and the temperature felt like it had fallen still more. Numerous radio calls to my wife, who sat in the truck reading a novel,
confirmed my fears. It was getting cooler. Trying not to grow discouraged, we kept walking along what was turning out to be a very long series of small cuts and natural rock ledges.

We had just rounded another bend in the road when I noticed my oldest son, Mark, stopping at a rock ledge some 100 yards in front of me. Suddenly, his voice rang out, echoing down the canyon.

"Dad! Lepidus!"

It was all the motivation I needed. Running hard, I hurried to join him, knowing full well that he would make no attempt whatsoever to catch the snake, even though he always carries a snake hook. While Mark is an avid herper and, at age seventeen, certainly able to handle a small rattlesnake of any species, he absolutely will not try to collect a snake—any snake—by himself. It doesn’t matter what species it is. We almost lost a juvenile blonde suboc one time because he would not pick it up, even though he knew it was a highly desirable snake. He is adamant in his refusals to touch wild snakes. It sounds ridiculous, but that’s the way it is. Within moments, I arrived at his location, out of breath from running uphill (at an elevation of 6,000 feet, mind you).

"Where is it?" I gasped.

"It got into that crack," he replied. "I couldn’t stop it, but you can still see it." Thinking there might be a chance to catch the snake, I quickly knelt in front of the rocks, right onto a very sharp cholla cactus. Fortunately, I only got half a dozen spines in my knee, only one of which seemingly went to the bone. After frantically removing the spine, and relocating the offending cactus (with my booted foot), I gingerly knelt again.

With my spotlight, I examined the depths of the crevice and, sure enough, there he was—about two feet deep into the crack, which angled up and to the left at about 60 degrees. The snake’s body was resting on this incline, the head down, facing me. Hmmmm... Maybe I can just get my hook over one coil and drug him out. It was a dicey proposition, but there was no alternative. Slowly, cautiously, I reached in with the stainless steel hook. Trying carefully to keep it from touching the snake, I shoved it as far back as I could reach—which wasn’t far—managing to get it just past the snake’s head. When I thought it was positioned about right, I turned it and made a quick snatch, trying to pull the snake out of his rocky lair. Nothing doing! The little rattler was too smart for me. He let his body slip around the hook and before I could blink, had slithered deeper into the crevice. There was no way I could get the hook into play again. The only good news was that the crevice wasn’t as deep as it looked. The snake had moved as far back as he could go, and he was still easily visible. He just wasn’t catchable. Damn!

For half an hour or so, we poked and prodded trying to get the snake to leave his hiding spot. I thought if we agitated him enough he might decamp in search of less disturbing quarters. It was not to be. Still, we wanted that Lepidus!

By now, the whole family had joined Mark and I, anxious to watch as we repeatedly attempted to secure our prize (with me doing all of the work and Mark coaching in his inimitable way). Eventually, after agitating the snake incessantly, I gave up, deciding to leave it alone for a while. Maybe it would calm down—it had been rattling continuously for over thirty minutes—and come back out of the crevice. With reluctance, we left the spot, but only after marking it was a large rock we could easily find it again. Mark was sure the snake would get away, but I felt otherwise. I told him that the crevice was the particular snake’s summer retreat and he wouldn’t leave it. Trying to convince myself as much as my son, I continued, saying if we just left him alone for a while he would settle down and move to a position of comfort, one that we might be able to exploit. Anxiously, we departed, heading further up the canyon.

We hunted several other locations with no success and this only served to exacerbate Mark’s anxiety. Every fifteen minutes or so he tried to cajole me into going back to the crevice. Patiently, I repeated my comments.

"Give him a chance to rest. Then he’ll come down."

"But what if he leaves the crack?" came my son’s plaintive reply.

"He won’t. It’s his home and he feels safe there. Don’t worry, he’ll be there when we go back." My words exuded confidence, but inwardly, I was really so sure.

An hour later we returned to the rock formation harboring the rock rattler. Approaching quietly, I got down on my knees again to examine the crevice. Sure enough, the snake had come down a little and was resting with his head facing me. Again, I attempted to gently hook him out, with the exact same result as before. Draaa! I was getting frustrated, and my son was growing frantic (which is hard to believe since he won’t even touch a wild snake). We departed again, this time staying away a mere half-hour. Upon returning, we found the snake had come down once more. This time I attempted to touch him on the tail in an effort to scare him in the direction he was facing—towards me. The result? He immediately crawled deeper into the crack. By this time, I knew we were not going to catch this snake, at least not that night. There was no way to manipulate a hook in the crevice in such a way that we could pull him out, and he obviously wasn’t going to come out on his own. It was quite late so we decided to return to the cabin, even though I’m sure Mark would have happily had me stay there and make hourly attempts throughout the night.

The next day it was partly cloudy and cool. Around 10:00 in the morning, I suggested that we take a short drive and see if our Lepidus had reposited itself during the night. The boys and I jumped into the truck, anxious for one more shot at capturing the snake—if it was still there.

We parked the truck just west of the rocks and cautiously walked the few yards to our snake’s crevice. Rock rattlers are notoriously timid snakes and we didn’t want to scare him again. Scanning the area carefully, we saw nothing on the ledges or in the rocks. Satisfied that it was safe to do so, I got down on my hands and knees to look into the crack. Whoa! My head snapped back. He was right there, just inches away, facing in my direction! More importantly, he had moved substantially forward during the night and was now resting in a nearly horizontal position. Oh, yeah! I was sure I could catch him now!
Apprising everyone of the situation, I warned them to stay back because I was going to hook the snake and toss him out onto the shoulder of road. At least, that thought was what I was going to do. The snake proved I wasn't. I made my move and the snake made his—right back up into the crack. Everyone was disappointed, Mark especially. Moreover, I was getting the distinct impression my abilities as a herper were under intense, and unwarranted familial scrutiny. My oldest son made it quite clear (as only a teenager can) that he didn't think I was able to catch this snake. I will tell you right now, the minute you have to suffer the slings and arrows from a seventeen-year-old son, that's when you get serious. A dad must not lose face in the presence of his sons—especially when that dad is me!

"Okay," I announced. "Everybody back into the truck. We're going to Alpine." Why? They wanted to know.

"Don't bug me! I'm thinking." And I was. I was thinking of a way to get that snake. I was not about to be outfoxed by a rock rattler.

Arriving in Alpine, I drove straight to the hardware store. There, I purchased two items: a 36-inch piece of 16-gauge steel welding rod, and a spool of 30 lbs test monofilament. Back in the truck, we headed north to our cabin. We zipped right on by the rattler's basalt hiding spot, despite my son's entreaties to stop for one more try. "Nossir! I had a plane and for it to work, I needed that snake to be in the same position he'd been at ten o'clock. We would not disturb him again until I was ready.

Back at our cabin, I disappeared into a small workshop the owners maintained where, after some pounding, filing, and drilling, I emerged with a capture device I knew would work—providing the snake cooperated. What I had manufactured was a miniature pole snare. One end of the welding rod I had pounded flat to a width of approximately one-quarter inch. In this flat, close to the end, I drilled a one sixteenth inch hole. Taking a three-foot length of the monofilament, I tied one end through the hole. The other end went through the same hole and was pulled tight until it formed a two-inch loop. This welding rod and monofilament snare was small, inconspicuous, and easily manipulated. If the snake did his part, I'd use it to snare him and snatch him out of his rocky lair.

I showed the device to my youngest son, Matthew. He was quite intrigued and after I explained how it worked, he suggested we immediately try it out. On what? I inquired. By way of response, he reminded me of a large Crevice Spiny Lizard that inhabited a stack of railroad ties forming a wall in front of the cabin. Oh, yeah! Five minutes later, Matthew was clutching a very surprised crevice spiny lizard while dancing around the sofa my oldest son reclined on. As for me, I could barely suppress a smug grin.

Mark was all for getting in the truck right then and heading for the crevice, but I declined. I wanted to give that little rattler all the time it needed to relax and come back down to its ambush spot. I knew it was hungry and would return to the same position it had occupied that morning, if only gave it enough time. My only concern was that some wandering lizard would pass by and become a meal for our little snake. If that happened, I was certain
Another Letter to the Editor

This letter was written in response to an article authored by Professor Terry Maxwell of Angelo State University. Terry, who I consider a friend, teaches ornithology at the university. He also writes a column for the Sunday edition of the San Angelo Standard Times newspaper. The column that prompted the letter that appears below was all about the Texas Banded Gecko, and it appeared in the June 9, 2002 edition of the paper. It was an interesting little discourse on the natural history of this native West Texas herp, but what really got me going was the fact that Terry introduced his topic by promoting rock flipping. Specifically, he extolled the virtues of a golf putter as a tool for anyone who searched for reptiles by turning rocks. In general, his article encouraged folks to go out and search for banded geckos by flipping rocks. Unfortunately, Terry neglected to mention a few salient facts pertinent to this activity, especially as it relates to geckos. I was bothered by—well, you'll see...

Just read my letter.

June 14, 2002

In reference to Dr. Maxwell's article on rock flipping for Texas Banded Geckos I would like to add a couple of comments for readers who may be planning a trip to the southwestern counties inhabited by these charming little lacertilians.

Lizards, including geckos, are considered non-game animals by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and a hunting license is required to hunt or collect them. Also, at least two of the counties inhabited by the Texas Banded Gecko (Coleonyx brevis) are also inhabited by the Reticulated Gecko (Coleonyx reticulatus) with habitat preferences virtually the same. There are superficial morphological similarities between the two species, but the most important distinction is that the Reticulated Gecko enjoys protected status as a threatened species in Texas. Consequently, the Reticulated Gecko may not be collected, or disturbed in any way.

If rock flipping is your preferred method of searching for geckos, please be a good naturalist and return the rocks to their original resting position after you're finished looking beneath them. Doing so enables the rock to continue serving as a shelter, as well preserving other less tangible aspects of the habitat.

As someone who spends a good portion of his leisure time searching for Texas reptiles and amphibians, I can't tell you how disappointing it is to occasionally approach a rocky hillside only to discover that some inconsiderate person has been there before me and left every rock flipped and out of place.

An easier, less invasive method of finding banded geckos is to simply drive along the roads transecting their preferred habitat and watch for them to cross the pavement—after dark, of course. Driving is not only much cooler and less strenuous, it is frequently more successful than rock flipping. Perhaps the best thing about driving is that you won't have to worry about encounters with any of the somewhat nosome Texas creatures that also frequent the underside of rocks—not that such encounters would deter any naturalist worthy of the name.

Rod Dearth
Executive Director
San Angelo Nature Center
Vampire Snakes
and things that hiss in the dark

Despite what Hollywood and the popular literature would have us believe, most snakes can make no sound whatsoever. In fact, most do not even hiss. For all practical purposes, snakes are both deaf and dumb. Other than rattlesnakes, the vast majority of Texas serpents make no sound at all. Snakes do not possess vocal chords, as do many warm-blooded creatures and, therefore, are theoretically unable to create sound. However, certain species are capable of making an audible hissing noise by forcibly exhaling air through their epiglottis. In Texas, the most familiar of these hissing species is the Bullsnake.

Bullsnares, when agitated, can generate a really loud hissing sound in the fashion just described and, when coupled with an aggressive defensive posture are able to put on a pretty impressive and intimidating display. I well remember one 3-foot male specimen I collected in Concho County. Its coiling, rearing, and body-flattening antics were augmented by the most horrific hissing I've ever heard. It was not a sound you'd ever want to hear during uncertain circumstances as it was more than mere hissing. It had a kind of guttural, visceral, raspiness that defied description. And loud, gosh was it loud! You'd never believe a snake could make a noise so loud and terrifying. Even after it was bagged and secured every slight motion around the animal resulted in (you'll forgive me here, I'm sure) a hissing fit.

For as long as I kept that snake, it was perpetually startling me. I'd be going about my business, not thinking about snakes or anything related, and suddenly the beast would let loose a hiss that I promise would freeze you in your tracks. I mean, it would simply turn your body to stone and your blood to ice. You'd feel like a snake had dabbled his eyes and caused you a headache. The snake made such an awesomely frightening sound, my two boys dubbed it the Vampire Snake—a moniker I decided was most appropriate. After a time, having put up with the snake's startling behavior once too often, I decided to release it. Since then, I have not heard such terrifying hissing from any other snake. At least, not until very recently.

On a dark, hot, muggy night in early June, I found myself in the company of several other herpetologists as we gingerly picked our way among cactus, louse bush along the rim rocks of a limestone bluff in Crockett County. We were looking for "leps", which is short for Crotalus lepidus, the Mottled Rock Rattlesnake. Among my collecting associates that evening were two other intrepid snake hunters: Mike Price, from San Angelo, and Ryan Blakely, from Lubbock. To round out the group we had my fifteen year old son, Mark, and an eighteen year old pal of Ryan's named Chris.

It was somewhere around 10:00 P.M. and both Mike and Ryan had just picked up really nice male "leps". I'd seen a medium-sized Western Diamondback coiled in ambush position under a big rock, Ryan had also collected a Banded Geckos, and we were seeing lots of tarantulas, scorpions, millipedes, and other arthropod varmints. The evening was going very well and...
we were all especially excited by the capture of the two little *lepidus*. Obviously, this was going to be a successful hunt.

As Mark and I inched along just below a juniper-shrouded rock ledge, we suddenly heard something that caused us both to freeze. I cocked my head in an attempt to locate what sounded like a hissing noise. At first, I thought I was mistaken, but Mark had heard it, too. I moved a few paces to one side, shining my powerful spot lamp all around, but I could see nothing. By this time, the noise had grown markedly louder, quite loud in fact. Mark, who was carrying a 6 volt lantern powered by last year’s battery, had moved close behind me. The hissing was so loud, I could not hear the voices of Mike and Ryan in conversation just a few yards away.

“What is it, Dad?” Mark whispered in my ear.

“I’m not sure,” I replied as I futilely scanned the ledge with my light. “But it can’t be a snake. At least, I don’t think it is ‘cause it sounds huge!” Flashbacks of the Vampire snake were on fast forward in my brain, but the sound we were listening to had to be something other than a snake! Didn’t it? Do rattlesnakes hiss?

Thinking it might be a ruptured well head or gas pipeline, I moved slightly to my left to get a different angle of view on the spot the sound seemed to be coming from. My movement caused the sound to grow louder and more intense. Obviously, whatever was making the noise was a living thing and it was watching me because my movement disturbed it even more. Almost simultaneously, Mark and I latched onto the same thought:

“Mountain lion!” we said in unison. Or at least a highly agitated bobcat!

Still, I was not sure and I continued to peer into the darkness. Mark, on the other hand, his curiosity evidently quite satisfied, suddenly disappeared, djinn-like, into the inky blackness, leaving me standing lonesomely there in front of a tall juniper bush behind which the cat apparently crouched, still unseen. Feeling a sudden, overwhelming need for human companionship, I calmly called out to Mike.

“MIKE! Getcherbuttuphere—NOW! There’s something huge behind this bush! It might be a lion!”

I guess there must’ve been a slight note of urgency in my voice because both Mike and Ryan came charging up the rocky slope looking for all the world like two Leathernecks storming ashore on Iwo Jima. Ryan never broke stride or even slowed down, despite the uneven terrain. He barreled through the brush, jumping over cactus and rocks, to knock the juniper bush aside like a Marine bayoneting a Jap sentry. He was heading directly for the spot my light illuminated. I thought, Lord have mercy! The cat is going to rip him a new one! Mike was a bit more circumspect, or maybe just slower, because he stopped short of the flattened juniper bush. For all I know, he was simply poising himself to deliver the coup d’grace after Ryan’s soon to be landed knockout punch. Good Lord! These guys were fearless!

The hissing had not abated. If anything, it had grown louder and more ferocious! Suddenly, I got a glimpse of something fuzzy and white.