Snakes Alive!

Collectors flock to Del Rio to capture a rare, fantastically patterned reptile.

**During a six-week period from late spring to early summer, the elusive gray-banded king snake ventures forth from its year-round home in the limestone catacombs beneath Val Verde and Terrell counties on its annual courtship odyssey. Moving across open ranchland, roads, and highways, the brightly colored nonvenomous snake becomes vulnerable to its most formidable predator, man. Drawn by the snake’s stunning beauty and diversity—no two are marked quite the same—amateur and professional snake hunters from as far away as England and Germany converge on the area to capture unusual live specimens from the wild.**

The gray-banded king snake (or gray band) was long thought to be one of the rarest reptiles in North America, because until about the mid-sixties only a few had ever been seen. The legendary scarcity of the gray band and the wide variability of its markings created a mystique that even today, six years after the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department removed the gray band (Lampropeltis alternata) from its protected species list, makes it the crown jewel in any snake hunter’s collection.

From May 15 through the end of June—particularly during the dark phase of the lunar cycle—Del Rio is the center of activity for snake hunters. Says one, who along with about twenty other hunters took advantage of the three-day Memorial Day weekend to hunt the gray band from just about dusk until dawn: “If you were to stick a pin in the map for the best place in the world to catch a rare snake, it would be here.”

To call these king snakes “gray-banded” does them no justice, even to those of us who view snakes with a certain amount of alarm: Each of these docile nocturnal creatures—the adults average 32 inches in length—has gray banding but in a diverting and endlessly varied array of widths, dots, and colors. Between the gray are strips of orange, coral, salmon, or rarely, deep red (some of the most highly prized are gray with black bands). Dramatic black head markings can be elaborate and unpredictable.

The handsome gray band has absolutely captivated collectors. David Forsk, a graphic artist from San Antonio who comes to Del Rio as often as he can, usually with his two nephews and occasionally their thirteen-year-old sister, says, “Hunting gray bands is like an Easter egg hunt—they are so pretty, and you never know what they are going to look like.” Says a lawyer from San Angelo: “I exhibit classic addicted behavior this time of year. This is my fourteenth..."
anniversary looking for gray bands.”

John Hollister makes some dramatic concessions to his snake-hunting passion. Hollister, who has been collecting gray bands for about twenty years, checked into a Del Rio motel last year while hunting gray bands, and he never left. Now a stop at his room is a must—for information, for gossip, and for camaraderie. The door to Hollister’s room is open, and as a feeble air conditioning unit sends a wisp of cool air into the late-afternoon heat, a dozen or so men wander in and out. Inside, where the 51-year-old chain-smoking Hollister holds court, the place is a wreck: The room is dominated by two large glass cages (gray bands inhabit one, a pair of nine-foot-long reticulated pythons live in the other). Stacks of paperbacks, videos, and cereal boxes; grapefruit juice cans; clothes and socks; and photo albums (mostly filled with pictures of Hollister’s various snakes) attest to a hectic life lived too long in a very small space. In the dressing area at least twenty ventilated Rubbermaid storage containers, stacked five feet high, are home to Hollister’s gray bands. “I’ve been normal,” the former computer programmer half apologizes, “but gray bands are such marvelous snakes, and I get such a rush from collecting them, that it was a good excuse not to go back to my job.”

In a successful year, Hollister and others like him could make a living selling their snakes to other private collectors—especially out-of-staters and Europeans—even though it turns out that the gray band reproduces easily in captivity and hundreds of hatchlings are born every year and traded among enthusiasts. “People breed these things like crazy,” says David Forks, “but when you catch one—that’s the whole thing.”

Bill Chamberlain was the first person to capture the gray band, in the early sixties. He is disgusted by the spiraling commercialism of collecting. “One kid put himself through college on what he made selling gray bands,” says Chamberlain, who owns the Exxon station in Langtry. Chamberlain won’t sell gray bands anymore, even though choice ones command $300 to $500 each and the demand for reptiles caught in the wild is high.

Traffic in live snakes doesn’t receive the blessing of law enforcement officials either. Says Stanley Brooks, Texas Parks and Wildlife regional commander of the Southwest region, which encompasses Del Rio: “Lots of us, including me, are philosophically opposed to these people coming in and taking our wildlife and selling it. If they want to do that, they need to get a commercial license.” But there is no such thing as a commercial license to hunt wildlife (which includes snakes). Some wardens, such as Lieutenant Mike Morris, who is supervisor of the Del Rio area, often reflect on what Morris has noticed about the gray band ever since it was taken off the protected species list. Says Morris: “I’ve been here eighteen years, and we used to see six or seven gray bands every night on the highway near Langtry. Now you can go for a week before you see one.” Morris notes that hunting snakes outside a vehicle along a public road is legal, an apparent exception to the rule that prohibits hunting other wildlife from a road.

But public roads are precisely where most gray band hunting occurs: Three or four stretches around Del Rio and Langtry, sixty miles north, are fertile hunting grounds. The retreating gray band tends to lurk in tight crevices in road cuts that have been blasted out of the hilly terrain. During mating season the snake can sometimes be found lingering along the highway.

As the snake hunters who have gathered in Hollister’s room prepare to go their separate ways, the talk (besides speculation about which game wardens they expect will hassle them tonight) is about which highway will offer the best opportunity. A catch the night before near Langtry lures most of the men, some of whom take their families. Hollister prefers the highway north of Del Rio—making a catch on this already heavily hunted road is more difficult and is therefore a measure of the hunter’s virtuosity. Besides, the gray bands from this road are the most beautiful.

Hollister’s maroon Ford Taurus station wagon is filled with snake-hunting accoutrements: hot dog tongs for picking up the dainty rock rattlesnakes occasionally found in this area, a snake hook to nab venomous snakes, several high-beam flashlights, a powerful Q-Beam spotlight (deftely illegal in areas where deer roam, which is everywhere in West Texas), a plug-in coffeemaker, and snake bags for catching both poisonous and nonpoisonous animals.

As we head north on U.S.
we notice at least five other cars that are obviously involved in the same vigil. With extra headlights and Q-Beams scanning the road cuts, the slow-moving vehicles are dead giveaways to watchful game wardens and irritated ranchers, who resent the hunters for lighting up the whole countryside. Some hunters, like the Forks family, prefer to walk the road cuts with flashlights, a tedious method that they insist pays off.

The art of snake hunting, Hollister believes, is just “luck and persistence.” Says a computer engineer from Austin: “It’s an aggravating hobby. I’ve hunted for four years, and I’ve caught only one gray band each year.” Mostly what is involved in hunting is long hours of intense searching for something that looks like a snake, which means hunters spend an awful lot of time slowing down to peer at strips of rubber, luggage straps, and dead snakes that have been run over.

Hollister and I creep up and down the 54-mile stretch of 277 between Del Rio and Edwards County for hours in the station wagon, stopping briefly to chat with other hunters and to commiserate on our lack of luck. By one o’clock, optimism is waning: All we’ve spotted are tarantulas, deer mice, lizards, a half-alive Trans-Pecos rat snake nicked by a car, a flattened baby rattlesnake, and a young diamondback rattler. The hunters aren’t interested in anything but gray bands. Nobody else has sighted one either, and by three o’clock we call it quits and head back to town. Hollister is philosophical. “If you are frustrated easily,” he says, “you don’t want to be a snake hunter.”

By noon the next day, the hunters congregate at Hollister’s room, curious to see who caught what. Of the thirty or so people scouring hundreds of square miles, only one—the San Angelo lawyer—was successful. His gray band, caught on Blairs Hill near Langtry, is a real prize, with its pronounced widow’s peak and orange saddles. Everyone shakes his hand. “This is why we come out here,” says one of the hunters. The lawyer’s gray band will return home with him and be added to the thirteen other gray bands that live in the garage he has converted into snake quarters.

This single catch is enticing enough for the rest of the hunters. Although they were up all night and have snatched only a few hours’ sleep this morning, they are already wondering how the weather will hold up and whether they will be the lucky one to catch a gray band tonight.