

## President's Message

Ed Ferrer

Happy New Year! I am honored to be elected as president of the H.H.S. I hope to be able to measure up to your expectations. This year will be full of challenges and opportunities. We have a number of new members that have joined this year and have become active in our activities. They bring new ideas and enthusiasm to our club. I challenge each of us to recruit other herp hobbyists to join our society. I know there are many "herpers" out there and we all can benefit from a sharing of ideas and experiences and support each other.

During this year it has been established that we will meet in the lecture room#108 in the Gallahue center (science building) on the third Wednesday of each month for our meetings. So there will be no last minute changes like we experienced last year on a few occasions. Let's make it a point to attend these meetings on a regular basis as we have a great line up of speakers so let's set aside one night a month for our society.

This year we are hosting the Midwest Herpetological Symposium in November. We are in the midst of planning for this event now. One thing that is always a hit is the auction on Saturday night after the banquet and keynote speaker. This is a chance for attendees to purchase herp related items and help support our club. Be thinking of items you can donate to this cause. For example, I have over the years accumulated three snake hooks. I really only need one so I will donate two of them to the auction. My brother and sister-in-law are artists in Nashville, IN. and I have commissioned them to each donate a painting to the auction. Other things such as books, cage items, T-shirts and even live animals are very popular. As you gather items you can store them or bring them to the meetings and I will store them. Also, I will be trying to get sponsors and donations from different businesses and organizations throughout the year. You may have connections with an organization or business that would want to make a tax deductible donation or sponsor our symposium or club. We can offer a tax credit and advertisement in our newsletter and symposium brochure.

We have in the past tried to offer an article about an Indiana native herp species each month. After a few months it normally has stopped. So I thought I would initiate a new effort to revive this tradition by starting over. I have a list of all the reptiles and amphibians that are native to Indiana. You probably have a favorite Hoosier herp on which you would like to report. I think it is important that we learn more about our native herp species. So if you have a herp that you would like to contribute just let us know and we will be more than happy to print your article. I have decided to start it off by writing about one of my favorite Hoosier herps in this issue, the timber rattlesnake. Hopefully more of you will get the urge to contribute. Of course, any herp related article is always welcome.

Let's make 2006 a year to remember. We can start by attending our monthly meeting, this January 19th. See you there.

## Hoosier Herp of the Month

### Timber Rattlesnake

by Ed Ferrer

Probably my favorite Hoosier reptile is the timber rattlesnake, *Crotalus horridus*. Its scientific name literally means horrible rattle tail. It is a member of the "pit vipers", referring to the heat sensing pits located between the eye and nose that helps it locate warm-blooded prey. It

has a large, triangle shaped head, distinct from the neck with a blunt nose. It also has vertical eye pupils as do other venomous snakes of Indiana. (All nonvenomous snakes in Indiana have round eye pupils.) It is a large bodied snake with an average adult length of 36-60 inches, the record being 74 1/2 inches. The longevity record for this species is 30 years, 2 months and 1 day. Its ground color is normally light brown, or grey with pronounced chevron-shaped crossbands of dark brown or black often bordered by white or yellowish scales and the scales toward the tail are black. This coloring offer the timber excellent camouflage as it waits for prey or hides from predators among the mixture of fallen leaves, grass and rocks. Colors vary throughout its range with northern species tending to be darker some mostly black while those in the southern part of its range are often lighter. It is also referred to as the "banded", "velvet-tail" or "canebrake" rattlesnake in some areas. In the southern part of its realm it often has a reddish rust stripe running along its dorsal side. Some books and herpetologists consider this southern variety with the rust colored dorsal stripe to be a separate subspecies, which they identify as *Crotalus horridus atricaudatus* while other scientists suggest that it is just a color phase. The scientific community is still divided on this issue.

Can you imagine what the early English settlers thought when they first encountered this snake? Most were terrified of it and reported many tales involving the timber rattlesnake. However, not all were repulsed by this creature. Benjamin Franklin objected to the use of the bald eagle as our national symbol. He thought the turkey was a much more honorable bird. (I imagine he had witnessed eagles stealing fish from ospreys.) But under an assumed name he also suggested that the timber rattler become the national symbol because without eyelids it would always be alert and it never started a fight but if provoked never backed down and often prevailed.

This serpent was once wide spread from the Eastern states almost to Canada to Northern Florida westward past the Mississippi River as far as Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas and following the Mississippi River basin into Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota. In Indiana it is found throughout the southern third of the state but is very rare and is currently listed as an endangered specie. Its habitat is usually upland oak-hickory forests adjacent to open areas with rocky ledges, cliffs or outcrops. It hunts warm-blooded prey such as squirrels, chipmunks, woodchucks, gophers, mice and rats and some birds. It is a typical sit-wait-predator, staying coiled up near a small game trail that they have discovered by using their Jacobson's organ that interpret particles collected by its forked tongue. When an animal approaches, it strikes and injects venom into the victim and then releases it. It will then follow the scent trail of the wounded animal and swallow the prey after it dies, therefore not risking injury from the struggling prey. A favorite ambush spot is along fallen logs so if you are hiking it is very important that you look on the other side of the log before stepping over it. There have been records of dead snakes delivering a bite as their jaws may snap shut by reflex action when handled. This gave rise to the rumor that rattlesnakes wait until sundown to die.

When approached by a human a timber rattle snake will often not rattle, depending on its camouflage coloring to hide it. It will normally only rattle if it is being threatened or bothered in some way and retreat is not an option. Its venom is a mix of hemotoxic poisons that attack the tissue. It can cause extensive damage which may typically lead to the loss of a finger or toe if not treated promptly. Although deaths have been recorded such cases are extremely rare. When these snakes are young they are often prey for predators such as foxes, coyotes, dogs, hawks and few king snakes. Although adult rattlesnakes may be trampled by deer or killed by hogs they have very few enemies except man.

Far more timbers die on the roads and highways, are killed by shotguns, hoes and shovels and perish due to habitat destruction than are killed by natural means. This mortality is even more dangerous because female rattlesnakes may wait until they are close to nine years old before they reproduce. Then they only have young about every three or four years. Often times gravid females are more apt to be caught by humans because they typically seek out warm areas more in the open and are therefore more likely to be discovered by hunters. Timbers typically mate in late summer. Females do not lay eggs but give birth to live young with brood sizes varying from 6 to 10 babies but some may be as low as three or as many as 19. The young typically stay around their mother up to 7 to 10 days and then disperse after their first shed. It is estimated that only about half the young survive into their second year.

In the spring and fall timber rattlers are primarily active during the day, but during the hot summer months they shift to a more crepuscular (dawn or dusk) or nocturnal activity cycle. In the fall it has been reported that often timber rattlesnakes will congregate with copperheads and other snakes such as black rat snakes to hibernate in large numbers for the winter months. These hibernacula are usually rocky crevices or talus slopes that face the south. They have been known to use the same sites year after year and neonate snakes apparently follow the scent trails of the older snakes to find the den for the first time. In the southern part of the range rattlers have been known to hibernate in much smaller groups in mammal burrows, old logs or shallow rock crevices.

Many people believe that one can tell the age of a rattlesnake by counting the segments of its rattle. Actually the snake adds a new segment each time it shed, which is usually about three times a year. Then again these segments are often lost or broken as the snake travels through rocks and other rough materials as it slithers along. So the number of rattles is not a good way of telling the age of the snake.

The timber rattlesnake is supremely successful in its natural environment. Unfortunately its natural habitat is compromised by human agriculture, road building and extirpation. Hopefully through education and legal protection this beautiful snake will be allowed to continue to survive in Indiana.

Ref. The Peterson Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern and Central North America, Roger Conant and Joseph T. Collins, 1998  
Amphibians and Reptiles of Indiana, Sherman A. Minton, Jr. 2001  
Venomous Reptiles of North America, Carl H. Ernst, 1992

**General Meeting, Wednesday Jan. 18th, 7:30 p.m.**

**Guest Speaker: Omar Attum, I.P.F.W.**

**Topic: Egyptian Tortoises Conservation**

**Butler University, Gallahue Hall, Lecture Room#108**

Dr. Omar Attum has a PhD from the University of Louisville. After his PhD, he spent one year with the Zoological Society of London's Conservation's Program studying the conservation issues of Nubian ibex and mountain gazelles. He is currently a post doc at IPFW where is studying the population dynamics of the copperbelly watersnake and researching the conservation on the Egyptian tortoise. He will also bring crafts such as pillow cases, purses, keychains, and magnets for sale which support the conservation project of the Egyptian tortoises. You don't want to miss this power point presentation. See you there!

## **Two-Headed Snake for Sale!**

by Ed Ferrer

The World Aquarium in St. Louis has been the home for "We", a one-of-a-kind-two-headed albino rat snake, since 1999. The 6 1/2 year old snake was originally purchased days after its birth from the original owner for \$15,000. Most two-headed snakes do not survive past a few months but We has not only survived but thrives. She is about one inch thick and about 4 feet long. We has survived because, unlike most two-headed snakes, both mouths are connected to the same stomach. If you are looking for a very special, unique addition to your herp collection the bidding will start at \$150,000 on [reptileauction.com](http://reptileauction.com).

Ref. The Courier Journal, Louisville , Kentucky, Jan. 3, 2006

## **American Crocodile Killed!**

by Ed Ferrer

A few weeks ago, in an area just south of U. S. 1 near the Monroe County line, an American crocodile named Charlie was tortured and dragged to its death by a group of men. According to accounts by neighbors, Charlie was basking on a sunny embankment in the late afternoon when some men slipped a noose around his neck. At first they started to drag the croc by hand and then they tied it to the back of a green Hummer and dragged it to its death!

According to one of the neighbors, Elaine Douherty, "The croc never hurt a soul. His habitat was right over here. I've known him for six years. We all referred to him as Charlie."

One horrified observer took pictures of the men attacking the reptile while another called 911 and led wildlife officers to one suspect, Pedro Guerra Morales, of Miami. He didn't speak English and stated through an interpreter that he had nothing to do with the crocodile. However wildlife officials said that pictures taken to a one-hour developer showed Guerra Morales with the crocodile. One picture showed Morales standing there holding a rope around the croc's neck but he still denied it.

Some other suspects got away in a boat before officers arrived, but there is hope that the pictures taken will help track these men down. They will be charged with killing an endangered specie which is a third degree felony in Florida that carries a sentence that could be as long as five years in prison. (As far as I'm concerned, that is much too lenient for this cruel and disgusting act. I think they should get the same fate as the croc got. Tie them on the back of the Hummer until they expire!)

There are only 800-1,000 American crociles in the United States. This population is concentrated in the southern tip of Florida. They are shy and retiring animals. There has never been one documented crocodile attack on humans!

Ref. The Center of North American Herpetology News Release, Lawrence, Kansas, Jan. 3, 2006