



NEWSLETTER OF THE HOOSIER HERPETOLOGICAL SOCIETY

A non-profit organization dedicated to the education
of its membership and the conservation of all
amphibians and reptiles.



Volume 35 Number 4

April 2024

HHS Monthly Meeting

April 17, 7:00PM, Holliday Park Nature Center

Guest Speaker – Katie Kolcun

Topic – *Interpreting Herpetology: Sparking
Fascination for Reptiles and Amphibians*

It's easy to advocate for charismatic megafauna like whales and giant pandas, but inspiring empathy for often unloved animals like reptiles and amphibians can be a unique challenge. Join animal educator and former zoo professional Katie Kolcun as we explore different techniques zoos and aquariums use to change minds and help guests fall in love with herps.

Katie is an environmental educator and former zoo education specialist. She has created educational programming for environmental nonprofits and worked as an interpreter at 2 different AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums. She is also Certified Interpretive Guide from the National Association for Interpretation (NAI). She loves connecting people with nature and inspiring empathy for the less cute and cuddly members of the animal kingdom.

www.hoosierherpsociety.org



HOOSIER
HERPETOLOGICAL
SOCIETY

Snakes Through the Ages Or “Fear & Loathing in Celtic World”

Mary A. Hylton

(NOTE: This article was originally intended for the March issue but, hopefully, you will find it interesting in April just the same!)

Why do snakes instill such fear in humans? The Greek term for “fear of snakes”, **Ophidiophobia**, is one of the most common “specific” phobias. While many anxiety disorders often don’t take hold until adulthood, specific ophidiophobia and arachnophobia [fear of spiders] often go back to early childhood, because they relate to the types of dangers that were common threats to our ancestors. The ancestral component is intriguing, to say the least.

That being said, why isn’t societal fear as strong towards *man-made* hazards such as planes, trains and automobiles, which are much more likely to cause our demise than spiders or snakes? It seems that natural dangers pose more of a threat because they have existed far longer than the man-made dangers and so are too recent to have imprinted onto our genome. Fascinating!

Hold on now as we detour onto a different, but loosely related, path. As you are reading this, we are well into the month of March. Thoughts turn to Spring and to our favorite patron saint of March and of Ireland, St. Patrick! Although he is often connected to Ireland, Patrick was actually not of Irish descent. He was a fifth-century Romano-British Christian missionary who served as bishop of Ireland. Irish culture is filled with myths and legends but none so prevalent as those connected to St. Patrick, and **how he banished all of snakes from the Emerald Isle**. According to legend, Patrick was fasting for 40 days atop a hill when he was attacked by snakes. He reacted promptly by waving his staff and in so doing, miraculously drove all of Ireland’s snakes into the sea.



(An 1872 illustration depicting St. Patrick banishing snakes from Ireland. (Credit: Library of Congress/Public Domain))

Generally speaking, Ireland--like New Zealand, Hawaii, Greenland, Iceland, and Antarctica— **has no snakes**. (I say “generally” because, as we all know, exceptions **are** the rule! 😊) No fossil records of snakes inhabiting Ireland exist. According to *National Geographic*, snakes *never* inhabited Ireland. To understand why, consider the last ice age. During that period, the entire country would have been extremely cold for reptiles to exist. When the climate began warming, Ireland was cut off from everything around it as glaciers began melting which, in turn, resulted in rising sea levels. After the ice retreated, two land bridges were revealed: one connecting Ireland to Britain, and the other connecting Britain to the rest of Europe.

Around this time, a number of new species of reptiles, including three separate snake species colonized Britain. They include: the **Common European Adder** (only venomous species in Britain), **Barred Grass Snake**, and **Smooth Snake**. But as melting glaciers caused sea levels to rise further, the land link to Ireland became impassable — some 2,000 years before surrounding seas cut off the bridge to Britain.

The prevailing theory is that snakes simply didn’t have enough time to make the last slither of the journey to the Emerald Isle. To this day, the island has only a single native terrestrial reptile: the **common or Viviparous Lizard**, which must have arrived sometime in the past 10,000 years, following the end of the ice age.

It was only in the 1970s that the *Irish Times* reports a type of **Legless Lizard (Slow Worm)** that was discovered flourishing in the Burren, likely a newcomer as its origin is unknown.

So, if there were never any snakes in Ireland to begin with and ancient writers and historians knew that, why does everyone think there was an overabundance of snakes in Ireland?

One theory is that since snakes were often symbols of evil in Judeo-Christian tales, they simply represented something else. Patheos says it's sometimes claimed the "snakes" were early pagans, and St. Patrick drove them out of the country and converted others to Christianity. But some historians have offered strong arguments proving otherwise: Ireland's conversion from pagan worship to Christianity began *prior* to St. Patrick's arrival, and it continued for centuries after he left. Some scholars even date the "final" push of Christianity into Ireland to the 14th century.

The story connected to St. Patrick works best, perhaps, as an allegory. Snakes were a symbol of paganism and Patrick was given credit for driving the pagans out and bringing Christianity to the Emerald Isle—regardless of the facts.

Another possible inspiration for the story could be found in a recent translation of a sixth-century text (via the *Independent*), which tells of a cult who worshiped the Crom Cruich. They were equal parts powerful and bloodthirsty, and they practiced a terrifying bit of human sacrifice. According to the texts, every year on Samhain (Halloween) it was expected that a first-born child would be sacrificed to guarantee a good harvest.

According to the text, the cult and the annual sacrifice ended when St. Patrick and his followers stormed their sites, destroyed their idols, and blessed the area. No retribution from an angry pagan god ever came, and the cult faded into obscurity. **The symbol of the cult was a snake**, so it's entirely possible that the destruction of the Crom Cruich was the source of the legend, and those were the snakes St. Patrick drove away.

Now for the "exception". The 21st century has now revealed that—technically—there *are* snakes in Ireland. Why say, "Technically"? Apparently, Ireland has become a haven for snake enthusiasts. During the period of economic prosperity referred to as the "Celtic Tiger" (mid-1990s to late 2000s), numerous individuals began keeping snakes as pets. They're also found in zoos, including the National Reptile Zoo in Kilkenny City, the country's only reptile zoo. According to *The New York Times*, because of their association with St. Patrick and their rarity, snakes became a status symbol. However, when that period of economic prosperity abruptly ended, many owners could no longer afford to keep their snakes and they began releasing them into the wild. There were so many of them that sanctuaries were set up to care for them. On the topic of released or "runaway" snakes, surprisingly little fear exists that these snakes will become invasive. Because the creatures are cold-blooded and unable to keep themselves warm, they rely on heat from the sun — something that's too rare to sustain a healthy snake population in the Emerald Isle.

On that note, including here a comment from one of the sources to sum it up nicely, "There's no need for a modern-day, snake-slaying St. Patrick ... for now, at least."

Sources:

<https://www.grunge.com/142773/the-truth-about-why-there-arent-snakes-in-ireland/>

<https://www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/are-there-snakes-in-ireland>

And a bonus grin (or groan) to end on!



St. Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland.

(Cartoon creator name unknown—my apologies for not citing it)

Snakes in Sales

By Ed Ferrer

Snakes aren't often used in advertising because a large part of the population view snakes as dangerous. For example, a shady character or villain, is often referred to as "A Snake in the Grass," someone to be avoided. In the past, they appeared in adds that warned against the danger of alcohol or other dangerous substances. During World War II they often appeared in posters representing Nazi Germany or Japan.

Snakes were sometimes used to promote certain products that were supposed to provide cures for many ailments. These questionable products were often referred to as "Snake Oils. However, snakes were often used as symbols of the medical profession. Of course, snakes were often used to advertise various exotic animal programs found at fairs and other entertainment events. Whether people loved them or hated them, they normally attracted big crowds, ("Like a moth is attracted to a flame.")

I received several phone calls from a phone number from Northeastern part of the country, way out of my area. I thought it might have been some scam call, so I ignored it. But one time the number came when I was home, so I answered it out of curiosity. It turned out to be a company that specialized in making boots and other shoes. They wanted to use a live snake to promote their new hiking boot. This boot was knee high and waterproof, and it **WAS GUARANTEED TO PROTECT AGAINST VENOMOUS SNAKE BITE!** I asked the director to explain the logistics of the exhibit. She said they were introducing this new snake-proof boot at an exhibit in the exhibition center in Indianapolis for three days, Thursday thru Saturday in February. She explained to me the size of the exhibit and asked if I had a medium size snake that they could use. My first concern was temperature and she said that it would be under a spot light. I told her I had two green tree pythons that I could set up on a limb in a Neodesha container. I told her that both my snakes had a very striking color and they were always popular in my snake programs. On the first day I used my Biak green tree python because its bright yellow and white markings made a great contrast to its bright green scales. At the end of the exhibit time each day, I had to pick up my snake display because the temperature would be too cold overnight. The second day I used my Sorong green tree python. It had a bright blue stripe with alternating blue triangles down its dorsal (top) side.

At the end of the three shows I asked her how the exhibit went. She said that the snake exhibit was a great success. She said it generated more traffic and more sales than their company ever had! She was so pleased with the results that she gave me a \$100 bonus! It was a new experience for me and I was glad it was a success.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

**Thank you and welcome to the Hoosier Herpetological Society! Thank you to our returning members!
Without all of you, we wouldn't be the organization that we've grown to be today!**

Renewals

Louis Studer
Madison Swinney

New Members

Lara Carey
Anna Hassler
Christina Hollering
Libby Keyes
Kiersten Leigh
Mitchell Johnson



2024 HERPETOLOGICAL EVENTS

April 17, 2024 – HHS meeting, guest Speaker – Katie Kolcun (HHS), Title: “Interpreting Herpetology: Sparking Fascination for Reptiles and Amphibians.”

May 3-4, 2024 – Herpetology Weekend, Natural Bridge State Park, Slade, KY. A weekend of presentations, hikes, and herpetological fun!

May 18, 2024 - HHS Herpout, Join other members for a day of field herping in Monroe County.

June 2, 2024 - Midwest Reptile Show, 10:00 a.m.- 4:00 p.m. Indiana State Fairgrounds, Indianapolis. \$5.00 admission, reptiles, amphibians, books, cages, feeder animals, and other supplies. Sell your herps and dry goods free of charge at our H.H.S. information booth (HHS members only), www.midwestreptile.com

July 24, 2024 – HHS Canoe/Kayak trip,

September 20-22, 2024 – Midwest Herpetological Symposium, St. Louis, MO. Hilton/St. Louis Airport. Mention the herpetological symposium for discount rates.

President's message

Jim Horton

Its been a great spring so far! The HHS. We have been awarded a contract for amphibian and reptile surveys at the grounds of a popular local attraction. Another survey is currently being conducted by our friends at Holliday Park. They will survey for salamanders in the park. This will take commitment from our members and if you are interested in helping out, contact me.

Our own Katie Kolcun will give a presentation on a subject in which she excels, live animal interpretation. If you've seen her at our exhibits and programs, you know how well she delivers herp biology and other information. Hope you'll come out and see this talk.

Thanks again to Mary Hylton and Ed Ferrer for writing articles in this issue!

HHS board meetings

Board meetings are always the second Wednesday of the month, 7:00pm

All members are welcome to attend. Contact any board member for the current locations.

HHS Partners with Holliday Park on Survey

Jim Horton

When the staff at Holliday Park reached out to us regarding a salamander survey, we jumped at the idea. On March 30, HHS members met with park staff and deployed cover boards. Boards were to be placed in strategic locations in optimum salamander habitat. Through this survey, park naturalists may get a better understanding of the numbers and species diversity of salamanders in the park. This will be an ongoing program. So far, two-lined and red backed salamanders have been recorded in the park. With hopes, the coverboards will turn up more species!



Annual Hoosier Herpout

Saturday, May 18 - 9:30 A.M.

Hardin Ridge Recreation Area (Hoosier National Forest),
Monroe Reservoir, Bloomington, IN

Meet at the shelter house #1 near the boat launch ramp parking lot.

Rain or shine (herping is always good, even in rain)

Schedule:

We will leave to herp the area shortly after 9:30 a.m. and return before 12:00 p.m. for the cookout.

We will herp again after lunch.

Several members will be camping at one of the many campgrounds. We may also herp on Sunday.

The herpout is a chance for our members to get out and field herp the hills of beautiful Southern Indiana. We should see a variety of herps with the possibility of venomous species. Wear the proper gear and herp at your own risk. The H.H.S. assumes no responsibility for accidents or injuries. Please be careful and have fun!!

The cookout/lunch

The H.H.S. will provide the burgers and dogs. Please bring a food contribution and your own beverages.

Hardin Ridge offers class "A" camping (showers, electrical hookup) and class "B" (showers) camping.

For more information, email Jim Horton email - president@hoosierherpsoc.org

HHS Board of Directors - 2024

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new member

renewal

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Herpetological Interests

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If this box is checked, it's time to renew your membership