

What You Missed at the February Meeting

John Archer
j-archer@sbcglobal.net

I think I've rather an average intellect that, as for most of us, has huge gaps in its filing cabinet. One of my gaps has been the inability to comprehend that real people are behind what I read and what I learn. I tend to picture ephemeral beings like a fairy godmother waving a wand and having all that written content suddenly appear. Until I became involved with your society I had not had conversations with authors or scientists. I knew they existed, as I know that the Indian Ocean and Antarctica exist, but I'd never actually had interactions with them. Mere mortals could not mingle with that class of being.

Then I got involved with the Chicago Herpetological Society. I began to meet authors. I've shared drinks with scientists. If you read any of my other writings you know that I remain in awe of both these groups and marvel at their productivity. But what I still have trouble accepting is their ordinariness; almost all are individuals willing to go that extra distance to create something that has not existed before, but after mingling with these folks I've gradually accepted that seemingly ordinary people can do extraordinary things. Gerry Salmon is an excellent example.

His bio says that he's an avid naturalist with a strong interest in herpetology and the geographic distribution of North American reptiles and amphibians. He's been a state park naturalist for New York and South Carolina, an associate of the department of herpetology at the Bronx zoo, and worked at the Miami Serpenterium in the 1980s. He's recently retired from the New York State Police and moved to Boerne, Texas. He's a volunteer curatorial assistant in the Texas Natural History Collection at the University of Texas Austin and a board member of the Southwest Center for Herpetological Research. He's also a leading authority on *Lampropeltis*, particularly *L. alterna*. He's published several articles, coauthored a book, done extensive field, laboratory, and literature research, and bred and raised many hard to keep animals. And he's done all this as a hobby. Gerry is not someone who wonders where all that knowledge comes from because he has created much of it.

He divided his talk into two parts, "Natural History of the Gray-banded Kingsnake: A Look at the Sequence of Discovery over 111+ Years" and "Herping the Texas Trans-Pecos: or rather, Various Critters in the Road . . ." and, as usual, I can only give you a general idea of what he covered.

Beautiful close-ups of *Lampropeltis alterna* started his slide show, followed by a shot of him peering into the cracks of a road cut, typical *alterna* habitat. He thanked his parents for tolerating his interest in herps and dedicated his talk to biologists Andy Price and Bern Tryon, providing pictures and short biographies of them. Then he began a review of the history of *L. alterna*, taking us step-by-step through the first 15 recorded



Gerry Salmon. Photograph by Dick Buchholz.

specimens in collections throughout the U.S. The first recorded specimen was discovered in the Davis Mountains of west Texas and collected by Edmund Meyenberg during the summer of 1901. He shipped it to Arthur Erwin Brown, director of the Philadelphia Zoo, who described it as *Ophibolus alternus*. That specimen is deposited in the Academy of Natural Science in Philadelphia. The only data associated with the find were the location, sex, season and year collected. With photos of the actual specimens, tags, journal articles, and biologists, Gerry built a picture

of the natural history of *L. alterna* as the knowledge was gained. Each discovery revealed a bit more information about the animals' life. Hobart Smith found the third specimen "...in a crack in a large boulder." The seventh had the "Remains of a *Sceloporus u. consobrinus* in stomach." The eighth specimen was "found active on roadside at 10:00 P.M.," implying a nocturnal snake. Other specimens extended the range and confused the taxonomy with various morphs, but we observed the gradual revelation of the snakes' habits and habitats as Gerry took us through the first fifteen. Gerry obviously is well versed on the snakes, but he also studied the people behind the finds, continually mentioning interesting asides such as Meyenberg's death by gunshot two years after collecting the type specimen of *L. alterna*, or showing us photos of William W. Milstead's notes on collecting the eighth specimen. He gave us the story behind the continuing taxonomic confusion surrounding gray-bands and examples of the earliest and best attempts at compiling the natural history of the animal. He tracked down photos of the original specimens used to illustrate guidebooks and gave us food for thought with a proposal that the snakes are mimics of

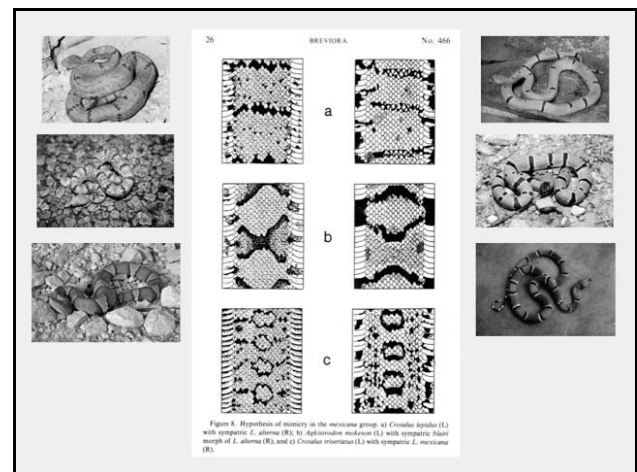


Figure 9. Hypothesis of mimicry on the mericane group: a) *Crotalus lepidus* (L.) with sympatric *L. alterna* (R); b) *Agkistrodon pictigaster* (L.) with sympatric trans-Pecos morph of *L. alterna* (R); and c) *Crotalus pictigaster* (L.) with sympatric *L. mericane* (R).

A slide suggesting that gray-banded kingsnakes may be mimics of the venomous snakes found in the same locality. The top two photos on the left show rock rattlesnakes (*Crotalus lepidus*). At the bottom left is a trans-Pecos copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix pictigaster*). Photo credits: top to bottom left, Troy Hibbits, Gerry Salmon, Damon Salceies, and top to bottom right, Richard D. Worthington, Michael Geiger and Buzz Ross.



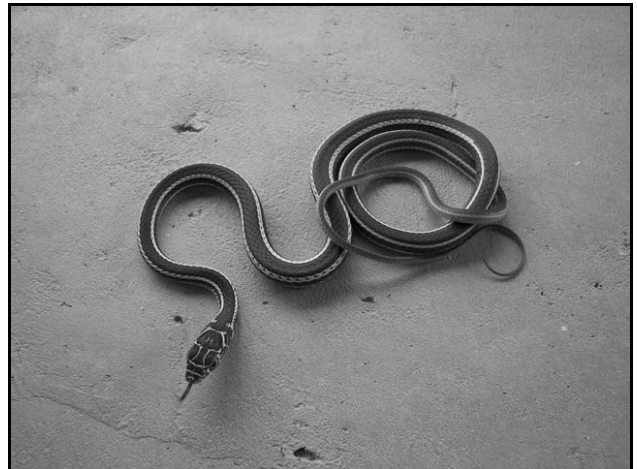
Great Plains ratsnake (*Pantherophis emoryi*). Photograph by Gerry Salmon.



Texas horned lizard (*Phrynosoma cornutum*). Photograph by Gerry Salmon.



Patch-nosed snake (*Salvadora grahamiae*). Photograph by Gerry Salmon.



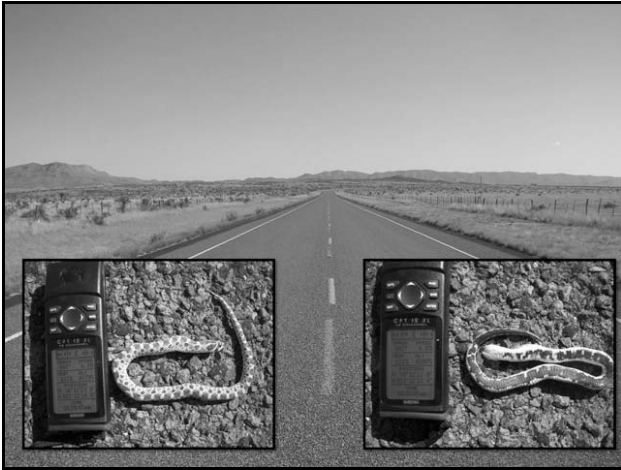
Striped whipsnake (*Coluber taeniatus*). Photograph by Gerry Salmon.



Checkered gartersnake (*Thamnophis marcianus*). Photograph by Gerry Salmon.



A clear demonstration of the variability of the gray-banded kingsnake (*Lampropeltis alterna*). All these snakes were found within ten miles of each other. Photograph by Damon Salceies.



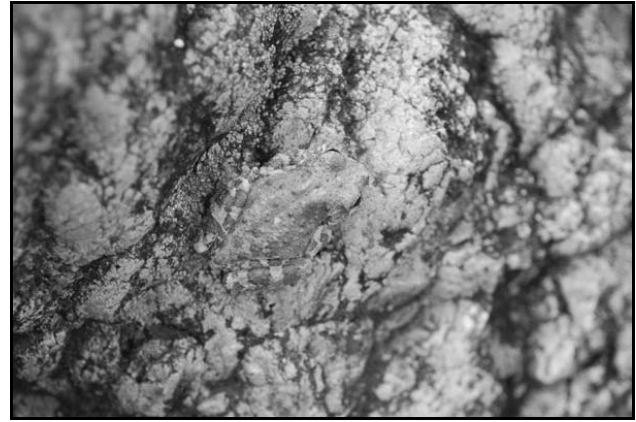
A photograph of the habitat, together with dorsal and ventral shots alongside a GPS is a reliable way to record your finds. Here the specimen is a road-killed Mexican hog-nosed snake (*Heterodon kennerlyi*). Photographs by Gerry Salmon.

the local rock rattlers (*Crotalus lepidus*) and Trans-Pecos copperheads (*Agkistrodon contortrix pictigaster*) accompanied by an excellent and convincing slide showing the similarities of the sympatric species.

We saw examples of popular articles about the snakes and pictures of the people that pursue the snakes. Gerry talked about his opinion of the Texas herping laws and the success of careful captive breeding in revealing the variable patterns of specific localities. He talked of the first “Snake Days” in Sanderson, Texas, showed the attendees and mentioned the \$5,000 raised for the underfunded state biologists in the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. And he finished with a photo of a desert kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getula splendida*) eating a gray-band. It was staged. The gray-band was a road-kill they fed to the kingsnake, but it was still a cool photo.

He smoothly transitioned to the second part of his presentation with a photo of a black-tailed rattlesnake (*C. molossus*), followed by a map of the trans-Pecos counties in Texas and photos of the landscape and habitat, including an impressive night shot of the wild fire that ravaged the Davis Mountains two years ago. In situ shots showed how easily a western diamond-backed rattlesnake (*C. atrox*) is to identify when it’s crossing a road in daylight. Photos of cute kids holding cool animals accentuated his appeal for us to get more youngsters involved in herping. And photos of adults emphasized that not only the young are enthusiasts. A photo of a trans-Pecos ratsnake (*Bogertophis subocularis*) was followed by a wider view featuring the snake paparazzi surrounding the critter and then a photo of the paparazzi escaping the midday west Texas heat with a few drinks on the porch of their hotel. A composite slide showing habitat and dorsal and ventral views with a GPS of a DOR hognose illustrated Gerry’s appeal for all herpers to keep careful documentation while in the field. Evidence well recorded can be valuable to many researchers.

A yellow mud turtle (*Kinosternon flavescens*) showed that the desert is not all dry. A Chihuahuan spotted whiptail lizard (*Aspidoscelis exsanguis*) and a crevice spiny lizard (*Sceloporus poinsettii*) grabbed our attention. With a Texas horned



A well camouflaged canyon treefrog (*Hyla arenicolor*). Photograph by Gerry Salmon.

lizard (*Phrynosoma cornutum*) on the screen Gerry mentioned that their numbers are declining rapidly perhaps due to changes in the ants that are their food source. Gerry showed a few slides highlighting the amazing camouflage capabilities of the canyon treefrog (*Hyla arenicolor*) and numerous photos of rattlesnakes, including black-tailed, prairie (*C. viridis*), rock, and Mojave (*C. scutulatus*) rattlers. A ventral shot of a Trans-pecos copperhead showed why the subspecies’ Latin name is *pictigaster*, meaning a painted or embroidered belly. A beautiful red and black long-nosed snake (*Rhinocheilus lecontei*) filled the screen followed by a green Couch’s spadefoot (*Scaphiopus couchii*). He ended with a photo of Mike Price pointing to a gorgeous gray-band on a rock wall and a last slide of a beautiful west Texas rainbow.

Gerry mentioned at the beginning of his talk that he had accumulated enough info for this talk that he could write a book. He knew that he’d gone too far when his hard drive crashed. Taking that as a hint, he scaled back the talk. He covered the natural history of the gray-banded kingsnake and herping in the trans-Pecos region, but he also talked about much more. He spoke about the importance of involving children in the herpetology. He gave us background on many famous and lesser-known biologists. He showed how we can make a difference in the public’s perception of these animals by collectively engaging in efforts like the Snake Days in Sanderson, Texas. He managed to give us a taste of how science gradually expands our knowledge through bits of data and he encouraged us to help collect that data by demonstrating how even we amateurs can collect meaningful data. And that was after he shortened his presentation. We’re going to have to have him back for the rest.