



The Cult of the Gray-band

All incidents cited in this story are true, based on my actual caffeine-clouded observations, or interviews with eyewitnesses. No names are mentioned because the Believers prefer to remain anonymous for the time being, in the hopes that someday their cult may achieve legitimacy in the eyes of the public, if not non-profit status with the IRS.

by Rod Dearth

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Exploring nature at any time is fun, but after dark it can be quite interesting and much more exciting than during the day. In Texas, many of our native animals are not active until after the sun goes down. For anyone willing to brave a few potential outdoor hazards, the chances of glimpsing a reclusive bobcat or a sneaky coyote grow exponentially in direct relationship to the setting of the sun. Of course, so does the possibility of poking your eye out on a thorny mesquite branch or having an encounter with one of our state's venomous creatures. In fact, the nighttime hazards of our Texas outback often outweigh the pleasures—at least for *most people*. However, if you happen to be a member of a certain fraternity of hardy, devil-may-care reptile enthusiasts, there is no hazard that will deter you from nighttime quests.

I realized how fanatical this special, nocturnal fraternity was on a warm, summer evening last year when I found myself in the company of one of its ardent members. It was well after midnight on an overcast West Texas night. I was standing at the edge of an 80-foot limestone

bluff. Directly across from me, a short distance away, was the top of a sheer rock wall where my companion was nimbly scampering about. I was supposed to follow him, but there was a problem: the rock wall where he stood was separated from the spot my feet were glued by an inky black abyss. The top of the wall my companion so confidently strode upon was about two feet wide. Under other circumstances (broad daylight, no wind, zero elevation) this would be no big deal. But not only was it Stygian black (the lights from Fort Stockton, 60 miles distant, didn't help), the wind was blowing 30 knots, and the distance from where I stood to where I wanted to go was more than I could comfortably step. I would have to jump and make sure I landed perfectly balanced and did not overstep. If I did ... well my light, as powerful as it was, did not penetrate the even deeper abyss on the other side of the rock wall.

During 23 years as a Marine, my courage had been tested many times, including enduring occasional periods of lethal metallic rain. Yet, standing there on the edge of the precipice, it took only a moment for me to decide that facing gunfire from hostiles was preferable to leaping a yawning black chasm only to land precariously, buffeted by high winds, on a narrow sliver of rock. Nope. Common sense, discretion, and maturity dictated that I stay on the



Far left—The author, at night, in typical Gray-band habitat; left—a blairi phase of Gray-band that is in blue; this one is from Highway 277 south of Sonora; below—T. Dean McInturff, president of the West Texas Herpetological Society, and a true Believer (the only one the author names in this secretive fraternity!), carefully examines a crack in the rock as he searches for the elusive Gray-band



solid, landward side of the cliff, despite the fact that I would have to pick my way around prickly pear, cholla, and sotol.

What pursuit could motivate ordinary family men to engage in nocturnal rock climbing? *Lampropeltis alterna*: the Gray-banded Kingsnake. My fearless companion belongs to an elite fraternity of snake-lovers whose principal hobby is collecting, raising, breeding, and studying this seldom-seen snake, known to Believers as simply *alterna*.

Lampropeltis alterna and its sibling *L. blairi* are arguably two species of Gray-banded Kingsnake. They are found in the United States almost exclusively on the Edwards Plateau and in the Trans-Pecos region of Texas. Their brilliant, highly variable orange, white, gray, and black colors make them standouts in the serpent world. They are quite desirable among herpetologists, herpetoculturists, and reptile hobbyists. Among certain fanciers, the desire to possess, hold, and covet Gray-bands borders on fanaticism. To some, such as the Believers, it is an addiction.

Gray-bands are not at all rare within their range. You just don't see them as frequently as bull snakes, coachwhips, or garter snakes. Alan Tennant in *Field Guide to Texas Snakes* says that Gray-banded Kingsnakes are almost never seen except at night. My personal experiences substantiate Tennant's comment, but I would modify it by leaving off *except at night*. Since I've been hunting these snakes, I would say it is more accurate to say that *they are never seen*. I'm convinced that all the *alternas* in captivity are descended from a single accidental mating between a male and female pair caught some time in the late 1950s by an itinerant oil-field roughneck who like snakes. I have yet to see my first wild Gray-band.

OF MUTTS & PEDIGREES

Alterna hunting is exclusively a nighttime activity. Searchers from throughout the United States, as well as Canada and many countries in Europe, find themselves traveling to locales in the southern reaches of the Edwards Plateau where they use a variety of

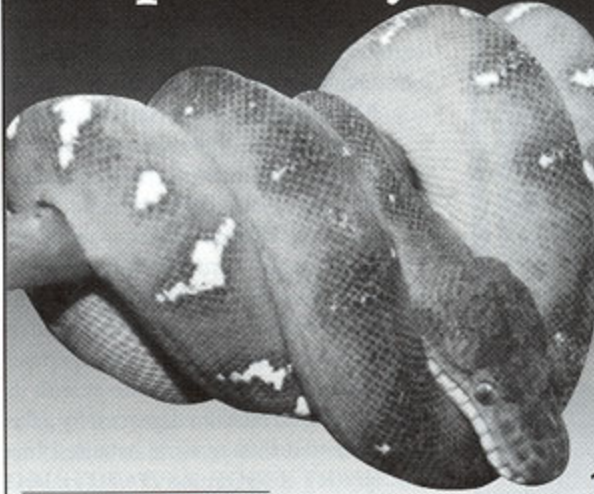
flashlights, spotlights, and lanterns to search for this elusive animal. Several places in Texas are well known to collectors. Gray-bands are identified first by the locality where the animal was caught, and second by the subspecies or color phase, depending on which school of thought you belong to. One highly sought Gray-band is the Davis Mountains *alterna* (a snake that is literally *to die for*!): a snake captured in the Davis Mountains of West Texas, with the *alterna*-phase color and pattern. A Howard Draw *blairi* is a Gray-band caught in Howard Draw, with the *blairi* color and pattern. Any snake that cannot be positively identified as to its locality of origin is called a "mutt", as are captive-bred *alternas* of questionable parentage.

GAME WARDENS & RANCHERS

Most Gray-bands are identified with a highway or road name (e.g., Hwy. 277 or River Road), as they are commonly caught in the cracks and crevices of limestone road cuts. The reason most are caught in road cuts has more to do with Texas laws against trespass and other rules set up by the state than with the type of habitat the snakes prefer. As most land in Texas is private property, the collector is permitted by law to hunt only along public roadways. This privilege is extended, according to the law, up to the first fence. 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 spotlight along the edge of his property. TPWD regulates the collection of all non-game animals such as snakes, including Gray-bands, and their game wardens rigorously enforce the state's laws.

Illuminating the countryside at night can lead to misunderstandings and anxiety. Ranchers and game wardens worry about livestock rustling or deer poaching; snake hunters worry about getting a ticket or being shot. The former generally do not understand the desire of the latter to wander around roadsides at night looking for snakes. The average person (Texans included) cannot fathom even *liking* snakes, much less engaging in

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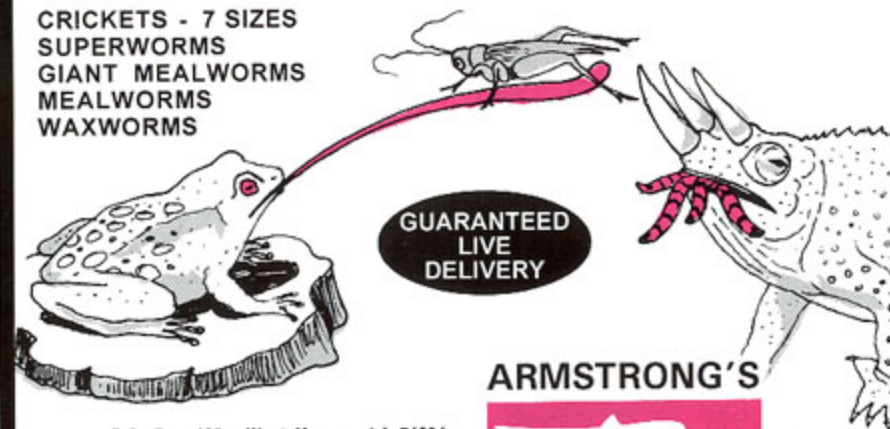
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nighttime excursions to catch them. Say "snake" and most Texans think of Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes or copperheads, not of *alterna*. Most ranchers and game warden don't know the difference between a Gray-band and a head band. However, they certainly do know what to do with trespassers, which is why we worry about being shot.

FLASHLIGHTS & SNEAKERS

The Believers view these difficulties as minor, somewhat irritating, parts of the game. But these are not the only problems that can be encountered. Texas is home to many other species of snakes. Diverse landforms provide suitable habitat for a variety of reptiles which includes a number of snakes. Prime *alterna* habitat is also home to pit vipers, some of which look like Gray-bands, or at least they do at night under the dim light cast by a flashlight outfitted with year-old batteries. Imagine spotting a screaming *blairi* (gray with orangish bands), only to realize as you curl your fingers around it that it is a lovely little Trans-Pecos Copperhead (gray with orangish bands). Oh yeah! Can you say *snakebite*? Try the same thing with an *alterna* (gray with black bands), only to find yourself up close and personal with a Rock Rattler (gray with black bands). The Believers take the presence of rattlesnakes and copperheads in stride—without snake boots, chaps, or leggings. The typical footwear of *alterna* hunters in general is a pair of athletic shoes. Sneakers.

You might think these after dark excursions into snake-infested areas would demand foot and leg protection, but such is not the case. In fact, a good pair of Nikes is required. If you have ever seen a Believer leap out of a moving car and sprint 100 yards to snatch a Gray-band from in front of an oncoming semi, missing a messy personal demise by inches, you would know why boots and leggings are out of the question. (Nike marketing executives take note: tap into the advertising potential of *R&A Magazine* to sell shoes to this devoted customer base.)

Such daring activity is also why *alterna* hunters possess driving skills that are nor-

mally learned only at the FBI Academy. I'm pretty competent behind the wheel of a fast-moving Ford, but my first road trip with a Believer was a learning experience. We made more ETS (Emergency Tactical Stops), boot-legger turns, and pylon slalom maneuvers than you will see watching *Miami Vice* reruns. All in the name of checking out that "snakey-looking shadow", not squishing a live snake, or identifying some D.O.R. I learned to identify ropes and broken fan belts while traveling at high rates of speed simply to protect myself from whiplash.

Believer: (at the wheel, going 70 M.P.H.) *Hey! Was that a snake?*

Me: (clutching the dashboard) *NO! It was a rope. I'm sure it was a rope!*

If you're ever driving any road at night during snake season with a Believer, here's hint #1: always wear your seat belt.

DRUG DEALS & HORSE TRADES?

NOPE. JUST SNAKES.

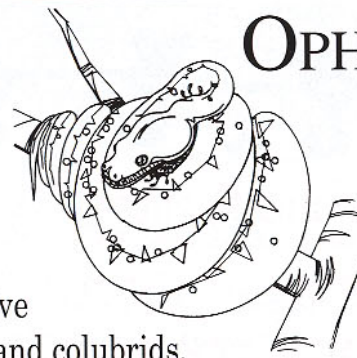
The Believers are not only fanatical collectors, most of them are inveterate horse

traders as well. This leads to roadside transactions in the wee hours of the morning, usually in some convenience store parking lot, or on a dark, isolated road. A group of men huddled in the middle of the night near the back of a pickup truck would normally indicate a drug deal going down or the retrieval of an illegally killed whiptail. One might even expect to find a body rolled up in a carpet nearby. But if you happen to be driving along a Texas road traversing Gray-banded habitat, chances are you're witnessing Believers swapping snake, and a few lies, too.

If you are bold enough to stop at one of these late-night Masses conducted by the faithful, you will find the congregation quite friendly. But be prepared for proselytizing. Not only will you be forced to endure hour after hour of stories about *alternas* these acolytes have seen or caught, you will also have to undergo the "mug shot" experience.

Every true Believer carries a photo album at all times of the *alternas* he has captured, or his pals have captured, or his pals'

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buddies, and so on *ad nauseam*. These guys can look at every one of the hundreds of these serpent mug shots and tell you exactly where, when, and how the snake was caught—including what the weather was like (which is important). These photo albums are usually presented at the drop of a hat, and even though everyone present but you has seen the pictures countless times before, they still exclaim in hushed, reverential tones over each image. Hint #2: don't ever say, *Gee, I've never seen a Gray-band before. Do you have any pictures?* Your spouse might report you missing before you are able to break away from the group and get home.

Like college fraternities, this brotherhood contains fun-loving guys with a well developed (odd) sense of humor. The ultimate is watching some poor neophyte risk life and limb climbing a 60-foot cut, juggling a snake hook, spot lamp, and catch bag, after his first Gray-band, only to find the snake in question is made of rubber, painted to look just like an *alterna*. Gotcha! There is even a story circulating about an incident involving

a six-foot dead python that one Believer placed high out of reach on a cut in *alterna* territory. The antics of the two rookies from Colorado who almost killed themselves catching this "mother of all Gray-bands" provided a gut-wrenching laugh. I know one guy who has been saving a 13-foot albino python in his freezer as he waits for the right circumstances to pull the ultimate *alterna* gag.

Jokes sometimes backfire, as in the case of my nimble friend. He had picked up a D.O.R. Mottled Rock Rattlesnake (*Crotalus lepidus*) from the Davis Mountains area which he placed, along with a "gotcha" note, in a conspicuous location near Iraan, Texas. The *lep* was spotted and mistaken for an *alterna* by some bleary-eyed hunter. The victim was outraged and, as he flung the rattler to the ground in indignation he spied a genuine *alterna* crawling along a crack in the cut. The punchline is that the guy never would have looked at the cut if he hadn't first seen the dead snake planted there by my friend.

PARTNERS & THE RULES

One critical aspect of hunting for Gray-

bands is having a good partner. Since this activity involves driving at night, a good partner is 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 help you stay awake while driving, no matter what, even if it means listening to old Willie Nelson tapes for hours
- (d) is willing to share gas, food, and coffee expenses (substitute any highly caffeinated beverage, as required)
- (e) understands The Rules

The Rules are an unwritten set of precepts for deciding who gets possession of *alterna* captured during the course of the night. This might seem to be a simple decision, but such is not the case. It is a complicated, ritualized matter governed by a variety of factors such as who owns the vehicle, who's driving, who spotted the snake, who caught the snake, was it the first, second, or whatever for the night, and how much of the expenses were shared. Other factors include how much you like your partner, is the snake

a particularly desirable phase, and is either one of you carrying a gun (hint #3: the guy with the gun keeps the snake). For me, all bets are off and The Rules be damned if a Davis Mountain *alterna* is involved.

There exists a combination of weather elements that must be present or no self-respecting *alterna* will show itself. The Gospel of the Believers states that unless the barometer reading is 29.8, humidity is 70% or higher (light rain helps), the sky is overcast, the moon is dark, and the wind is blowing at 5–10 m.p.h. from the southeast, save your gas because no *alterna* will be moving. That is, unless the snakes *are moving*, in which case just record the weather in your notebook and make up your own gospel.

Hunting Gray-bands ranks up there on the list of most enjoyable things you can do. I spent many a night April to October last year walking back roads, searching for elusive *alterna*. If you like danger, excitement, intrigue, and just plain fun (not to mention hour upon hour of mind-numbing boredom), this is perfect. I keep at it, even though I have



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not seen an *alterna* yet—dead or alive. It is getting embarrassing to drag home at 3:00 a.m. and have my wife drowsily say, "Well?", with me replying, "Nothing."

According to the Believers, seeing Gray-bands is a once-in-every-30-nights occurrence. Most hunters, even the most faithful, must hold down a job during the day. This sad fact, plus the uncooperative West Texas weather (which has been especially bad in 1998), can make it a long time before you get 30 nights of hunting under your belt. I know one Believer who hunted for seven years before he finally saw his first *alterna*. Another went 12 years before spotting his first Gray-band. From what I gather listening to the Chosen (those who have actually caught a Gray-band), your first *alterna* is a seminal event, likened to losing your virginity or winning the lottery—only better.

Actually, I think I saw a Gray-band once, just west of Fort Davis. It was about 1:00 a.m. when I shined my light on a cut 10 feet high and saw the tail of a dark snake

disappear into a fissure. I tried to find it, but to no avail. My partners were convinced it was an *alterna*. It was a heart-rendering experience.. Salvation had been *so close!* Have I been discouraged? Plenty. I've been on trips where I felt fortunate to see *any snake*, even a dead one. I have stared at limestone cuts so often without seeing anything except spiders, centipedes, and millipedes that I've acquired the physiological equivalent of computer "screen burn". I began to believe that somehow I was overlooking *alternas* lying there in plain view. Ultimately, I had moments of complete breakdown when I doubted that Gray-bands even existed in Texas (*gasp*).

However, along about that time, some lucky guy full of exuberance and the joy of life would pull up and cheerfully produce a neatly tied muslin bag containing a freshly caught *alterna*, taken off the cut I just hunted minutes ago. At times like these, you can only fall back on the sage advice of the seasoned Gray-band hunter: you just gotta *believe* the snakes are out there. Thus, the Believers. ☘



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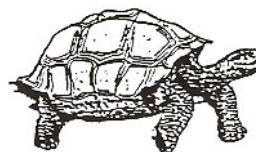
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