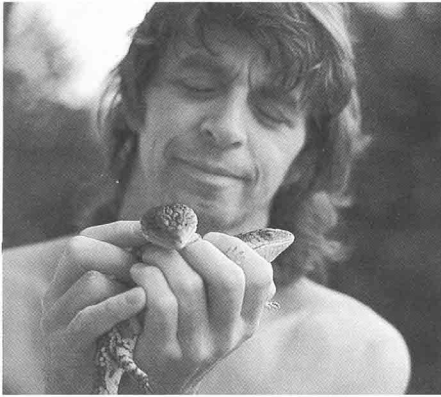


# AFH Interview: Ernie Wagner



*By Ralph Gowen*

**AFH:** How and when did you decide to make captive breeding of reptiles your career?

**Wagner:** In the early 70s, I had really become interested in breeding reptiles and began building a breeding collection of reptiles. I paid \$350 for my first red albino corn snake (*Elaphe guttata guttata*)! I built up the collection by trading for animals, with the ultimate goal of being able to leave the zoo and breed reptiles for a living. It took me a long time to get the collection big enough so that it could support me. It is a difficult thing to be a bureaucrat and have a steady income and just walk away from it. I left the zoo with my retirement vested, and I won't be able to start drawing it for another two years, when I'm 52. I have had to support myself breeding reptiles, but I've always liked different challenges. Going from one area to another in the zoo gave me a lot of interest in doing different things.

Even though I had been in the business for some time, it was a real challenge making the transition. When you try to support yourself by captive breeding, it's a learning experience. It's not easy to do and has presented interesting challenges.

**AFH:** You started working primarily in colubrids, but now your emphasis has shifted to amphibians and lizards. Why the shift in direction?

**Wagner:** Recently, there has been a sudden burst within the hobby of breeding colubrids. When I was working with all the "mexicana" and "triangulum" series, it was during the "golden years" when there weren't a lot of them around and the prices were up. Everybody that buys these animals eventually wants to breed and sell them. Today, they have been bred to the point

where they are relatively common in the market, and their prices have dropped. A breeder has to make some decisions about where he wants to put his efforts and interests.

There were a couple of other reasons why I changed my emphasis. First, I enjoy moving on to new challenges and new things. Second, the "mexicana" series, in particular, was really driving me nuts. When I sell animals, I guarantee that they are going to thrive. Not that you're just going to get them alive, but that they are going to continue to live. I found that on things like Blair's kingsnakes (*Lampropeltis mexicana alterna*), I would be replacing as many as 50 to 60 percent of the babies I sold. The same thing was true with some of the others of the "mexicana" series. This was because they want lizards and are hard to get started on mice. I was also tired of producing large numbers of babies that I had to force-feed all the time.

I kept looking at how I wanted to spend my time and eliminated many things from my collection that were a bit more difficult as babies. I've also looked at what can provide me with more income over the winter while my colubrids are hibernating. I also had to cut back on colubrids because I needed space for other things that could be reproductive. So I have increased the amphibian collection to provide me with winter income.

I have also boosted up certain aspects of the lizard collection. I'm breeding a lot of leopard geckos (*Eublepharis macularis*), and building bigger fat-tail gecko (*Hemithelyconyx caudicinctus*) and Namib sand gecko (*Chondrodactylus angulifer*) colonies. These are lizards that, in terms of husbandry, I have managed to develop ways of maintaining, working with and breeding that are relatively labor-free. Since they don't require a lot of time, I can maintain a large number of these animals with a minimal amount of work. The babies are

**E**rne Wagner began his career in herpetology at the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, Washington working as an assistant zoo keeper. Prior to that, he worked in the pet trade for a short time.

His first duties as an assistant zoo keeper were in the pony ring, leading ponies, where every keeper begins. Ultimately, he worked in almost every area of the zoo. He even worked the night shift at the zoo for two years while he earned a BA in zoology at Evergreen State. He was drafted in 1964, and after spending two years in the Army, he returned to the Woodland Park Zoo and continued to work in many different areas of the zoo. At this time, there was only a small reptile house, and there was no full-time reptile keeper. Ernie had taken care of the reptile house in addition to his other duties. Then a new reptile house was built, and Ernie became senior keeper of reptiles. When the zoo established curatorial positions, he became Curator of Reptiles.

During his latter years at the zoo, Ernie was even pressed into service in management as the zoo's Operations Director for about nine months when someone quit unexpectedly. Ernie's experience as Operations Director taught him that he did not want to pursue a career in zoo management. He worked at the zoo for a total of twenty-five years, leaving it in 1985 to become a private commercial breeder of reptiles and amphibians.

hardy and sell well, providing a nice background income. And they're neat animals.

One of the other big reasons that I am more involved in lizards than in years past is the interests of my wife, Darcie Richardson. She possesses the interests and skills necessary to manage these animals successfully. Lizards still take more work than snakes, but without her help I could not have been as successful with them. In fact, it is really the other way around - I help her with the lizards.

I also have expanded the python and boa collection. I have a nice group of Argentine boas (*Boa constrictor occidentalis*) and am still working with Dumeril's boas (*Acrantophis dumerili*) and have bred emerald tree boas (*Corallus caninus*) this year. Because Burmese are no longer being imported into the country, I am breeding them for the pet trade. I have put together a facility away from my house that is for Burmese pythons (*Python molurus bivittatus*). I have around 16 Burmese out there. I am also working with the albino and the patternless striped Burmese. In fact this year I'll be breeding the albino into the patternless, making double heterozygous that I can breed back to each other, producing 3 striped, 3 albino, 9 normal and 1 striped albino Burmese. I ultimately hope to get that cross going.

The one thing I've learned from the zoo is that when you are working with hot snakes or anything that's at all hazardous, as Burmese are, it's dangerous if you don't have a facility that is designed for it. So I rented a place that is essentially a large vacant room, and I built in cages. These cages are 8 feet long, 2 ½ feet front to back and 18 inches high, and I stacked them 3 cages high. They form a wall that the snakes can't go behind or under. I can take a big Burmese out of a cage or it can crawl out of a cage while I'm cleaning. It can crawl down on the floor, and

it can't get behind electrical cords or under another cage or in back of anything. It's just on a bare floor. When I'm ready to put it back, I can just let it crawl back or move it where I want. If it bolts on me, I can just stand there and watch it go away. I don't care, because it has no place to go. The facility is designed for handling these animals.

Maybe I didn't really answer your question in terms of leaving a lot of the colubrids. When you're in this business, you have to look at where the demand is. Then what you have to look at is whether an animal you can breed is going to produce enough offspring to make it worthwhile. Are the babies going to be easy enough to maintain so you can get them started and send them out without having to replace them? The demand changes as the hobby changes to some degree. So, I've gotten out of some species that weren't as lucrative as others. I could probably still make money off of them, but I got out of them because they were either more difficult to work with or the price was dropping.

It doesn't really matter if the price drops, because every time the price drops it opens up the animal to more people, kind of like a pyramid. When you get something very expensive, only a few people can buy it. As the price drops, more people can buy it. If an animal can produce enough offspring, it's still profitable to produce that animal even though the price has dropped. Especially if the animal is easy to care for.

**AFH:** You said you built your collection up while you were still working at the zoo. Anybody who maintains a large collection and works a full-time job knows that the collection is almost like having a second full-time job. How did you manage to keep things going during this period?

**Wagner:** I'm a late night person and frequently will work to 1, 2, or 3 o'clock in the morning. I just

kind of get lost in the animals. After working the job the way that I did, dealing with a lot of paperwork and not very much physical work, it was extremely relaxing to be able to come home and work the animals. There were times when it got very hard and tiring, and there just weren't enough hours in the day. It really was like working two full-time jobs. The last couple of years that I worked at the zoo, the only way I was able to handle it was by taking leaves of absence during the summers, when I had all the eggs and babies. I never would have been able to manage it otherwise, because I was dealing with several hundred baby snakes at a time. There just wasn't enough time in the day. I kind of lead into leaving the zoo by taking these leaves of absence.

**AFH:** The hibernation period is obviously a Godsend for people who deal with colubrids. Do you have any successful strategies on how you hibernate your animals?

**Wagner:** I have a tropical room and a temperate room, and when I'm going to hibernate, I make sure that all the animals are adjusted. I begin by turning off the heat tapes and after a couple weeks of that, I turn off the cage lights. It's a basement room, and all the heat and light is shut down except three overhead lights. It gets relatively cold during the winter.

The only real key to hibernation that I'm aware of is, if you have animals that are hibernating, you need to pay some attention to what they are doing. A hibernating animal should go under and disappear. It doesn't matter whether it goes under its hide box or into a drawer or under its shavings. The ideal situation in a hibernating room is not to see many snakes out and abroad. If you have an animal that you are trying to hibernate that comes out and is restless, wandering back and forth, and you force it into hibernation, you'll

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probably lose it. When I have animals that are restless like that, I'll pull them out of hibernation and put them into the tropical room. I'll feed them for another month or so, and then I'll try to hibernate them again. As long as you pay attention to that aspect of hibernation, you'll probably do just fine. During the winter, it's not unusual for the temperature to go down into the high 40s - low 50s.

**AFH:** Are you concerned with the temperature being stable, or do you let it fluctuate?

**Wagner:** I am concerned about stability in terms of temperature. I had a friend who used to live in Seattle in an upstairs apartment that the sun would come through and bake. On a hot winter day, it might be 80 degrees F inside his apartment because of the sun. You just can't breed snakes with that kind of fluctuation in hibernation. During hibernation, one week the

temperature in my basement might be in the 40s and the next week in the mid 50s or even in the high 50s. To me, that doesn't matter. The animals are still hibernating within that temperature range.

That sort of fluctuation is not very important. What's important in terms of stability is that you can't hibernate animals and succeed in breeding them by allowing the temperature to jump all over the place. Letting the temperature be 50 degrees one day, 75 the next, and 45 the following day is dangerous. You can't have that kind of high fluctuation and actually bring the animals in and out of hibernation and expect to be successful in breeding.

The same thing applies in the summer time. If you get a series of cold days, you need to have environmental controls so the animals don't see that much of a drop.

**AFH:** Were you ever involved in determining who could keep venomous snakes in Seattle?

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**Wagner:** Yes, the city of Seattle passed a dangerous animal ordinance, and there was a fellow in the city who was keeping rattlesnakes. There was a provision in the ordinance for a permit. When he heard about it, he went down and applied for one. Animal control was of the feeling that if they issued him a permit, they would be condoning his keeping venomous snakes and might be liable if an accident occurred, which is kind of strange. Why would they have a provision for a permit, but not want to honor it? He promptly hired a lawyer and proceeded to take the city to court over the issue.

So the city responded to that by asking the people of the zoo to inspect his facility (I was curator at the time). Frank Slavens and I went down and went through his facility. The cages had locks on them, were big and secure cages, and he was obviously skilled in keeping venomous snakes. He had never been bitten, and had kept the rattlesnakes for many years. The room he was keeping them in was secure, and the only suggestion we made was that he screen over the windows as one added safety precaution. Everything else looked great to us, and we said sure, the facility was safe. The fellow never really pressed the issue. He gave up and decided to move out into the country with all of his snakes. That is where his collection is now.

**AFH:** Have you had any trouble personally trying to maintain a business of this nature?

**Wagner** (laughing): When I was working for the zoo, I was aware for many years that there was a zoning code, actually a director's ruling within the zoning department, that had been written by the director relating to keeping animals. The ruling said that in Seattle you were allowed three animals per residence. Obviously, this wasn't being adhered to by many people in the city. When I was applying for my business li-

cense, I made the city aware of what I was doing. They basically knew anyway, and it came to the attention of the zoning people. An inspector came out and said that my license wouldn't be approved because you are only allowed three animals per residence. So we started talking about what animals were.

Wagner - "I have friends who kept lots of tropical fish."

Inspector - "Well fish aren't animals."

Wagner - "Well, what about birds?"

Inspector - "I don't think birds are animals."

Wagner - "OK, what about my daughter's pet rat?"

Inspector - "Oh, if it's a pet, it's an animal."

When I got more specific, I discovered that every time the question came up, they would hold a board meeting to decide whether or not it was an animal. I sat down and wrote a long letter addressing the issue of this director's ruling, pointing out that the University of Washington would be extremely surprised to discover that fish weren't animals. I also pointed out that the ruling was so vague as to be literally unenforceable. People were violating the ruling all over the city. I sent copies of the letter to the mayor, the city council, and the director of the zoning department. The result of it was that they sat down and rewrote the director's ruling to state that you were allowed three dogs or three cats per residence. They also defined the handling of offspring from these animals, stating that you could keep them for 30 days or some length of time. Then they went on to say that animals you keep inside the house - and they specifically named tropical fish, birds, reptiles, and small rodents - are not covered by the zoning laws of the city of Seattle. I thought, "Oh great we've got this funky law changed." So I kind of filed it away in the back of my mind and knew it wasn't a

problem any more. Then I forgot about it.

About five years later, I was visited by a city of Seattle Inspector who asked,

Inspector - "Are you keeping snakes?"

Wagner - "Sure, lots of snakes! Come in and take a look."

Inspector - "Well... No, I don't want to look at them."

Before long, I received a letter in the mail from the zoning department stating I was in violation of their regulation of having only three animals per residence. I was given thirty days to get rid of all but three animals! So I began pulling my hair out, went back to the zoo (I had left it by now) to talk with Frank Slavens. I asked him if he remembered us changing the ordinance, and he said yes. I went down to the zoning department

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and looked at their ordinances and there it was, the old ruling—three animals per residence. I went to the library to look for the records relating to ordinance changes. The librarians looked it up and couldn't find any changes.

I then tracked down an old letter that had the name of the woman at the zoning department who rewrote the ordinance. I found her working in a different city department, and she remembered rewriting the ordinance. With her assistance, I found that the director's changed ruling had been authorized, but was never sent out to the department. When we pointed this out, the zoning department implemented the revised ruling. Since then, I have not had any problems.

The only other concern I have is the dangerous animal permit issue. It falls in the same category as the number of animals issue. Every time the question comes up, animal control holds a board meeting to decide whether or not that particular animal is dangerous. If you call them, you will get a variety of answers on what's dangerous. One time they might say that any snake over eight feet is dangerous. Another time they might say that any boa is dangerous. I tend to try and maintain a low profile and appear as normal as I can to my neighbors. If nobody knows what I have or do then they won't complain. It behooves me to take really good care of my animals and not let anything get out, because it is money out of my pocket. **AFH:** One of AFH's main concerns is the role that legislation could play in herpetoculture. What role do you feel that legislation should play?

**Wagner:** Well, I'm not comfortable having someone keep a lot of venomous snakes right next to me. I have worked with venomous snakes all my life and have never been

bitten (I've come close). It's necessary to have rules and regulations controlling people who are going to keep venomous snakes or a lion. This forces them to maintain them in a professional sort of way. The fellow who was keeping the collection of rattlesnakes lived not far from me. I wasn't uncomfortable with that because he was caring for them properly.

I have been involved in several cases developing legislation on reptiles. The most successful approach when legislation is proposed—either restricting or controlling how people can keep or collect animals—is to be willing to sit down, talk, advise and approach the bureaucracy you are dealing with in a constructive sort of way. Do not be an antagonist; offer to help. People who simply feel that someone is out to screw them over are completely negative about it and are abusive and abrasive. That doesn't help the situation at all.

In areas of some states, it is illegal to keep harmless snakes. I think that's wrong, but at the same time it is really hard to keep on top of all the legislation. You'll find, more often than not, the people who are writing the legislation are looking for help and assistance. If you can fulfill that role, either as an organization or as an individual, you will get a lot farther than you will saying, "Oh God, they're trying to keep us from doing THIS now!" and getting up in arms to go to battle.

**AFH:** So basically what you are saying is that you would like to see well-defined legislation?

**Wagner:** Well, I don't know. There is a veterinary college somewhere in the southeast that is undertaking a project of writing a series of legislative guidelines that will be offered to states to use on governing the keeping of animals. These guidelines will list every single animal they can think of and how it should be kept. In other words, how big and warm a cage you need for a kingsnake. They are

going through species by species and gathering all of this information and putting together this big thick complex manual which they are going to give to the states to use if they want to write animal legislation. They expect that states may take part or all of it. This is too restrictive. I don't like to see it down to that level. I think it is pretty hard for someone to sit down and effectively say what size cage you need to have for a kingsnake or a parakeet and cover all the basics adequately.

**AFH:** You have been honored by your peers as the Best Dressed Herpetologist. Any comments or thoughts on this?

**Wagner** (laughing): I don't know, sometimes I think that I live in a different world than other people. This is one of the nice things about not working in the zoo. I can let my hair grow, wear an earring, and just be myself. Not that I didn't do this to some degree while at the zoo. The award started out with me being a little bit incensed and wanting to poke a hole in somebody's bag of hot air at the Reptile Breeding Symposium a couple of years ago. I was one of the speakers and I don't remember who instigated it, but I received a letter that told me how I should dress. It kind of said that the symposium is coming of age now and we are trying to make it a little more formal. Well, that just irritated the hell out of me. One of the things that I like about the symposia is that they are informal. People who don't have any formal background can go and feel comfortable.

Secondly, I had a bone to pick with those people for quite some time because they don't hold these meetings in the winter. If they would hold them in Miami, San Diego, or Hawaii or someplace like that when my animals are hibernating and I'm not beating my brains out they would be a lot easier to go to. Every time I have brought the subject up, they kind



of hem and haw around, and say that there are a lot of students in school who couldn't get away in the winter. My answer to that is BS. Students can get away for two or three days to go to a symposium. Especially if it is held on a weekend with maybe a day on either end.

The summer scheduling came from when they were trying to hold joint meetings with the SSAR and American League of Herpetologists. They wanted to schedule the symposia along with these meetings which were held during the summer when school was out. Although there is a lot of sentiment among people that I have talked for holding these meetings in the winter, I have never been able to convince them to.

They hold these meetings in some place like Houston, Texas in the middle of summer and they want you to wear a necktie. I don't own a necktie and if you've ever been in Houston in June or July that is the last thing you would want to wear. Everybody is running around in shorts and are comfortable, so why not wear shorts and a T-shirt? Anyway, I found this necktie that was blue and covered with little green frogs. I bought it, got up there and made a complete fool out of myself saying that since they want me to wear a necktie, here it is. I took it out, put it on and then gave my talk. The point I was making was that the quality of the meetings is dependent upon the quality of the papers (which I thought were pretty good), not on what people wore.

**AFH:** Let's try a few quickies. What is your favorite species that you are working with?

**Wagner:** Well, I dearly love Argentine boas (*Boa constrictor occidentalis*). I don't know why. The damn things are hard to breed. They drive me a bit nuts, but I really like them.

**AFH:** Which species that you have captive bred are you the most proud of?

**Wagner:** I think it was the tomato frog (*Discophus antongilii*) breeding. It was really neat and exciting since they hadn't been done before. It took a while to figure out. I went through all kinds of hell breeding tomato frogs, but I just kept at it. I went through periods where I had convinced myself that I didn't have both sexes and needed to find males or females. I didn't know how to sex them. The lack of information on the frogs was very frustrating.

**AFH:** Was it a hormone-induced breeding?

**Wagner:** Yes, it was. Even doing that, I think it was one of the most satisfying things I have ever reproduced.

**AFH:** The new thing on the street seems to be the rage with collectors. Do you have anything special that you are going to be introducing in the next year or so?

**Wagner:** As I said earlier, I am working towards a striped albino Burmese, but the other thing that is exactly what you described is the four-lined corn snake. This is an animal that occurred spontaneously out of wild Okeetee stock. The trait is a simple recessive and produces gorgeous animals that are patternless on the ventral surface and have no blotches on the dorsal surface. At hatching, they have four distinct dark red lines down the body, and they turn into these gorgeous four-lined Okeetee corn snakes. The interest is very high on this phase. I have been expanding my breeding population of these animals. There has been very limited numbers of them available up until now. Last year, I bred that gene into both the black corn and the snow corn. The snow probably won't be nearly as spectacular as the black corn with four lines.

**AFH:** I have noticed a few trends in price lists where people are contriving taxa to sell their animals when the market value drops on the normal animal, such as the "intermedia" phase of the rosy boa

(*Lichanura trivirgata*). Do you have any feelings on that sort of marketing strategy?

**Wagner:** Listen, it's the free-market system. Let the buyer beware. The only thing I find kind of strange in this particular hobby is the prices people expect to get for their animals. When an animal first appears, I may pay a thousand dollars for it. When I'm breeding and marketing them, I will sell them for whatever I can get: \$300, \$400, or \$500. As more begin to appear on the market, the price might hold for a year or two, and then it begins to drop. Breeders have to respond to the market demand. Every now and then I'll run into somebody who pays \$300 for a snake and finds that two years later that same animal is selling for \$150, and they are singing the blues. Well, they're going to get their money back out with the price at \$150. But I can't hold the price at \$300 if nobody is buying.

You have to respond to what is happening in the market. You also have to look at the animal and decide whether it is something you can make money on when the price drops. A perfect example is the albino Burmese. They were \$2000 last year. I don't know where the price will start this year, but it will depend to a great degree on how many are around. There were 20 or 30 albino Burmese available last year, but if this year there are a hundred available, the price of \$2000 is out the window. In fact, I can still buy last year's babies at \$2000.

It is obvious that the price is going to drop. If the price drops to \$100 an albino Burmese, and I have an animal that produces 50 eggs, that animal will produce \$5000 of income for me. So if I get into breeding them with an initial investment of \$3000 to \$5000 whatever, will it be a worthwhile investment several years down the road? The prices will

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\$300 for a single animal that you want to keep and breed, you'd better be well aware that the price is going to drop as the animal becomes more common. You have to ask yourself if the animal is still going to be worth working with. Albino Burmese are an animal that the answer is definitely yes.

**AFH:** Do you have any overall feelings about herpetoculture and your chosen career?

**Wagner:** I really have mixed feelings. I am never totally comfortable with caging animals and keeping them as pets. I have done it all my life, and it is how I have earned my living. I don't mean to denigrate the hobby in any sort of way, but I really have a lot of problems with taking animals out of the wild and putting them into cages. That's why I try to avoid the sale of wild animals when I deal with the pet trade. I have opportunities to do it on occasion and usually avoid them even though there is money that I could make. I am much more comfortable with captive breeding animals, but when you get into something like leopard geckos that you can produce a thousand a year for the pet trade, you kind of wonder if that is really what you want to do. It disturbs me to put all those animals out into the hands of people who might or might not take care of them.

It's kind of a double-edged sword. I love the business, and it's exciting to breed animals. I really like making money at it. In the long run, I am looking forward to retiring from this business or maybe when I start drawing a retirement check from the zoo, cutting back even more to where I am not producing all the pet trade items, just a few specialty items. I would like to spend more time traveling. I am a commercial dealer, there is no question about it, but I am not always totally comfortable with it. It's just one of those things that I have difficulty absolutely pinning down. □

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ultimately drop and level out, and the animal will probably become a pet trade item that you can breed and sell by the hundreds because the price is low. If you have only economics in mind, and you pay