

December Meeting
Heino Kemnitz

The general meeting in December was a pleasant low-key affair complete with Christmas goodies ala pot luck. The intent was to allow everyone more of an opportunity to circulate in an informal atmosphere and herpetologize. Ballots for the election of NCHS officers for 1987 were passed out to those who did not receive them in the mail, and the winners are reflected in the list of officers on the previous page. Congratulations to the winners.

Speaking of low-key it was Skip Kruse, master of understatement who provided visual relief with a travelogue on a trip to the back country of Mexico, that he and several colleagues undertook this past July. Among the stops made was a three-day camping layover in the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains on a large privately owned ranch on the outskirts of the city of Durango. This area has some interesting habitats which makes it suitable for a diversity of animals. The most famous of these to a herpetologist is the Durango Mountain Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis mexicana greeri*), a lovely creature which is light or medium grey-green with almost fuchsia colored blotches down the dorsum encircled by jet black. This snake lives in some very rugged rocky terrain high up on the hills which face the south and west and thus collect the most sunlight during the short period of late spring and summer when the snakes active. The first specimens of this kingsnake were found on this ranch.

At 6000-7000 feet of elevation this area is perched atop the western edge of the

central Mexican plateau. The terrain and climate is not unlike that of our own Sierra Nevada and not at all like the parched, bandido-infested landscapes as depicted in the great Humphrey Bogart film, "Treasure of the Sierra Madre". Vegetation consists mainly of fir, pine, and scrub oak; however, cactus plants can be found all around where rock is exposed to large amounts of sunlight. Snow covers the area much of the year, and this accounts for the short activity period for most of the animals. During the summer, though daytime temperatures reach a pleasant 80°F or so and night time temperatures dip to about 45°F.

Hiking up into the hills and clambering about the rocky cliffs several hundred feet above the campsite every day is not for the faint at heart. One has to watch where one steps and places his hands as scorpions, vinegaroons (sinister looking but harmless whip scorpions) and no fewer than four species of rattlesnakes may lurk under any rock: The "striking" Banded Rock Rattlesnake (*Crotalus lepidus klauberi*), the male of which may be an eerie moss-green color; the Twin-Spotted Rattlesnake (*C. pricei*), the Ridge-nosed Rattlesnake (*C. willardi*), and the large irascible Black-tailed Rattlesnake (*C. molossus*). Of course, keeping your hands firmly around your beverage cup and avoiding the cliffs altogether is the best protection against snakebite, as Skip will attest.

Other interesting herps to be encountered here are the Narrow-headed Garter Snake (*Thamnophis rufipunctatus*) in the streams; the communal nesting Mountain Patch-nose Snake (*Salvadora grahamiae*); the Durango Gopher Snake (*Pituophis deppeii*); the handsome burgundy and gray Durango Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma orbiculara durangoensis*); an unusual anguid lizard *Barisia* which resembles our alligator lizards (*Gerrhonotus sp.*) and a host of spiny lizards (*Sceloporus sp.*) which appear to be a major food source for most of the snakes; and for the amphibian fancier the canyon tree frog (*Hyla arenicolor*) and the Chiricahuan Frog (*Rana chiricahuensis*) are both found here.

Skip will tell you that there are also bears to contend with in this secluded spot. Judging from the sounds which emanated from his tent nightly, one might have thought they were all gathered right in there.

All in all, this is an area of great scenic beauty and habitat which supports an abundance of wildlife. It is certainly worth checking out if you're ever in the neighborhood - just ask Skip.