Herpin'

ALAN TENNANT

ONE OF THE CENTRAL motifs in my life has been the quest for a successful way to interact with wildlife, which has consistently done its best to avoid interacting with me. The first wild fugitive I was able to overtake, in the second semester of third grade, was the butterfly. For months it was intoxicating to net and preserve fritillaries and monarchs, arranging their stiffened wings in kaleidoscopic rows as I worked my way up the lepidopteral ladder through tiger and black swallowtails and, finally, to the big cecropia moths whose furry bodies suggested mammals more than insects. But having to chloroform my captives eventually took the edge off the delight of capture. Trapping was another failed venture—Raskolnikov suffered less than I the day I pried the twenty-pound sprung jaws of an Acme #3 from the leg of the first 'possum to wander across the trapline I'd set in rigorous adherence to plans in *Outdoor Life*.

Birding was psychologically easier to deal with, of course, but somehow the satisfaction of glimpsing a distinctive wing bar or eye ring through 7X35 binoculars lacked the hands-on immediacy that I'd envied in a line of animal handlers stretching from Frank Buck to Jim Fowler. During the past year, however, I've at last become one of them—on an only moderately diminished scale. I discovered my wildlife métier in the search for exotic, multicolored creatures hidden right on the edge of town—a search spiced with an almost entirely illusory whiff of danger and, best of all, perfectly suited to the genteel pace demanded by a rather poorly cared-for, thirty-eight-year-old body. It's called herpin'.

A more accurate term would be snakin', since nearly everyone interested in herpetofauna (which includes all reptiles and amphibians) concentrates on serpents. Turtles, frogs, and amphibians just don't generate the same emotional pizzazz. But nobody wants to be called a snaker, so enthusiasts refer to each other as herpers, and to what they do as herpin'. Like birders gathered at flyway touchdowns or bellying through the junipers in search of golden-cheeked warblers, herpers go where the snakes are. That means spending their Sunday afternoons overturning rocks, logs, and, around abandoned farms, fallen panels of corrugated iron. These panels soak up solar radiation faster than the earth, providing a thermal pick-me-up to cold-blooded serpents unable to move or metabolize efficiently when the temperature falls below 60 degrees F.

As with most initially off-putting endeavors, the key to successful herpin' is the right attitude. Enough knowledge to operate safely and effectively, plus one or two basic pieces of gear, are important, but the proper point of view is absolutely essential. Snakes are only frightening when *they* surprise *you*. Sudden slithers through high grass or, worse, those spooky nocturnal plops into a quiet pond give everyone a queasy start. But when, filled with anticipation, you surprise a snake by abruptly lifting the roof of its hidden nook, it's a different story. Finding even a small snake is one of the more exciting things that happen ordinarily on country junkets. With the proper perspective and enough background to appreciate one's finds, these episodes can be turned into the most interesting part of the trip.

The background comes from a good field guide, and because there are far fewer kinds of herps than of birds, trees, or insects, even a herper with mild interest can usually recognize the distinguishing characteristics of every species living in a given area. Some commonly seen varieties are slim, red-striped ribbon snakes as pretty and delicate as their namesakes; plump garters with a checkerboard pattern of olive green and charcoal on their backs; king snakes speckled with chromatic yellow dots, each centered on a single black scale; orange-and-chocolate Halloween corn snakes; tree-dwelling rough green snakes, a livid lime color; and tiny prairie ringnecks, whose soft gray backs set off their glossy tangerine necklaces.

When exposed in their crannies, the vast majority of species stay coiled and motionless, like small, hidden treasures, and can be gently picked up, admired, and released unharmed and usually unfrightened. The best part about herpin', in fact, is the chance it offers to handle wildlife without the panic inevitable in tactilely close encounters with more highly strung, warm-blooded animals. A curious, characteristically ophidian resig-

MICHAEL J. BOWERMAN/HOUSTON ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS

Rock rattlesnake: the key to successful herpin' is the right attitude.

nation causes snakes—even those accosted in the heat of flight—to calm down at once when confronted by odds that favor a human captor. If held loosely, the feistiest big water snakes and coachwhips usually permit themselves to be handled with ease and will not flee in a frenzy when released. Smaller reptiles are perfectly content, after being looked at, simply to return to their old nooks. The roofing rock or plank should be lowered first, though, allowing the snakes to find their own way home.

BESIDES A FIELD GUIDE, and boots and gloves to protect against an occasional nip, only one piece of equipment is necessary, a fact which will probably prevent herpin' from ever developing a sizable following. There's just not much glamour associated with the potato hooks and filed-down saltwater fishing gaffs used to lift those rocks and logs—though fancy leather-gripped, graphite- and aluminum-shafted custom hooks are carried by some of the most gung-ho enthusiasts. These aficionados order them—in assorted weights and left- and right-handed configurations—from a handful of precision builders with all the care of Willie Mosconi selecting potential cue sticks from a rack of hard-rock maple. Like old-hand birders, unexcited by even the brightest abundant avian species, sophisticated herpers merely cluck approvingly over their commoner finds and only rarely leap to check out an unusual color phase or an individual found far enough beyond its normal range to rate a line in the *Journal of Herpetology*. But even for those who have never so much as thumbed through a snake-lovers' periodical, unusual serpents immediately take on the aura of hidden doubloons, at least if you go with the right people. An exceptionally dubious university press editor, talked into joining one of these outings because of a forthcoming book on snakes, had by midday tentatively begun to ease herself into the search, surreptitiously lifting a few smaller pieces of overlooked roofing with the tip of one ostensibly uninterested boot. She finally struck a little chocolate-and-white-striped patchnose which, though it nipped her thumb, proved so captivating that by midafternoon we were discussing what length hook she should buy for future trips.

Our tally from this brief foray, launched on the first warm day of spring near Elgin, Texas, included a pair of copulating western ribbon snakes, twenty-odd gray earth and ground snakes no larger than generous loops of toothpaste, a hefty, orange-mottled Texas rat snake, the editor's patchnose, and a slender juvenile racer, still wearing its brown-and-white baby pattern, dappled like a fawn. Yet, after the initial delight of examining our finds for a minute or two, we let them go: many species are protected, and all are a lot of work to care for in captivity. The few reptilian gems that do get taken home are generally treated royally, however. They have to be, for the successful husbandry so highly respected in herp circles calls for delicate diplomatic feats like piquing the notoriously picky appetites of lizard-eaters by raising their food mice in the same cages as iguanas, thus giving the mice an aroma irresistible to the snakes. Other keepers artificially manipulate temperature, humidity, and amount of daylight to approximate annual changes in their snakes' native habitat, thus stimulating the natural breeding responses often lost in the uniform environment of captivity. One successful propagator, Joseph Laszlo of the San Antonio Zoo, at times resorts to a more direct approach. To overcome his charges' sexual reticence he puts a newly introduced pair into a soft cloth bag and jiggles them for thirty minutes twice a day.

MICHAEL ALLENDER

Diamondback jaws: gasps of admiration.

Because we hiked the only dry ridge between miles of low-lying farm fields, there were also western diamondback rattlesnakes. A pair of old-timers were looped thick as anchor cables around the pilings of a derelict barn, while three or four youngsters coiled in the bare dirt paths nearby, looking exactly like cow patties. We stopped to acknowledge an ancient, stub-tailed, rattleless female encountered here a half-dozen times before. Even in the wild, some rattlers live more than a dozen years. Big rattlers draw gasps even from experienced hands, but they're mostly expressions of awe, filled with the same admiration one feels for a lounging Bengal tiger. The reason they are not also gasps of fear is that, like their small, nonvenomous relatives, moccasins and rattlers hold still when turned up beneath shelter and, folklore to the contrary, almost never strike under these circumstances unless molested. After a minute to savor the subtleties of the diamondbacks' varied dorsal patterns, we left the rattlers undisturbed, at least in part because we knew where they all were. Until the warmth of midday, they'd likely stay there and out from underfoot.

GOOD AS THIS EXCURSION sounds, the real *sine qua non* of connoisseur herpin' is cruising over pavement at night, which is the only way to see the best herps, since the most colorful milk and king snakes are nocturnal. They spend almost their entire lives hidden in the inaccessible warren of cool limestone crevices that lies beneath much of the southwestern desert, venturing forth only during six weeks in May and June, in a nightly search for mates. Gray-banded kings are slashed by a dozen or more subtly varied, black-edged, vermilion brocade cummerbunds. No two individuals share exactly the same marking. The bright colors actually function as camouflage: in the short wavelength of moonlight, the kings' red bands appear gray, and their dark cross-stitchings make it almost impossible to tell where the snake stops and the cracks lacing the desert floor begin. The milk snake is another fossorial, barber-pole animal. Its red and yellow bands never touch (unlike those of the coral snake). In the Southwest it shares the gray-banded king's honeycombed limestone substrate; and in the southern pine forest and Appalachian highlands, the porous interior of crumbly logs and stumps offers shelter to eastern subspecies.

Pavement cruising requires only a reliable, back-road automobile, a good lantern or six-cell flashlight, and—the most important piece of gear—a beer cooler. Even on the best roads east of Texas' Big Bend, there are typically long waits be-

tween snakes, and idling for hours along narrow country blacktops at twenty miles an hour puts a premium on conviviality, alcoholic beverages, and lengthy tall tales. That is why veteran herpers tend to travel in groups characterized by both remarkably genial manners and expansive waistlines.

The search for these rarities also requires a substantial measure of caution. Though even dangerous serpents often give one the benefit of the doubt and opt to bite without injecting venom, it still pays to be careful about what you pick up, especially at night. Spying an animate red, black, and yellow form in the middle of an obscure Harkel Canyon ranch track, veteran herper Joe Smith scooped it up at a dead run just as the snake dived into the roadside shadows. As expected, it swiveled around and bit him on his index finger—par for the course among committed enthusiasts. But, as he drew back into the light, Smith saw in horror that, instead of a similar gray-banded king snake or Big Bend milk snake, it was an errant coral, one hundred miles west of its normal range.

He immediately went into a stupor, which lasted only a brief time. But he experienced tremors, difficulty in swallowing and breathing, tingling in his scalp and fingertips, and nausea during the seventy-mile ride to the nearest hospital, in Langtry. However, his vital signs remained strong. Had his condition become critical, precious time would have been lost in transporting him to a San Antonio hospital that had the proper antivenin. But soon his condition began to improve, and after several cups of coffee he decided sheepishly that maybe he was okay after all and might, in fact, be up for a little more cruising before dawn . . . and he could claim one of the few sightings of *Micrurus fulvius* in that area of the state.

Despite its occasional hazard, herpin' is a fundamentally gentlemanly endeavor. Easy on both man and serpent, it has no more in common with the carnage of rattlesnake roundups (where hundreds of diamondback and prairie rattlers, burrowing owls, kangaroo rats, endangered kit foxes, and Texas tortoises are flushed from their dens with asphyxiating gasoline fumes) than birding trips have with the turn-of-the-century plume hunts that slaughtered wagonloads of snowy egrets for the millinery trade. No one is more keenly aware of these antipodes of human/ophidian interaction than the serious weekend herpetologist, to whom snakes are plainly wonderful. ▲