LANCASTER HERPETOLOGICAL SOCIETY

HUSBANDRY, EDUCATION, CONSERVATION, COMMUNITY

HOW TO TAKE ACTION AGAINST POACHING

by Jesse Rothacker

Have you ever noticed suspicious activity while hiking, surfing the internet, or talking with colleagues? This article will arm you with the knowledge you need to make smart choices and take action.

Ask any herper where to go to find reptiles and amphibians, and they won’t tell you. Like most nature-lovers, herpers keep their best spots a secret, and for good reason. Some people leave behind trash or destroy cover by flipping the best rocks and logs and debris piles and not putting them back.

Nothing is more frustrating than finding a favorite area in ruin. It’s like coming home and finding the house ransacked. Sometimes it’s just a matter of education. Ignorant hikers and herpers may not realize the impact of their actions. In other cases, bears are the culprits destroying cover piles while foraging.

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Corny Reptile Joke...

How can you revive a snake that looks dead?

With mouse-to-mouth resuscitation! Happy Summer Herping!

Calendar

July 19, 2013
Do-it-Yourself Herp Enclosures
Learn how board member Zach Barton constructed many of his own snake and turtle enclosures.

August 16, 2013
CSC’s Snake Count
Andy Adams, affiliate professor of biology at Loyola University of Maryland, will explain the Center for Snake Conservation’s annual citizen science snake count.

Sept 20, 2013
Marbled Salamanders
Dr. Meshaka, Senior Curator of Zoology and Botany at the State Museum of PA, will share his marbled salamander research.

October 18, 2013
Rattlesnakes
DCNR Wildlife Biologist Aura Stauffer will share her rattlesnake research.

All meetings are held at 7pm at the Manheim Township Public Library at 595 Granite Run Drive, Lancaster, PA 17601. Meetings are free and open to the public. Children under 16 must be accompanied by an adult.

Reptile Shows:

Havre De Grace/ All MD
Aug 10, Sept 7, Oct 5

East Coast Reptile Super Expo
July 27

Northwestern Berks Aug 3, Oct 19

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SPRING PROGRAMMING SUCCESS: LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Summer is finally here and the herps are hopping, or slithering, everywhere. In April, they were hopping at MTPL when we hosted a “Critter Encounter” night. In addition to special guest Roger Kilhefner’s presentation on “Herping in India”, we had many herps in attendance. A sizable crowd turned out to meet and greet our reptile friends.

Our May meeting gave us an opportunity to learn about the Pennsylvania Amphibian and Reptile Survey (PARS) from Brandon Ruhe and Jason Poston. This important program will compile herp sighting data over the next ten years to determine population size and location throughout the state. Please participate in this program. Links are on our website.

Kid’s Night in June saw the largest crowd ever hosted by LHS. Over 200 adults and children were at MTPL for this special event! Everyone had fun and hopefully learned a few new things. The board, member volunteers and our friends at MTPL worked hard to make this event a success. And a success it was!

LHS also participated in several other events this spring. We hosted the “Picture with a Snake” booth at That Fish Place in April and May. We had a booth at the Habitat MT Native Plant Sale. In June, we gave a presentation to a group of seniors at a retirement community. That was a fantastic audience. Also in June, I spoke to a group of young people at a local summer camp.

Check our website for more information on future events and volunteer opportunities.

Additionally, I would like your feedback and suggestions on what we are doing right and where we could meet our mission more effectively. Feel free to email me at jeff@lancasterherp.org.

Jeff Chiyka
LHS President

TAKE ACTION AGAINST POACHING CONTINUED...

But every once in a while, an eerie feeling creeps in. There’s a sixth sense that herpers get, an alarm bell that tells them something’s not right. Their instinct says they should be finding more reptiles at a certain spot. But the herps are gone. It’s like they vanished into thin air. When that happens, along with telltale signs of human habitat destruction, herpers fear the worst: Poachers.

Unfortunately, poaching is more common with reptiles and amphibians than with some other kinds of wildlife. Dragging an illegal deer out of the woods is pretty conspicuous. Grabbing a bird out of the air is nearly impossible. But you don’t have to be quick-witted or cunning to collect a turtle in a backpack. Amphibian migrations put hundreds of slow-moving animals within an arm’s reach of the unscrupulous. Without vocal cords, most reptiles and salamanders are silent victims. And while local pet stores don’t sell wild birds or mammals, the pet trade is full of people who will illegally trade wild herps. Consequently, cold-blooded critters face a serious threat from a growing number of predators. But like a massasauga rattlesnake, poachers are an elusive creature, and are rarely encountered in the field. Until recently, I don’t think I had ever seen one. But when I did, it made me realize that there are a few things herpers can do to be prepared. With a minimal amount of planning and coordination, we can all be a part of a Neighborhood Herp Watch and protect our natural resources.

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TAKE ACTION AGAINST POACHING CONTINUED...

**First Poacher Encounter**

Recently a friend and I were hiking in a favorite herp area. It’s a spot that is practically guaranteed to produce a few snakes and turtles on every trip, if not ten or twenty, and too many amphibians to keep track of. After hiking a good distance to reach the best habitat, we saw two guys walking toward us. One wore baggy shorts, sported a long goatee, and a cigarette hung from his lips. Not your typical hiker. His companion carried a net in one hand, and a pillowcase – obviously full – in the other.

I sized up the lumps in the pillowcase, which looked like box turtles and wood turtles. I desperately wanted to confront them. I wanted to ask what was in the sack. But we were a mile from the nearest back road and cell phone signals were either weak or nonexistent. When you’re in the boonies, you’re responsible for your own safety. It didn’t help that my friend and I were dressed in gym shorts and t-shirts. We had no idea what the other guy was carrying under his baggy clothes, but anyone could see that we were visibly unarmed.

I thought two or three steps ahead and imagined how things could go downhill if we got more involved. As much as I wanted to intercede, my instinct told me to tread lightly. We were in no position to make demands or enforce the law.

I mustered up a friendly greeting. “Hey guys. See much today?”

“Just a few turtles,” the guy in the baggy shorts responded. I feared that the turtles were already in the sack, but I didn’t ask. And they didn’t stick around for conversation. None of us stated the obvious aloud: hikers shouldn’t be carrying bags of wildlife.

My friend and I kept walking and debriefed almost immediately. Our options were few. Direct confrontation didn’t seem prudent under the circumstances. If we could find a cell signal, whom could we call? I had a couple numbers in my phone for conservation officers from different regions. I found a spot with a weak signal, two bars out of five, and made some calls. Unfortunately it was too little, too late. I wasn’t able to get a hold of the right authorities fast enough.

We’ll never know what was in the bag because they got away. I would like to believe that the pillowcase was full of chips and sandwiches, and they were looking for a picnic table. But my instinct tells me otherwise. We have long suspected that poaching was occurring in that exact area. But that was the first time any of us ran into the poachers. The situation left me feeling helpless and guilty, like I should have done more.

**Lesson learned**

Ultimately I knew I made wise decisions that day. But there was no denying that I was unprepared for that encounter. It was a teachable moment. I wanted to learn from it and help other herpers be prepared as well, so we can protect our natural resources. I interviewed several herpetology colleagues, and a number of law enforcement personnel. Here are three tips that may help you in the field.

1. **Know whom to call**

   Don’t wait until you’re in a sketchy situation to program your phone. Contact your wildlife authorities now and ask them what numbers to keep in your phone. They can’t fight poaching without tips, so they will give you the best information they have.

   Don’t limit yourself to one agency. In Pennsylvania, the Fish and Boat Commission regulates herps, but it’s a small agency. They do not have 24-7 support. However, the Pennsylvania Game Commission, which officially regulates birds and mammals, is big enough to offer a 24-7 response line for all wildlife crimes. Some locations, like state
parks, have ranger patrols. Get their numbers in your phone now, before you need them.

Don't worry too much about whom to call, if you're not sure. If you witness a major violation and don't know whose jurisdiction you're in, call 911. Most local police are available 24-7 to enforce the law. The locals can probably show up the fastest and detain suspects. The various wildlife agencies can sort out the prosecution later. If nothing else, 911 is worth a try.

2. Take photos

In 2011, Herper Stan Kotala was out hiking when some ATV riders called him over to brag about shooting a rattlesnake. The proud killers showed off the protected reptile they had just destroyed. Stan made the most of this invitation and took pictures of the snake, the killers, and their ATV license plates. He told them it was illegal to kill a rattlesnake, but didn't engage them in an argument beyond that. He later submitted photos to law enforcement, and the violators were prosecuted.

In some cases, using your camera is one of the easiest and safest ways to gather useful evidence for law enforcement. A photo of the suspect is worth a lot more than a description, and license plates can track down a suspect long after they leave the woods.

3. Stay safe

Even taking photos can be risky. Officer Lisa Kurtz is a veteran cop with a local police department, and is also an avid herper and birder. She recognizes that law enforcement may not be able to respond to situations deep in the woods. If you can't call for help, she recommends collecting information for law enforcement with your camera and giving it to them later. However, she points out that doing so may be “hard to do without jeopardizing your own safety.” In Stan's case, he was invited to take photos. In my case, it may have escalated the situation. Officer Kurtz and other law enforcement advise hikers to make their own personal safety the priority.

PFBC Waterways Conservation Officer Brendan Ryan agrees. His advice: "You have a lot to lose if things go bad, which can happen pretty fast and be really bad. Our world is full of rotten people. Some of my best cases have come from concerned citizens reporting in when they see something sketchy. I would never advise anyone to get more info than they feel safe and comfortable with gathering. Pictures with cell phones are usually pretty easy to get, especially of vehicles with license plates. Descriptions of persons, exact areas they are in, and which direction they are working in, are a big help. Don't do anything outside your comfort zone. Realize that these guys often work in pairs or groups and sometimes have a lookout in the area."

Bob Ferguson, President of the North American Field Herping Association, expressed his own regrets about encounters with wildlife violators. Bob recalls, “I've run into people going through vernal pools in the middle of the night in their trucks. I had my children with me, so it was a no-brainer not to approach them. Kids are more important than tadpoles. But still, it killed me not to know if there was a better approach.”

A better approach

Law enforcement can't be everywhere, so we need to adopt the mentality of a Neighborhood Herp Watch. We can help preserve our natural resources with a small amount of preparation and vigilance from within our community. Law enforcement relies on our calls and photos to fight poaching, although they want us to stay safe in the field. Make sure your camera is ready, your cell phone is programmed, and don't be afraid to dial 911 for a turtle, snake, or salamander. Hopefully you'll never encounter a poacher in the field. But if you do, at least you'll be ready.

Program your phone!
Southeast Region Fish & Boat Commission: 717-626-0228
Southeast Region Game Commission: 610-926-3136

Forgotten Friend Reptile Sanctuary
Lancaster Herpetological Society board member, Jesse Rothacker, is the founder and president of Forgotten Friend Reptile Sanctuary.

Forgotten Friend Reptile Sanctuary is a reptile rescue in the middle of Amish country, Pennsylvania. Registered as Forgotten Friend, Inc., we are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization focused on educational outreach and rescuing reptiles.

View animals for adoption at Forgottenfriend.org/adopt
QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE STARTING A D.I.Y. HERP ENCLOSURE
by Zach Barton

Am I building an enclosure for a snake, lizard, or turtle?

Different kinds of herps have differing space needs. Also some herps are more prone to escapes.

What kind of moisture requirements does my herp have?

Though wood can be effectively waterproofed, excessively humid herps (like amphibians) might be better kept in aquariums.

What kind of heating and lighting requirements does my herp have? How do I want to supply the heat and light?

Undertank heaters need airspace to prevent overheating. Heavy-bodied herps can break non-caged heat bulbs, and smaller herps can receive burns from poorly placed heat bulbs. Also, holes in enclosure for wiring can become escape points. Improperly secured wires can become perches, often leading to bad connections.

What kind of doors do I want?

Hinged doors require more engineering than sliding doors, but both can be made secure. Turtle enclosures can be made open top without needing any doors.

What tools will I need? Do I need to buy them or can I borrow them?

Often you can beg, borrow, or “steal” most tools from relatives or friends.

Where am I going to place the finished enclosure? Am I building for a particular space or am I attempting to maximize purchased lumber?

Building an enclosure for a particular space will usually entail wasting some lumber. Depending on where you want to place the enclosure might determine what kind of finish you give it. A more formal setting (like a living room) might require a more furniture-like or a more faux-nature or faux-rock finish. An enclosure meant to be a centerpiece of a room will require better quality wood, paint/stains, and overall craftsmanship.

Will I need an extra pair of hands?

Depending on final size, the finished enclosure can often be heavy and/or bulky, making it difficult to maneuver through doorways and stairwells without help. Also, when making initial cuts on sheets of lumber, it is sometimes helpful to have an extra set of hands.

HERPS IN THE HEADLINES...
Study of salamanders in ponds demonstrates ‘invisible finger of evolution’ - Phys.org, May 2013
This Snake Has a Tail That Looks Like a Spider - National Geographic, July 2013
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BECOME A MEMBER OF LANCASTER HERPETOLOGICAL SOCIETY

We are a group of reptile and amphibian enthusiasts. We meet the third Friday of every month at 7pm at the Manheim Township Public Library. We host guest speakers on a variety of topics, facilitate critter encounters, lead field herping adventures, and attend community events. Our club is open to all folks curious about cold-blooded creatures! We hope you can join us!

Membership Form

Name: ________________________________________
Address: ______________________________________
City: ___________________________ State: _____ Zip: ______
E-mail: ______________________________________

Please check membership type:

☐ Individual - $20
☐ Business - $50

See your logo on our website and newsletter

New members welcome anytime.

Please return this form with payment (cash or check) to an LHS board member.

All ages are welcome. Children under 16 must be accompanied by an adult.