

Running Among Reptiles

My third and final blog about the 2009 National Reptile Breeders' Expo in Daytona.

August 31, 2009

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Crowds are always a part of the National Reptile Breeders' Expo in Daytona.

The auction gets quite a crowd as well.

Howie Sherman shows off a very nice black-headed python. "Running Among Reptiles"... that sounds like a Native American name. But the title of this blog refers to how I feel when I'm attending the Daytona reptile expo. True, I may not actually be running among the reptiles (though I did get some actual running in during this trip, as you know if you read my August 26 blog), but to say the pace at the expo is fast for me is a bit of an understatement.

There were some changes to the expo venue this year. The Ocean Center in Daytona Beach, where the expo has been held for the past several years, has been given a facelift. It's got a much more polished, professional feel and look to it now. In the past the vendor booths were mostly on the main ground floor, but there were a bunch of other booths up on a second floor. This year, all the vendor booths were together on one main floor. I thought this was great for the most part. The only thing I missed was going up to the second floor to take "aerial" photos of the main floor. Photos taken from up there and looking down really enabled one to convey the size of the expo floor and the hustle and bustle. Now there is no second floor, so it's no longer possible to take such photos. I considered at one point grabbing the big blue globe balloon that's always floating above the Jon's Jungle booth, untying it from its tethers and floating up to the ceiling in order to take pictures, but I didn't want to cause a ruckus.

Down on the showroom floor things were busy as ever. This is the only time of year I get to say hi to a lot of reptile people, including some with whom I may do business over the course of a year. It's always helpful when they're all gathered in one place and it's fun to go from booth to booth, checking out the latest crop of herps and chatting with people.

As mentioned in my previous couple blogs, Ben Weiner, the ReptileChannel web editor, was with me this year, and we had an objective: We wanted to enlist as many people as possible for ReptileChannel's "Herper Headshotz." In case you haven't seen it yet, "Herper Headshotz" is a section on the site where we feature a photo of someone within the reptile industry – it might be a reptile breeder, a manufacturer, author, artist ... it could be anyone – and include some multiple choice questions for ReptileChannel visitors to choose from in trying to identify the person. Website visitors who participate get Club Reptile reward points.

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Dav Kaufman was this year's auctioneer.

My kinda guitar.

Ostrich eggs painted with herp themes.

This photo of a male glass frog guarding an egg mass with tadpoles visible inside the eggs was especially fantastic.

Photo courtesy Brian Kubicki.

Tom Crutchfield awaits a dunking at the dunk tank.

The Three Russes: Russ Gurley, Russ Pearl (holding the artwork for this year's T-shirt, which he created) and Russ Case. One of Scott Corning's beautiful sailfin dragons. Ben and I spent a good deal of time finding willing victims, taking their photos, having them fill out questionnaires and generally pestering them. As a result -- and thanks to everybody who participated -- we've got a great crop of new Herper Headshotz that you will be able to view over the coming months. It's a fun new section of the site and if you haven't checked it out yet, you should. It's a good way to get to recognize some of the prominent (and maybe not so prominent ... yet) people in the business.

The animal assortment at the National Reptile Breeders' Expo is always mesmerizing. Scott Corning's sailfin dragons consistently draw a big crowd. Ron Tremper is always there with his latest and greatest leopard geckos; he's got so many cool morphs I can't remember now which one I thought was my favorite. The Chondro Coalition had a great assortment of green tree pythons, as usual. Tom Crutchfield's albino green iguanas are ultra-cool. And there are turtles, tortoises, frogs – everything, really. There are so many herps there you would be hard pressed to not find something you're after if you're in the market for some new animals.

Also new this year was a charity dunk tank, courtesy of Kingsnake.com. An assortment of dunkees took their place on the platform, willing to face a barrage of balls hurled toward the target that would drop them into the water below. Some of the good sports who went into the drink included Tom Crutchfield, Desiree Wong, Jeff Barringer, Kim Bell and Mr. Daytona Reptile Expo himself, Wayne Hill. Hmm...now that I think of it, I was in a meeting when Wayne was scheduled, so I don't know whether or not he went into the water. Does anybody else know? Please leave a comment below if so.

The charity auction once again was held on the Saturday night of the show, immediately following the pre-auction reception that REPTILES magazine hosts every year (free cheese!). An auction is held every year to raise money for a herp conservation cause. This year the money was going to the Costa Rican Amphibian Research Center. Brian Kubicki, the center's director, was on hand. Brian once wrote a glass frog article for REPTILES, a photo from which has adorned my office window for many years (and you can read his article right here on ReptileChannel). He's a great photographer, and many of Brian's photos were on view at the CRARC booth, along with information about the research center. One photo of a male glass frog guarding an egg mass with tadpoles visible inside the eggs was especially fantastic.

Actually, there are two auctions held concurrently each year. There's a silent auction, which is the type that features tables covered with items, each item with its own bid sheet. People file past the tables and if they see something they want to bid on, they write their bids on the sheet. The highest bid at the end of the night wins the item. Then there is the live auction, which is the traditional auction with things being held up, announced by an auctioneer and bid upon by people in the audience.

Just before the auction was to get underway I was approached about being this year's auctioneer, as a last-minute replacement for Robyn Markland from Pro Exotics. Robyn had lost his voice over the course of the day, probably from touting his and Chad Brown's AllProShipping service. Because I generally prefer to weasel out of anything that involves public speaking (I don't mind public writing, but do tend to dread public speaking) I had the good fortune to spot Dav Kaufman walking by at that precise moment. Yes, that's how he spells his name – Dav – but with the long vowel mark over the "a"; these creative types, what are you going to do? Dav made the documentary Herpers. Have you seen this documentary yet? I was briefly featured gabbing in a park that featured more duck excrement on the ground than I would have ever thought possible. I was there primarily to present statistics regarding the number of people who own reptiles, the kind they own, etc. Henry Lizardlover and his poseable lizards were probably far more interesting.

Because Dav is a large, outgoing guy who can talk loudly, I thought he would make a great auctioneer. And when he was asked he said he'd do it if I promised to publish a bull snake article he wanted to write. Mustering up every ounce of my deeply ingrained journalistic integrity, I told him I'd be happy to review the article. Then I scrambled away before he could change his mind.

Truth be told, I thought Dav did a good job as auctioneer. Like every year, a grab-bag of reptile goodies was donated by many of the vendors to be auctioned off. There were live animals, paintings, reptile products, clothing, books, and even a guitar with a frog painted on it. I was interested in some wood carvings from New Guinea that were up for bid in the silent auction, but I shamefully admit I got sidetracked and never got around to making a bid.

For the first year ReptileChannel made a donation to the live auction, courtesy of our Director of Internet Marketing, Michelle Williams. This was the first year Michelle attended the show, and I am happy to announce she has decided that she likes reptile people. Our donation was \$3,000 worth of advertising on ReptileChannel. The winner? Penn-Plax, for, I think, a winning bid of \$700 (thanks, Paul).

In the end, the auction netted \$23,000 for the Costa Rican Amphibian Research Center. That should help set up a lot of breeding ponds. Oddly, the last I saw of Brian Kubicki he was clutching a suitcase from which dollar bills could be seen emerging, and jumping into an idling cigarette powerboat that sped off into the night from the end of the Daytona pier. I would have questioned him about this behavior but I was still reeling from the consumption of some Long Island iced teas (of course, I make these last two statements in jest, though a kernel of truth may be present in the latter).

So there you have it, another National Reptile Breeders' Expo come and gone. If you weren't able to make it this year, there's always next year. And of course many other worthwhile shows between now and then, the next one being the North American Reptile Breeder's Conference in Anaheim, Calif.

This blog will be my last for a couple weeks, as I'm heading to Alaska on vacation (people paying attention may remember this being brought up way back when, in my March 27 blog). While I'm gone I leave "Random Neural Firings" in the capable hands of REPTILES Managing Editor Stephanie Starr and Associate Editor Eric Syverson, who will be RNF's

guest bloggers while I'm away. Enjoy their blogs, and mine should resume starting with the September 18 blog, unless I experience fatal interaction with grizzlies, icebergs, puffins, etc. Adios!

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