

Always Know What Your Snake's Head is Doing

By Russ Case

January 30, 2009

Eastern ribbon snakes, similar to this one, were a common find in the northern New Jersey woods. In my last blog, responding to queries, I talked about some of my past lizard pets. This time I thought I'd relate the story of my first snake pet.

I mentioned last time that the primary wild snakes I encountered as a kid were garter snakes, but the snake I remember finding most often was actually another member of the *Thamnophis* genus, the eastern ribbon snake (*T. s. sauritus*). I would find ribbon snakes near creeks and among the skunk cabbage, poison ivy and other "friendlier" plants in the northern New Jersey woods. I remember how exciting it was to find one; there would be much yelling back and forth between my friends and myself, followed by a cautious grab at the snake. I don't remember getting bitten, but I probably did.

My inclination was usually to capture any herp I came across and bring it home. But here I usually ran into the standard Mom Block when it came to snakes. My mom was pretty tolerant when it came to anoles, turtles and frogs, but she was not a fan of snakes and did not want one in the house. As such, I don't have reliable memories of keeping any of the ribbon snakes I caught. My earliest memory of a "pet" snake takes place when I was about 10 years old and living in California.

When my family moved west we settled in Westlake Village, located in Ventura County and about 45 minutes north of Los Angeles. There was an actual lake named Westlake, and my friend and I took to herping in the surrounding scrubby hills and beyond the dam that formed the lake. Back behind the dam and along a creek there were many rocks to overturn, and woods full of oak trees extended back into some fairly rugged terrain. I remember one friend and I scared the heck out of ourselves when we heard a grunting noise and convinced ourselves that we saw Bigfoot when we saw what looked like a dark, towering figure among the thick vegetation. To this day I don't know what caused the sound we heard, but I imagine the "Bigfoot" we saw was just some vegetation – a tall bush, perhaps -- and shadows moving in the breeze. But the two things combined – sound and motion – sure sent us flying out of there.

But I digress. It was in this habitat that I encountered my first western herps, mostly western fence lizards ("bluebellies") and southern alligator lizards. I learned that the former had pretty blue scales on their bellies and the latter wouldn't hesitate to latch onto your fingers if you tried to pick one up. One friend and I had a novel way of turning rocks. I would berate him until he got mad, and his resulting adrenaline rush would be used to overturn rocks that would be too heavy to turn over otherwise. Yeah, we were weird.

Gopher snakes are found in arid and semiarid areas. Apparently, they are also found in couches. Anyway, it was also here that I encountered gopher snakes for the first time, and it was one of these that I brought home and begged my mom to let me keep. She said I could keep it in the backyard, so I constructed a crude wooden cage with a screen top in which to keep the snake. I was under a strict rule to never bring it into the house -- a rule I broke almost immediately.

One Saturday morning, while the rest of my family was still sleeping, I decided it would be fun to sneak the snake into the family room so I could hold it while watching cartoons. It was fun, too, for awhile. But as I sat on the couch, my eyeballs glued to the TV, I eventually became dimly aware that the snake's body had tensed up. It felt like someone was pulling on it. I shifted my position to see what was happening, maintaining my grip on what amounted to the rear third of the snake's body (I don't remember how long this snake was, but I'm guessing it was a bit more than 2 feet in length).

I was horrified to see that the snake had pushed its head into a gap between the seat cushions, which led down into the interior of the couch. I pulled on its body but was afraid to pull too hard and risk hurting the snake. It must have been coiled around the springs inside the couch because I couldn't get an inch to give. A slight tug of war ensued, but rather than tear the snake in half I let go and the rest of its body slithered out of sight, down into the couch.

I scabbled after it and poked around the couch from top to bottom, but to no avail. There was no sign of the snake. It appeared to have decided to take up residence inside the couch. Various disciplinary measures I might be made to suffer

danced through my head, and I briefly considered not telling anyone that there was a gopher snake living in our family room couch. But I figured the punishment would be 10 times worse if I didn't say anything, only to have the snake emerge some evening to crawl across my mom or dad's lap as we sat there watching Bewitched.

So when my parents awoke that morning I fessed up to my crime. Let it be said that their reaction could have been much worse. The fact is, I don't remember any punishment, other than being made to sit for I don't remember how long (15 minutes? Hours?) watching the bottom of the couch, which had been upended. My parents were reluctant to cut the bottom material away from the frame, so I sat there for however long I was ordered to, in the hope that I would see the snake emerge from the inside. But I never saw that snake again.

We had that couch for years, and although I was sure the snake snuck out on its own (for one thing, we never smelled a decomposing body), I sometimes wondered if there was a gopher snake skeleton tangled among its inner springs. Actually, I still do, wherever that couch may be.

[Back to Blogs>>](#)