

“Ready for Reptiles” a Hit!

By Russ Case

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On April 17 to 19, ReptileChannel and REPTILES magazine editors conducted a reptile presentation at the America's Family Pet Expo at the Orange County Fairgrounds in Costa Mesa, Calif. “Ready for Reptiles?” was conducted by two of my valued staff: ReptileChannel Associate Web Editor Ben Weiner on Friday and Saturday, and REPTILES magazine Associate Editor Eric Syverson on Sunday. I was on hand primarily to show off animals and to talk with expo attendees about – what else? – reptiles.

The 30-minute event focused on educating people about how to get started in the reptilekeeping hobby the right way. Included was the common-sense advice of doing all the proper research before buying a pet reptile, knowing how big it'll get, etc. A highlight of the presentation was, of course, the live herps we were able to show off, thanks to some on loan from Prehistoric Pets (and special thanks to Prehistoric Pets' Tim O'Reilly and Kelly Vo, who loaded us up with the animals each day). To anyone who is able to visit this well-known and highly regarded, 10,000-square-foot reptile store in Fountain Valley, Calif., I very much recommend you stop by. Not only are there tons of great herps on display and for sale (inverts, too), owner Jay Vella is a renowned reticulated python breeder. They breed a variety of other herps at Prehistoric Pets, as well, but Jay's famous for his retics.

Our presentation was at 11 a.m. each of the three days, and the first thing we would do upon arrival at the fairgrounds each morning was head over to the Prehistoric Pets booth to retrieve the animals. They were located in a different building than where our talk was being held, so there'd be a procession back and forth carrying Tupperware containers full of animals, as well as a large tub on wheels that contained an 85-pound, 10-foot albino Burmese python. We also borrowed a large adult male green iguana that was content to ride on someone's shoulders. In addition to the large burm and the iguana, we wanted to show off smaller, better-for-beginner animals, including a bearded dragon, California kingsnake, red-footed tortoise, ball python and others.

The big animals were to get the Wow! factor, of course, but we also wanted to show them off to illustrate how important it is to know what you're getting into when you're buying babies of the same species. For the same reason we also planned to borrow a large sulcata tortoise and a hatchling. But when we were picking up the animals the thought of carrying a heavy sulcata through the fairgrounds in the hot weather resulted in us leaving the big tortoise behind.

Once we had the animals back to the stage where the talk was to be held, I would pull the big burm out of the tub, drape her over my shoulders and walk around to generate interest and attract a crowd for our presentation. She was a beautiful, mellow female that was very tolerant. Another helper would walk around with the green iguana that was also mellow, but that, as iguanas will, kept trying to climb up onto the top of the head of whoever was holding it. At one point I was holding him and he managed to knock my glasses off trying to get onto my head. You know how long and spindly those iguana toes can be, and I had to keep telling people to be wary of the claws as the iguana would attempt to climb up.

When it was time for the presentation those of us holding the big animals would stand on either side of the stage while Ben or Eric addressed the crowd. During the talk the speaker would also bring forth the other animals to show the audience. For the most part the animals were all well-behaved, though Ben did get a quick tag from a baby Burmese and Eric got latched onto by the Cal king. Neither bite hurt, and both carried on with their talks like troopers.

“The ‘Ready for Reptiles?’ presentation was a lot of fun,” Ben said. “I enjoyed it and the kids and audience seemed to really enjoy it too. My favorite thing was seeing the reaction from the crowd to the reptiles. People seem to get a big smile when they see reptiles and quickly come over to check them out. You see the same look in the 3-year-old child's eyes that you see in the eyes of a 50-year-old man: interest, fascination and wonder.”

According to Eric, “The herps stole the show. They're what kept people in the seats or what stopped others who were passing by. People laughed when a very active corn snake seemed interested in becoming my belt. By its sheer size a plump pixie frog dropped jaws, and a cute baby sulcata tortoise, which fit in the palm of my hand, elicited a collective ooh. Many heads nodded when I said the adult tortoises grow large enough to practically be a stool. Kids had no fear; they wanted to touch everything. For me it was a learning experience. Absolutely I'd do it again.”

After the talk we would meet and greet while people oohed and aahed over the big herps. It's always a lot fun watching the

reactions of people to large reptiles. Some would walk right up to us; others would shyly approach or keep their distance. A few were momentarily startled as they walked by, but they would always come back for a closer look. A lot of parents wanted photos of their kids standing next to me with the Burmese. As is often the case, people would be surprised at the feel of the snake; there are still many who think snakes are slippery and slimy.

The questions I was asked most repeatedly about the python were, "How much does it weigh?" and "Does it bite?" My standard response to the biting question is to point out that while an animal may not be predisposed to biting, you should always treat any animal with care and respect, and even a normally docile animal might bite should something startle it or, sometimes, if it doesn't feel well. I tried to be careful to keep the snake's head away from people's hands, and if they wanted to pet the snake I would direct them to a lower coil and instruct to always pet gently and in the direction of the scales.

A lot of photos were taken, a lot of laughs were had, and I think people learned something. It was a great experience for us editors, too, and a good time was had by all. It was definitely worth my moderately stiff neck and shoulders from having been adorned with 85 pounds of python for several hours. The current plan is to edit and post a video of the "Ready for Reptiles?" presentation on ReptileChannel, so check the video section of the website periodically if you'd like to see it.

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