

Salamanders Deserve Respect

By Russ Case

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Tiger salamander photo by Bill Love.
Spotted salamander. As threatened at the end of my last blog, which was about newts, today's blog will touch on their slimier cousins, the salamanders.

I've always liked salamanders, due in part to my exposure to them as a little kid. Once again I'll reminisce about the fun I had looking for reptiles and amphibians in the woods of northern New Jersey. There was a brook in the woods across the street from my house and it provided some prime salamander habitat. Overturning rocks and rotted wooden logs among the skunk cabbage, poison ivy and other vegetation sometimes would yield a salamander, and that always made a day herping in those woods a great one.

I don't remember now precisely what kind of salamanders I found back then. Perusing the Peterson guide several choices become apparent. Reddish coloration rings a vague bell, so maybe I came across the red-backed salamander (*Plethodon cinereus*), as its range does encompass New Jersey. So does the range of a variety of other species, so who knows.

Once I began keeping reptiles and amphibians in earnest, my pet salamanders of choice were *Ambystoma* species, predominantly tiger salamanders (*A. tigrinum*) and spotted salamanders (*A. maculatum*). Some people may not consider salamanders as animals that would display much personality, but mine always learned to recognize me and would emerge from their hiding places when they saw me approach their enclosures. I always kept them in a woodland setup, with soil substrate, moss, bark, etc. Usually the salamanders would be secreted under a bark slab, but if you looked closely you could see them peering out. And sure enough, when I would come up to the vivarium they would emerge because that sometimes meant it was time to be fed. Their food of choice was earthworms.

The robust salamanders of the *Ambystoma* genus also tolerated handling better than more fragile, slender salamanders. This was one reason why I liked them so much, in addition to the fact that they just looked really cool. Don't take this as an endorsement to handle salamanders frequently, though. Compared to reptile skin, amphibian skin is fragile and more susceptible to injury. Amphibians are best kept as display animals and not handled.

In my newt blog I mentioned a vivarium I once set up that contained a small waterfall, and a water area that turned into a death trap for a couple of emperor newts. The base enclosure I used was a 60-gallon aquarium. I remember when I first set it up, and how great it looked. There were a variety of live plants in it, rocks, branches, the waterfall – it really looked like a little slice of nature. Upon initial setup, it looked pristine.

Then I added some animals: a baby water dragon, two emperor newts and a fat tiger salamander. I think there may have been a treefrog or two, as well (yes, I had no aversion to mixing species). As I sat admiring the setup, I watched happily as the salamander emerged. My happiness gave way to horror, however, when the salamander began doing what many reptiles and amphibians do to pass the time: clawing at the glass, trying to escape the enclosure. As I used soil and orchid bark as a substrate, and the salamander was prone to be moist, this resulted in a muddy salamander clawing at the glass, streaking mud and muck all over the front wall of the enclosure. Let this be a lesson to anyone who plans to use soil in setting up a vivarium – some of that soil may end up dirtying the glass and obstructing your view.

When I first moved to California I had a friend who would travel with his family to the Colorado River. One time, upon his return from one of these trips, he brought me home a waterdog (depending on where in the country you are, you might call it a mudpuppy). Here was a salamander unlike any I had seen up to this point. Waterdogs were sold as bait at the river, he said, which I found horrifying to contemplate. To me it looked like an alien, due of course to the external gills that were prominently featured. That was the only waterdog I ever kept.

Some other popular pet salamander species are the fire salamander, which is particularly attractive due to its bright yellow-on-black markings, and the marbled salamander. The fire salamander is not indigenous to the United States, but the other species mentioned here are. Many, many species of salamanders, from many different genera, can be found in the U.S., so if you go herping in the right places it is possible to find some. Just be sure that if you plan to catch some to

take home, that you can do so legally. You may need a permit or license to legally remove them from the wild, and if you happen to be in a national park – such as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which is home to many salamander species – it is illegal to take them, period.

Salamanders generally eat insects, including worms of various types. Some of the larger species will also eat pinky mice. Be sure you keep their enclosures clean, as their skin can absorb toxins. If you leave something to mold and rot in a salamander enclosure, this can adversely affect the inhabitants. If you include a water area, be sure the salamanders can easily exit the water (the hard lesson I learned with my emperor newts). As with most reptiles and amphibians, provide hiding places for security purposes. Salamanders are quite secretive. This doesn't mean you will never see them, though. Like I said, mine would often emerge to hunt for food.

Consider keeping some salamanders as you pursue your herpkeeping hobby. I think you'll be happy you did. And if you can put up with muddy vivarium glass, so much the better.

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