

In Over My Head

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Spectacled Caiman. I've constantly harped on the fact that people should not give in to impulse purchases when it comes to reptiles. But did I always do that? Nope.

I don't consider myself a hypocrite, though. In my younger days my enthusiasm for reptiles simply ran rampant on occasion. My goal back then was to keep the coolest, most unique herps I could find. I didn't think too much when I entered a pet store; I came, I saw, I wanted.

Back when I was in my early teens, my herp collection at one time included a pair of flat lizards. One died, so I thought I'd see if I could trade in the other for something different. I took it to a local pet shop, and the owner was interested in the flat lizard. I have to admit, it was a really cool-looking lizard (as its name implies, it was flat; also very colorful). So he asked me what I might want in trade.

I poked around in the herp department for awhile, thoroughly inspecting each enclosure. It wasn't very often I had a store credit with which to use on a reptile, and I wanted to get something special. And then I saw the animal I wanted, one so exotic and unusual, and a type that I had never kept before. I asked the store owner if he'd be willing to make the trade, he was, and off I went with my new pet.

I had just acquired a baby spectacled caiman. I named it Nero.

So I got Nero home and set him up in an aquarium, one that I'm sure was probably too small for him. I loved him! I had never kept a crocodylian before, and what reptile hobbyist wouldn't think that a caiman was super-ultra cool? My friends would gawk at Nero as he floated in his tank in his alligator-y way, and my family, too, seemed to get a kick out of this new and unusual pet I had brought into our home. He ate very readily. I fed him mostly fish and beefheart. I think I may have given him squid, too. It was fun to feed him and watch his enthusiastic feeding responses.

I would regularly take Nero into our backyard, to let him wander around in the grass for exercise. I would always keep a close eye on him at these times (it was in this same backyard that I once ran over a baby southern alligator lizard with the lawnmower; I was mowing, and suddenly saw the squirming remains; I was remorseful and sad). He'd walk around for awhile, soaking up the sunshine, and then I'd pick him back up and carry him back to his aquarium. He was fine with being handled, and I held him often. We were pals! He made funny grunting noises, like burps!

And so it went, until one day when I took Nero outside for his usual exercise. At this point, if I remember correctly, he was now between 2 and 3 feet long. I think I was keeping him in a kiddie wading pool. Regardless, I carried him out back as I always had, set him down and he began ambling around, walking with that recognizable crocodylian gait. I loved watching him walk around, my cool pet "croc."

Then I bent down to retrieve him and Nero did something new. He gaped, snapped, puffed up and hissed at me -- repeatedly. Apparently, Nero was through being Mr. Tolerant of my handling. He really startled me. I circled around behind him, but he whipped around and repeated his defensive behavior. And so it went, me circling, him following my every move and not wanting to have anything to do with me. I got many good looks at the inside of his mouth, and his teeth.

Eventually, as a last resort, I got a heavy towel and threw it over him. Then I grabbed Nero, him thrashing, and held his mouth shut while I hurriedly carried him back to his enclosure and dumped him in.

So now I was faced with what to do with a growing caiman that could be a bit testy. For one thing, I knew my parents would not be very happy at this new development. I think my safety was important to them, for some crazy reason. And I knew Nero could ultimately get pretty big, something I chose to ignore when I first decided to get him. A happy future together did not appear to be in our cards.

I was living in Fountain Valley, Calif., at the time. Not too far away, in Buena Park, there was an alligator farm. It's been gone for years now, but it was to that alligator farm that I took Nero. They took him off my hands, so I got lucky. I remember seeing him there once or twice when I would visit, basking in the sun among his crocodilian kin, but then the place closed down and I have idea what happened to any of the animals that were kept there.

Thus endeth my experience with keeping crocodilians. And the only reason I tell this tale here is to once again implore my readers to not give in to impulse buying. It doesn't usually end well. I got lucky in that the alligator farm was willing to take Nero. What if they didn't want him? What if I couldn't find anywhere else to take him, and in the meantime he's still growing and perhaps becoming increasingly feisty? These are situations best avoided, and you can do so by careful planning and the resistance of impulse buying.

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