

Reptile Camp

A fun look at The Reptile Store Summer Camp in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Text and photos by Steve Featherstone

My alarm clock goes off at 5:45 a.m. every weekday during the summer. Most people are on vacation, or would hit the snooze button and roll back over and fall asleep. I, however, spring out of bed, excited to start another work day. You see, I don't have a typical job ... I actually may have the best job possible. I am the Director of The Reptile Store Summer Camp in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. [Click image to enlarge](#)

Staff with lots of educational animals. Left to Right: Bailey Willock, Colin Newbiggin, Kendra Lupton, Steve Featherstone, Nicole Ossachuk, Jordan Hazell, Katie Howie, Natalie Skinner-Williams.
Ball pythons.

I have spent the better part of my life working with children in different programs – from recreational settings to at-risk youth. I worked at a zoo while in college, and also a reptile specialty pet store that focuses on educational programs. I have enjoyed all of these immensely. Four years ago I was able to combine all of my passions and start The Reptile Store Summer Camp.

Our camp is based out of The Reptile Store. The Reptile Store is a full-service retail store that sells reptiles, amphibians and arachnids. The Reptile Store has been operational for more than 12 years now. Our store prides itself on being as responsible as possible with our clientele offering only captive-bred animals, and animals that make appropriate pets. We don't sell giant snakes, crocodylians, iguanas, or red-eared sliders.

The summer camp itself is geared towards children who are nature freaks. This is all we do! All of our teachings, games, crafts, and songs are of a nature theme. Kids can learn about animals of all kinds, the environment, ecosystems, conservation, and nature. The kids at camp are eager to learn about all facets of our natural world.

We pride ourselves on being a very interactive program. Kids register for camp sessions one week at a time. The sessions are Monday through Friday, from 8:15 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. During this time each child will personally interact with more than 100 species of animals! Highlights from past camp sessions include; hand feeding reticulated giraffes, flying different birds of prey, handling tons of reptiles, and even playing with baby Amur tigers.

We have a 12-foot green anaconda, Burmese pythons, boa constrictors, spectacled caimans, American alligators, alligator snapping turtles, tegus, monitors and much more, all on site! Our store and camp have more than 200 educational show animals.

Children involved in our program learn how to take care of these animals in a captive situation (at our camp, as well as at local zoological institutions) as well as how to conserve them in their natural environments. The children even do an animal presentation for their friends and family at the end of the week. The kids share with everyone all about the animal, while practicing safe handling techniques.

We have invested a substantial amount of money in our summer camp program to ensure the kids are getting the best quality program they can. We have acquired lots of nature and animal books, DVDs, games, and other teaching tools. We have an X-ray viewer, and lots of animal X-rays. We are also collecting authentic and reproduction osteological items like bones, skins, furs and skulls.

Our summer camp also promotes a green lifestyle. We truly believe that the children we are educating in our program are going to grow up and make a huge ecological difference on our planet. We have recently switched our camp T-shirts to 100 percent bamboo shirts, with eco-friendly dyes. We give out stainless-steel water bottles to prevent bottles and cans from being carelessly thrown out. We are even working towards being a carbon-neutral camp program. [Click image to enlarge](#)

Mojo the 8-foot American alligator.
Julius Squeezer the green anaconda.

More than 300 children register for our summer camp each year. We run lots of programs for children throughout the year

including Non-School Days, March Break, Christmas Break, weekend camps, after school clubs and more! Our camp sessions are run by eight staff members and myself. We benefit from a very active "Leader In Training" program, which is made up of volunteers who are 13 to 15 years old. In fact, four of our former L.I.T.'s are now full time staff members in our program, and two more have full time jobs with other summer camp organizations.

We spend three days a week at our summer camp location, and the other two days we go on field trips. During our base camp days we bring in guest speakers who work closely with wildlife or animals. We take care of all the educational animal ambassadors. Kids get opportunities to be a reptile zookeeper. They feed and clean snakes, handle crocodilians, improve enclosures, perform public education shows, and more.

Field trips are put into our program so that the campers can meet people in the animal industry. The kids get opportunities to work with animals that The Reptile Store does not keep. The kids gain experience with security enclosures, shift cages, and following zoo protocols. Some of our field trip locations include Safari Niagara, Brantford Twin Valley Zoo, African Lions Safari, Toronto Zoo, Mountsberg Wildlife Centre, Bird Kingdom, Niagara Falls Butterfly Conservatory, Wings of Paradise Butterfly Conservatory, Jungle Cat World Wildlife Park, Sciencesational Snakes Nature Centre, Scales Nature Park, Little Rays Reptile Zoo, and more!

Our summer camp has positive changes in store for the future. We are currently applying for Not For Profit status in Ontario so we can donate profits each year to underprivileged youth as camp spots for next year. This will ensure that the camp experience is relayed to as many children as possible.

No matter the reason why children come to our camp, they all leave camp as life long nature ambassadors. Some of the children that come to our camp even teach us new things about animals. Some of them have fears or phobias about certain animals. Some children come to our camp because they have an exotic animal as a pet.

I have the greatest pleasure in life to be able to work with some of the worlds coolest creatures and to work hand in hand with both children and adults who are all interested in a common goal ... conservation.

Because of our camp the children will grow up to be in a position to make good ecological choices. I believe that animals are an amazing bridge to conservation. Kids come to our camp to "play" with animals. They end up leaving this camp "saving" animals!

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