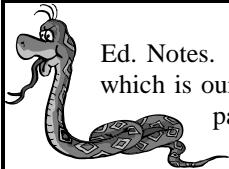




# New Mexico Herpetological Society

September 2004 Newsletter

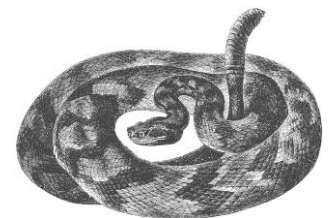
Volume 41 (3)



Ed. Notes. There are a number of important scheduled events and some changes in this newsletter, not the least of which is our new meeting site. The month of October has quite a few planned herp events and as always, the more participants, the better the event. So please take a careful look at the upcoming events and make plans to join your fellow herpers.

## NEW MEETING SITE & TIME 7:00PM @ THE RATTLESNAKE MUSEUM

Until further notice, the New Mexico Herpetological Society will meet at 7:00pm at the American International Rattlesnake Museum at 202 San Felipe NW in Old Town (yes, the meetings are still the first Thursday of the month). The zoo booted us for legal reasons (fears of litigation) and Bob Myers was kind enough to offer up his facility. Other than being 30 minutes earlier, the meetings will be pretty much the same, with one exception. Bob requires that any live critters remain in the front room area (not beyond the cashier's counter). This is a reasonable quarantine concern, especially considering the number of Bob's herps and the value of the museum collection. So if you are bringing a live herp to the meeting (it would be best to check with Ted or Mark first) make plans on leaving it outside the exhibition and meeting area. If your presentation requires a live herp, check with Bob first and set up the required procedures. Remember, we start 30 minutes earlier and no live herps beyond the front desk. Parking is available in the city lot SW of the museum. The closest lot is a 24 hr pay lot.



# A SWEET TRIP TO SUGARITE CANYON

by  
Ted Brown

It seems that the recent NMHS Memorial Day field trips have been to cool, green places in even-numbered years and to hot dry places in odd-numbered years. In 2000 we camped in Gallinas Canyon in the Black Range, then survived the Florida Mountains' heat in 2001, delayed the 2002 trip until Labor Day to enjoy Mills Canyon's peace and quiet, and last year had a compromise of sorts in Chloride Canyon's warmth with some scattered showers. This year we went whole hog for the cool and green of Sugarite Canyon State Park near Raton and had plenty of both cool and green to keep everyone happy.

Scott and Rebecca Bulgrin were the first to arrive at the Soda Pocket Campground on Friday the 28<sup>th</sup> in plenty of time to set up their tent and enjoy the fine breezes with their dogs Apollo and Abigail. The Browns arrived next, quickly followed by Dave & Jean Burt who all decided to share one of the three campsites given to us by the park staff. Soon after, Stacey & Gregg Sekscienski arrived to grab the third site with their Dalmatian India. Scott remembered what the trip was really for and caught a fine garter snake (*Thamnophis elegans vagrans*) just north of the camp in a wet area with cattails and irises. After dinner everyone settled in at the Bulgrins' camp to chat and lounge about with the dogs, as the night cooled off a bit too much for road-cruising.

The next day brought sunny skies and a good breeze, but certainly not enough to discourage the herpers from getting out and looking for critters. The Browns headed down to the visitors center to join the morning hike around the former coal camp of



Some of our intrepid herpers sampling an early morning breakfast. From left to right, Sue Brown, Ted brown (sitting), Scott Bulgrin, Dave Burt, Rebecca Bulgrin, Jaci Fischer, and Jean Burt.

Sugarite, built in 1909 and operated until the beginning of World War II in 1941. The stone foundations of the houses still stand and provide shelter and basking sites for many plateau lizards (*Sceloporus tristichus*, formerly considered a subspecies of the eastern fence lizard, *S. undulatus*, but now considered to be its own full species, at least according to some researchers). Ted kept his ears peeled for a rattler's buzz, as some of the kids in the hiking group refused to heed warnings from the guide, Daniel, about the snakes and continued to climb about on the ruins. No harm to either, as the short steep climb to mine # 2 soon tired the youngsters into relative silence and obedience. No rattlers, either, darn it. Lots of good photo opportunities on the hike, as the old railcar winches and structures around the camp were still there, albeit somewhat worn from exposure to the elements. Daniel would pull from his tote bag old photos of the camp from 70-90 years ago and we could compare them with the view we have today. Ted was later allowed to photograph these old photos for historical reference.

Meanwhile, some of the younger herpers (from this author's viewpoint, ALL of the other herpers were younger) decided to hike down the Deer Run Trail from Soda Pocket Campground to the camp near Lake Alice, a decidedly easier hike downhill than up. The group saw lots of plateau lizards and caught two fine and possibly gravid females, which were kept just for the herp display at the evening campfire program and then released. Stacey chased and caught a nice female many-lined skink (*Eumeces multivirgatus epipleurotis*) with a nice pattern of dark and light lines. She has a knack for catching good skinks, having caught a fine unpatterned skink of this species on the NMHS trip to the Gallinas Mountains near Corona in 1997. Incidentally, those mountains suffered a disastrous forest fire just a month ago caused by an illegal campfire.



**The clicking of shutters is heard for miles as Ted, Scott, Rebecca, and Dave catch that magic moment as an elusive herp pauses for a “frozen” instant.**



Scott and Dave risked all to collect two more garter snakes near Lake Alice and kept them for the display but decided not to bring back 10 more they had seen there. Perhaps surprisingly, they saw no leopard frogs near the lake despite some really intensive searching. The group was given a ride uphill back to camp by Ted & Sue on their return from the coal camp hike around lunchtime. Meanwhile, Rebecca had taken Apollo and Abigail for a hike on the Little Horse Mesa Trail north of the campground and reported that she had seen a nice short-horned lizard (*Phrynosoma hernandesi*) but was unable to catch it before it dashed into some larger rocks. We usually don't think of horned lizards and mountain scenery as being compatible, but this species is the one horned lizard in New Mexico that's common in upland forests and rocky areas.

While some of the group hiked around the campground, Ted & Sue managed to enjoy the public showers near the visitors center in the afternoon and returned to camp ready to begin cooking a fine pot of South Dakota chile for a visiting group of Raton friends who joined the NMHS crowd for dinner on Saturday evening. Now folks, South Dakota chile is NOT like New Mexico chile, except perhaps for its general appearance. There are no hot red or green chiles floating around in it, no pinto beans, and no need to reach for the Kleenex to wipe your tearing eyes. It does have plenty of red beans and kidney beans, other seasonings (usually 5 cloves and some bay leaves do the trick) and, this time, it had buffalo meat to add some western flavor to the mix. There was enough chile to keep everyone there quite satisfied and even some left over for Sunday's lunch.

Ted & Sue's Raton friends Florence and Mike Higgins and Bill and Carol Crary brought a salad and some band booster cookies for dinner that evening. Florence is the NM Environment Department's office supervisor and food inspector (Ted bribed her to look the other way during preparation of the meal), her husband Mike is a retired high school band director now doing local theatrical productions and the Crarys teach at Raton High School, where Bill is band director and Carol teaches art.

Just as we were preparing dinner, Lynn Schuler and her friend Harold (aka Howard) Watts arrived to join us, soon followed by Brian Eysers, Jaci Fischer and Doug Czor. Not driven away by the food stylings of the NMHS crowd and desirous of a good time on a Saturday evening, the Raton folks joined the campers at the evening campfire amphitheater to hear Ted speak on the herps of the area. Killing time until it got dark enough to show slides, Ted told stories of his two rattlesnake bites and of being eaten alive (well, his hand, anyway) by a large African rock python named Orvie back in 1965. Those who stayed for the herp slides were disappointed only by the cold evening on the metal benches and quickly retreated to their warm tents or trucks afterwards. Some of us enjoyed watching the space station zoom across the sky, thanks to Dave's alert eyes and his map gleaned from NASA's website.

And then came the dawn on Sunday the 30<sup>th</sup>. Not really on time, as the snow and hail and heavy clouds prevented us from getting outside our tents and trucks until 8:30 or so. Ted received the mistaken impression that Jaci was an early riser as he witnessed her dashing out of the Volvo station wagon to grab a box of clothes on the luggage rack and disappear back into the Volvo quicker than a fence lizard appearing from under a rock and grabbing a grasshopper. As the storm rapidly moved out to the east, the sun and herpers appeared for breakfast and the day was set to begin. The Sekscienskis and Lynn and Harold decided that enough cold weather was enough, so they quickly drove into Raton for breakfast and continued on their way home. Lynn later reported that they made a quick trip to Capulin Volcano and saw a plateau lizard there on the very top of the peak.

The sun quickly warmed the frozen herpers, so after breakfast, Dave, Scott and Rebecca hauled out their new digital cameras to photo the chilled herps from the day before. No problem getting the plateau lizards, skink and garter snakes to pose on a warming rock in the sun before they were released, as the herpers spread out for other points of Sugarite Canyon. Dave and Jean went to Lake Maloya to fish and observe herps and saw a mass of small black tadpoles (probably Woodhouse's toads) in a grassy part of the shore near the dam and a pair of plateau lizards as well. Scott and Rebecca and the dogs went to Capulin Volcano and Folsom Falls, where Scott saw a leopard frog (*Rana pipiens*) jump into the stream. Jaci and Doug walked along the Vista Grande Trail by the campground for an excellent view of the canyon and saw a "large lizard with a greenish back", according to Jaci. After some discussion around the noon table later, we decided this must've been a large plateau lizard whose scales do reflect a greenish color in the sun at certain angles. Brian Eysers went to Lake Maloya to fish but caught nothing. Ted & Sue walked along the River Walk Trail and caught male and female smooth greensnakes (*Opheodrys* [once again] *vernalis*) under a large rock. Dave has the male (13" long) and Ted the female (19.5" long) to keep for future NMHS displays.

After lunch, some folks relaxed and others took to the trails once more to photo flowers and try to find that elusive large lizard on the Vista Grande Trail. Ted had good luck on the flower photos until his camera went on the fritz (a faulty magnet in the shutter mechanism, quickly repaired in Santa Fe), but the large lizard remains to be seen again. The evening meal was a great one to remember, as Dave & Jean shared their trout cooked over the coals, Brian was content with a huge steak, Jaci & Doug's rice served many and all seemed to get enough to last until breakfast. We then built up the fire and watched a paper cup Zozobra finally meet its end as the space station silently skated across the sky once more. Then came the fun of extinguishing the fire until it was totally dead and cold enough to hold in the hand, more or less.

Monday's dawn was a good deal more pleasant than Sunday's, so we broke camp after breakfast and headed down to the visitors center for showers and short hikes. Ted photographed a ninebark tree (*Physocarpus*) that was blooming like a white cloud along the road and Sue spotted 5 or 6 mule deer in the forest nearby. Ted patiently waited for Sarah Wood to appear for duty at the visitor's center while Sue watched hummingbirds and evening grosbeaks at nearby feeders and the other herpers took to the trails. Scott reported seeing 4 green snakes and 11 plateau lizards around the ruins of the coal camp, but brought back empty snakebags. Ted & Sue drove down the Mora River road (St. Rd. 97 near Watrous) in search of a huge snapping turtle Ted had seen there last July, but saw no more herps that day. They did, however, hear a chorus of chorus frogs (*Pseudacris maculata*) calling from a flooded pasture at the Doolittle Ranch near Watrous. Everyone arrived home safe and sound, a good feat in this day of highway accidents in abundance on holidays in the Land of Enchantment.



Albuquerque Exotic Pet House Calls  
David G. Burt, DVM

505.856.1774  
dburt35@comcast.net

Animals examined & treated where they live

American International



Rattlesnake Museum

SE corner of the plaza in Old Town

**SUBTERRANEAN JUNGLE**

Snakes, Lizards, Turtles  
Tortoises, Frogs, Tarantulas &  
A Full Line of Supplies & Feeders  
Owned & Operated by  
Professional Breeders

BUY/SELL/TRADE  
**255-1043**  
116 Morningside N.E.

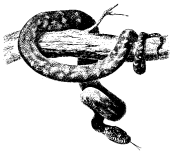
Hours  
Mon-Closed  
T-F 12-6  
Sat 10-6  
Sun 12-5

Washington  
Morningside NE  
Carlisle

ALL DEBIT CARDS




# Meeting & Activity Notes



Since the last newsletter we have had the gathering at Sugarite State Park (see Ted's comments on page 2) and a superb potluck dinner at Jaci Fischer's. There were about 40 folks in attendance for great food and drinks followed by three slide presentations of the wildlife of Sugarite State Park by Stacey Sekscienski, Dave Burt, and Scott and Rebecca Bulgrin (kind of a tag team presentation). It was a wonderful evening, thanks to all who participated.

## Upcoming Events

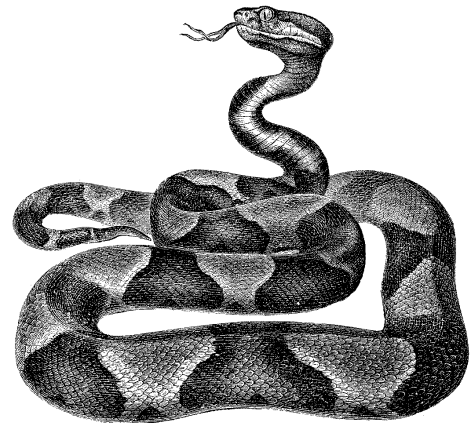


**2 October: Herp Day** at the Rio Grande Nature Center. Once again we need folks to "come on down" to Candelaria Blvd, where it dead-ends into the Rio Grande, to support this event. We will set up at 9:00am for a 10:00am start. Doors will close at 4:00pm. We need lots of display herps as this event that typically draws plenty of kids. Kids are those little critters that we need to educate on the importance herps play in nature and the need to protect them and their habitats. We will not have a raffle this year and need plenty of good displays for the visitors. Look for Ted and Scot the day prior with Steve Stucker on the channel 4-morning news. Contact Jaci Fischer at: 344-2957.

**7 October: NMHS Meeting** at the American International Rattlesnake Museum in Old Town. Meeting time is 7:00pm to 9:00pm. Remember, live critters are not allowed in the collection area.

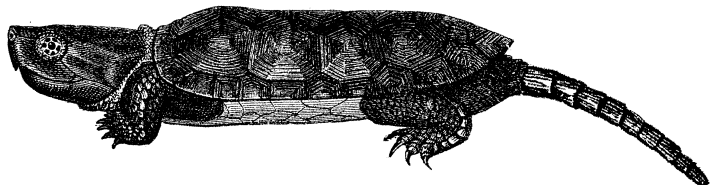
**15-17 October: Wildlife Days** at the Wildlife West Park in Edgewood. There will be tables set up and lots of exhibitors, yet another chance to display herps to the curious. This event is sponsored by the Wildlife West Park, a zoo with mostly native animals. If you have not yet visited their facility this is a great opportunity to see what is offered. Contact Scott Bulgrin at: 332-9672.

**16-17 October: Herp Expo** 10:00 am to 5:00 pm at the Howard Johnson's at I-40 and Eubank. Once again we need folks to man the raffle table. Any raffle prize donations are also most welcome. The fall expo normally does not have the number of newly hatched and born herps, but there are often great bargains as breeders look to over-wintering their livestock. Even if you do not man the raffle table, come on out and have a look at what is offered.



**20-21 November: Festival of the Cranes** at Bosque del Apache Wildlife Refuge. The NMHS will again be invited to support this event. We will need display herps and folks willing to listen to some often very "tall" herp tales from visitors from around the globe. Set up is at 9:00am both days with doors closed about 5:00. The display area we are in is locked over night. Come on down for lots of good food, interesting animals (hawks, owls, wolf, cougar, etc.), and visitors from around the world. We normally get a couple thousand visitors for this event.

**11 December: Annual banquet** at Little Anita's in Old Town. We will gather at the Rattlesnake Museum at 6:30pm and plan to be at the restaurant at 7:15 for dinner. We do not yet have a speaker lined up, so if you have any ideas, contact Ted or Scott.





# Western Hognose Snake *Heterodon* *nasicus* Baird & Girard, 1852

The western hognose snake is found pretty much throughout New Mexico. There are generally three recognized subspecies: the nominate species, the western or plains hognose snake (*Heterodon nasicus nasicus*) found from southern New Mexico, through the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles to southern Canada; the dusty hognose snake (*Heterodon nasicus gloydi* Edgren, 1952), found from southwestern Texas (S.E. corner of New Mexico) to Oklahoma; and the Mexican hognose snake (*Heterodon nasicus kennerlyi* Kennicott, 1860), found from east central Mexico, to southern Arizona, New Mexico, and southwestern Texas. The western (or plains) hognose snake and the dusty hognose snake differ only in color and pattern and seem to intergrade where the ranges of the two meet. Thus the subspecies status of the dusty hognose is in question as it may be just a color form of the western (plains) hognose.

The western hognose snake is generally less than two feet long (a record 760mm (almost 30 inches) specimen of *H. n. kennerlyi* was collected in 1995 in southern New Mexico (Degenhardt et al., 1996), and has the thick body and distinctively upturned nose that mark this genus. The color/pattern generally consists of numerous irregular brown blotches (in various shades from light to dark brown, reddish to almost black) set against a tan background. The scales are keeled, giving the snake a rough, non-glossy appearance. The underside of the snake is smooth and shiny with undivided scales of light tan to yellow, or even orange, marked with black in various amounts from blotches to coloring almost the entire scale. This black on the underside of the snake is missing from the other two species of U.S. hognose snakes: the eastern hognose snake (*Heterodon platirhinos*) found from Texas, to the east coast and from Florida, to Maine; and the southern hognose snake (*Heterodon simus*) found from mid-Florida, to North Carolina, and to southern Mississippi. The eastern hognose is larger and darker in color with a solid black morph occurring. A three-foot long, rearing, hooded, hissing, and striking black hognose is an impressive sight and will cause the most intrepid herper to look twice to ensure he or she is not facing an exotic escapee. The southern hognose is similar in size and color to the western hognose, with fewer and darker blotches and no black on the ventral scales.

Hognose snakes of the genus *Heterodon* are only found in North America and Mexico (from southern Canada to central Mexico). Similar species from South America were included in the genus *Heterodon* at one time due to similar habits (feigning death), but are now in a distinct genus, *Lystrophis*. One of these, *Lystrophis semicinctus*, is a banded tri-colored (red, black, and white or yellow) snake similar to the color pattern found in some very popular kingsnakes.

Hognose snakes have rear fangs and a mild poison that has at times been implicated in serious medical problems for people who have been bitten. On the other hand, an actual bite from a hognose is a rare occurrence, as they will go to extreme measures when threatened to do everything but bite. A hognose encountered in the wild will remain still like most snakes and hope to be passed by. If this fails, the snake will usually attempt to flee. If prevented from leaving the scene, the snake will coil and flatten its neck, very much like a cobra. It will then present a



**Western (plains) hognose snake from northern New Mexico showing the beginnings of a neck flair. Photo courtesy of Ken Garrison, Mora, NM.**



**Close up of the same snake with a nicely developed "cobra" flair to neck and head. Photo courtesy of Ken Garrison, Mora, NM.**

“fearsome” appearance and proceed to hiss and strike at the intruder. But the strikes usually fall short and seldom involve a bite. The snake usually strikes with a closed mouth. If this does not resolve the situation the snake will often attempt to flee once again, and if prevented it will begin writhing and thrashing around as if in great pain and the throes of death. The flipping, turning, writhing snake will then “die.” This fake death is accomplished with the snake on its back, mouth agape, and sometimes food regurgitated and feces vented - a most convincing, if somewhat nauseous, display. If picked up, the snake will hang limply. The only sign of death missing are x’s over the eyes! The scene is only spoiled if the snake is turned over right side up. In that case it will immediately flip back on its back to the “approved” death pose.



**The same snake, showing the distinctive underside pattern as it writhes around in the beginnings of its fake death scene. Photo courtesy of Ken Garrison, Mora, NM.**

This dramatic defense mechanism of hognose snakes has resulted in a number of colorful common names, including: puff adder, hissing adder, blow viper, spreading adder, and hissing sand snake. Unfortunately, this behavior coupled with a common name that includes “adder,” or the common mistaken identity for a copperhead or rattlesnake, causes a great number of these snakes to be killed out of ignorance and/or fear.

Hognose snakes are sexually mature in about three years and lay from five to two dozen eggs that hatch in approximately two months (depending upon temperature). They are found from river and stream valleys, to plains habitats, to mountains. They are rarely found under logs or trash, preferring to remain underground in harsh conditions and coming out to feed at night or during rains. Anurans or frogs and toads are the he primary food of hognose snakes. This complicates captive care as they often refuse to feed on mice, sometimes even if the mouse is scented with a toad. This difficulty is rarely experienced with the western hognose as they have a wider range of prey and will eat mice (as well as frogs, toads, and snakes) in the wild. Most will readily convert to an all mice diet in captivity.

The western hognose is never a common find in the state, but always a nice find. These are good looking herps with straightforward captive care requirements. Care and breeding are similar to that needed for corn snakes or kingsnakes. Keep in mind that care should be exercised to avoid an inadvertent bite (due to feeding response) because serious reactions have been recorded from the venom of this mild mannered herp.

#### **References:**

- Conant, Roger & Collins, Joseph T.** 1998. Reptiles and Amphibians: Eastern/Central North America, Peterson Field Guide, Third Edition (expanded), Houghton Mifflin Co., New York. pp. 616.
- Degenhardt, William G., Painter, Charles W., & Price, Andrew H.** 1996. Amphibians and Reptiles of New Mexico, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, N.M. pp. 431.
- Mehrtens, John M.** 1987. Living Snakes of the World in Color, Sterling Publishing C., Inc. pp. 480.

This newsletter is published for the edification and enjoyment of the members of the New Mexico Herpetological Society. Any opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not express or represent official NMHS policy. Questions, suggestions, and articles for publication may be submitted to the editor,

Tom Eichhorst  
4528 Quartz Dr. N.E.  
Rio Rancho, NM 87124-4908  
thomas@Rt66.com