

# New Mexico Herpetological Society

September - December 2008 Newsletter

Volume 42 (3)

## Annual CHRISTMAS BANQUET



**Saturday 6 December 2008**

**Dinner 7:00 - 10:00 p.m. at**

**St. Clair Winery & Bistro, 901 Rio Grande Blvd. N.W. (on the west side of the road across from Hotel Albuquerque and next to Starbucks (about 1/2 mile north of Old Town). Our meal will feature a choice of five different entrees (including a vegetarian dish for those so inclined). Beer, wine, or liquor will be extra. We will eat in the enclosed patio area on the west side of the bistro.**

**Speaker – Charles Painter on Adventures with King Cobras in India**

**Cocktail Hour at 6:00 p. m. at the American International Rattlesnake Museum in Old Town**

**\*Cost is \$20 per person payable that night to Garth Graves**

**We will have a Silent Auction with lots of great herp books just before dinner**

**Bring your ballot for the election of 2009 NMHS officers.**

## Meeting & Activity Notes

### **\*\*Special Meeting Notice\*\***

**The January 2009 NMHS meeting will be held on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January, rather than the 1<sup>st</sup>, as many of us have other activities planned for the 1<sup>st</sup> of January. So go ahead and watch football games on New Year's Day, but plan on a NMHS meeting the following Thursday on 8 January 2009.**



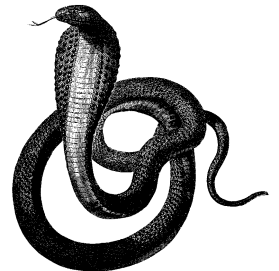
**The Festival of the Cranes** at Bosque del Apache Wildlife Refuge was another success. The NMHS has participated in this event since its inception and everyone always has a great time. We had the display room to ourselves and filled it up with critters and displays on herps. I do not have any attendance figures, but we had a solid stream of visitors both Saturday and Sunday. Thank you to the NMHS participants, including: Ted and Sue Brown, Dave and Jean Burt, Jaci Fischer, Scott, Rebecca, and Logan Bulgrin, and Tom and Donnie Eichhorst. Aside from the

NMHS display there were arts and crafts, food booths, live raptors, and other New Mexican wildlife. It is always great event; if you missed it this year, make plans for next year to spend the weekend before Thanksgiving with the cranes.



**6 December - NMHS Annual Christmas Banquet and Meeting.** This is our last meeting of the year and aside from great company, delicious food, a superb speaker, we will also elect the officers for the year 2009. We will meet at 6:00 pm at the American International Rattlesnake Museum for drinks and chips. This is once again hosted by Bob Myers and is your chance to check out his new herp related books, figurines, wall hangings, etc. The dinner and meeting will be from 7:00 to 10:00 pm at the St. Clair Winery & Bistro on Rio Grande Blvd between Old Town and the I-40 freeway.

Our speaker this year will be **Charles W. Painter**. Charlie Painter, NMHS member and herpetologist with the New Mexico Game & Fish Department's Non-game Program, spent an exciting few weeks earlier this spring chasing king cobras in India's Gombe Forest Preserve and will regale us with tales of cobras and other interesting encounters with India's exotic herps. Be sure to make your reservations to hear about Charlie's work with Romulus Whitaker, the famous conservationist in India, and Matt Goode, our banquet speaker in 2007.



**If you have a ballot insert in this issue it should be filled out and either mailed in or brought to the banquet.**

**WHAT'S IN A NAME?** From "Cold Blooded News," Oct. 2000. Ever wonder where the word herpetology comes from? According to Marty Marcus of the Colorado Herpetological Society it is from the Greek "herpet," meaning things that crawl. He theorizes it is an onomatopoeic word, or one based upon the sound it describes. In this case the sound being that of Greek frogs who must have had a call of "herpet, herpet" rather than the "ribbit, ribbit" call we are used to. In any case, because amphibians and reptiles were considered to be the same type of animal until the 1870s, the term herpetology is used to mean a study of both reptiles and amphibians -- or literally the study of things that crawl.

# A ONE-DAY NMHS TRIP TO THE OJITO WILDERNESS

By Ted Brown

At our regular meeting on 7 August, the gathered throng of the NMHS regulars decided that a long trip over the Labor Day would be a bit too much for us, considering the price of gas and other necessities, so we decided on holding a one-day survey at a site a bit closer to Albuquerque. Tom Eichhorst suggested that we try the Ojito Wilderness, just 22 miles northwest of Bernalillo. He told us that the roads are in good shape, the scenery is quite unusual, and the chance of finding a lot of critters seems pretty good. So we agreed to take a day from our busy schedules, gather our hooks and bags and conduct a quick survey in the Ojito Wilderness on Saturday, 30 August 2008.

The Ojito Wilderness was designated in August 2005 after a great deal of cooperation between the Bureau of Land Management, Zia Pueblo, and other private landowners. The result of this cooperation is an 11,183-acre wilderness area of stark rock mesas, intriguing hoodoos, historical sites, and unusual plant and animal life to be preserved from damaging human activities.

After some rainy weather in northern New Mexico during the preceding week, the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup> dawned cloudy over the Ojito, but by the 9 AM meeting time at the designated spot a few miles south of San Ysidro, bright sun and warming temperatures greeted the herpers. Tom and Donnie initially led the way from the east base of White Mesa along the recently graded Cabezon Road past sandstone buttes and grassy flats. Then Ted & Sue took over the task of getting the herpers' caravan to the parking area near the southwest corner of the wilderness. Trails led off in several directions along the route and some shallow and weed-filled retention dams were seen but not investigated, as they looked too dry to offer the promise of any toads.



Soon after we disembarked from our vehicles, we spotted a large western collared lizard (*Crotaphytus collaris*) still in its cool shades of gray near a large rock by our parked vehicles. Another one was seen a few feet away, but this one had warmed up a bit, showing off its bright greenish body and yellowish head and feet, before it disappeared under a large sandstone boulder. At this point, our group of the Burts (Dave & Jean), Bulgrins (Scott, Rebecca & Logan), Browns (Sue & Ted) and Betsy Davis split up. Tom was nursing a broken big toe (kicking an "empty" box isn't always a cool idea), so he and Donnie returned home to Rio Rancho. Sue and the Bulgrins stayed close to the parking site to check out the bare rock formations and flat areas and shallow arroyos nearby for lizards. The Burts, Betsy, and Ted took off along a very narrow trail following more or less a contour to the west to reach a lower mesa on which a small forest of stunted ponderosa pines was established. This is said to be the lowest elevation in New Mexico at which these trees are naturally growing – about 5800 ft. Just as we reached the mesa, Betsy spotted a large lizard poking about under a live oak (*Quercus turbinella*, the same species on the lower western slopes of the Sandia Mountains) and wondered what it was. She'd never before seen a large checkered whiptail (*Aspidoscelis tessellata*), although she'd seen its cousin, the Chihuahuan spotted whiptail (*A. exsanguis*), when she's joined the Burts on NMHS surveys in the Sandia Pueblo bosque on Saturdays this summer. The checkered lady --- the lizard, not Betsy --- was trying to stay in the sunshine and struck a few nice poses for us as we snapped away with our cameras before we moved on. Nearby was a large pedestal rock – a flat rock on top of a rock column – and a male fence lizard (*Sceloporus tristichus*) nearby. The four of us explored the pine-topped mesa, photographing the fabulous views of the Nacimiento and Jemez mountain ranges to our north, the unusual rocks (one looked like the rough skin of a large dinosaur), and even a WW II training bomb lying in the sand. Thirst and hunger soon brought our attention to the time that had passed and we hustled back along the trail to the parking site, noting a couple of very large and fat fence lizards on the way and photographing a large outcrop of sand dunes cemented into rock that we'd missed earlier. As everyone gathered around the vehicles and munched

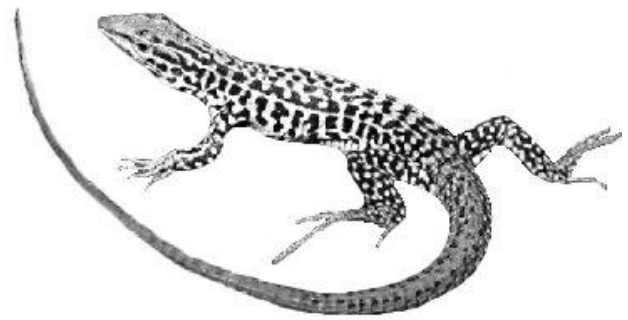
Snack Well cookies, we exchanged notes on what we'd seen that morning. Scott, Rebecca, and Logan reported the most observations from his hike to the flat areas east and north of the parking site: 3 adult and 3 young fence lizards, 2 adult Chihuahuan spotted whiptails, 2 small New Mexico whiptails (*A. neomexicana*) and 4 adult whiptails which seemed to be the plateau striped whiptail (*A. velox*), a species partial to rocky piñon-juniper scrublands and expected in the Ojito Wilderness. Dave and Jean had also seen a pair of these whiptails on the pine mesa in addition to a pair of fence lizards.

A quick lunch break under a large salt cedar a mile east of the parking lot proved to be just the thing to spur us on to reach an area of hoodoos northwest of the pine mesa site. Just in time, a large cloud drifted over us and gave us a little cooling off as we started up the easy trail to the hoodoos. A pair of collared lizards on large rocks tested Dave's noosing skills – he missed the first lizard but easily noosed the second one, a nice female that Betsy fell in love with before she released it (we have photos, Betsy). The trail was easily marked and lined with juniper branches to retard erosion. Jean spotted an unusual rock formation to our left as we rounded a bend in the trail and we all hustled to reach its shade for a break from the hot afternoon sun. And what a view awaited us – downhill to the north were miles and miles of piles of boulders, mesas in brown and gray, and hoodoos that appeared to be white, but upon closer inspection revealed an array of fine layers of thin, dark red, brown or black deposits. Some had flat rocks of a different type of sandstone on top, others came to a fine point and at least one had lizards on it – a pair of tree lizards (*Urosaurus ornatus*) clambering upside-down under a ledge near the top of the largest hoodoo. On a nearby pedestal rock a dark-colored tree lizard was displaying itself to the onlooking herpers. One more lizard caught our ever-sharp eyes – a hatchling checkered whiptail dashed under a live oak and posed briefly while we gathered to check it out before heading back to our vehicles and leaving the Ojito about 3:30 PM.

Guess what? No snakes! Bill Gorum, another member we've watched grow up in NMHS, told us at the 4 September meeting after the field trip that he and his family had almost always seen western diamondback rattlesnakes (*Crotalus atrox*) in that area on their visits. Although our eyes and ears were on constant alert on the Ojito field trip, no snakes, no tracks and no shed skins were noted. We also had no accidents or injuries to report, a pretty good record considering Ted Brown was along on the adventure.

Our total count of lizards for the trip was 4 collared lizards, 12 fence lizards, 3 tree lizards, 2 Chihuahuan spotted whiptails, 2 New Mexico whiptails, 2 checkered whiptails and 6 Plateau striped whiptails.

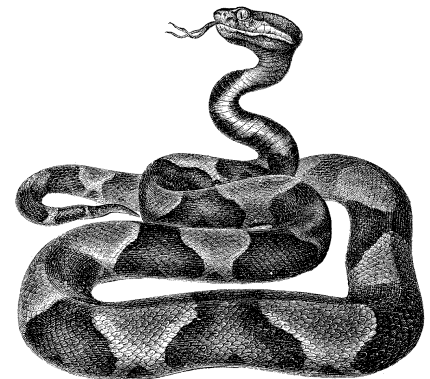
More adventures in the Ojito Wilderness await NMHS should we decide to return. A copy of the trip report will be submitted to the Bureau of Land Management for that agency's files. Special thanks go to Tom Eichhorst for suggesting this interesting locale for our field trip!



**VENOMOUS SNAKEBITES** There are approximately 300,000 reported snakebites reported annually worldwide. Of this number there are some 30,000 deaths, of which 20,000 were in India. In the United States the numbers are about 7,000 venomous snakebites per year with a reported 15 fatalities. That is a fatality rate of 2/10ths of 1 percent, or .002% for venomous snakebite in the U.S. Pretty good odds, but if you are still concerned and want to improve your chances even further, what can you do? **Don't mess with venomous snakes!** The majority of bites occur in males between the ages of 15 to 30 and almost half of the bites suffered each year are classified by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) as illegitimate. These are bites in the arm and hand that occur because the victim was handling or molesting the snake. According to the CDC, 85% of legitimate bites occur below the knee.

We had a tragic death earlier this year of a young man in New Mexico who kept venomous snakes. He had been bitten twice before while feeding his snakes and the third time was no charm. The young man died, leaving behind a wife, two preschool children, and a house trailer full of snakes. Charlie Painter was one of the "lucky" authorities that had to figure out what to do with dozens of cages of venomous snakes that were left behind. If you want a really good lesson in any number of ways NOT to keep venomous snakes, talk to Charlie about his experience.

If you are bitten, then what? First of all, realize that approximately 50% of venomous snakebites are "dry" bites. That is the snake struck at and bit the person in a defensive gesture and did not inject any venom. After all, the venom is there to subdue prey, and as small as a rattlesnake's brain may be, it most likely does not consider something the size of a human as a potential meal -- why waste the venom? If the bite is "hot," there will be an almost immediate intense burning pain and a swelling around the puncture wounds. The most important thing is to get medical aid. The seriousness of the bite depends



upon the size of the snake (and thus the available amount of venom injected) and the size of the victim. Yes, the Mojave rattlesnake (*Crotalus scutulatus*) has extremely virulent venom no matter how big or little it is. But in general, a bite from a six-foot diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*) is much more serious than a bite from a two-foot prairie rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis*). And both are much more critical with a child as the victim rather than an adult. A copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix*) is no real threat to an adult but could deliver a lethal bite to a child. Swelling is rapid so make sure all rings, bracelets, and watches are immediately removed, then get the victim to a hospital.

Modern field treatment no longer involves cutting the wounds with an X cut or the use of a tourniquet. Both of these treatments have great potential to do more harm than good. Using a suction device such as found in a snakebite kits is only effective if done immediately within a few minutes after the bite. Keep the victim calm, warm, and immobilized if possible. The wound area should be elevated above the level of the heart. Only qualified medics should use a compression bandage between the wound and the heart. Such a band can easily become a tourniquet and seriously complicate eventual medical treatment. Similarly, the wound area must not be immersed in ice. Both of these treatments have resulted in unnecessary loss of limbs. Snakebite antivenin is the only cure. Because this is a horse serum and may cause an allergic reaction in some people, it should only be administered by qualified medical person at a hospital.

The best cure is to not get bitten in the first place. If you are handling venomous reptiles, whether for research or any other reason, have a treatment plan ready. Have emergency phone numbers readily available and know what hospital in your area is best equipped to handle snakebite. (Ed. Note. A few years ago I was lucky enough to have dinner with Roger Conant (1909 – 2003), perhaps best known as the author of the *Peterson Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern North America* (later renamed to the *Peterson Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern and Central North America*). As we sat around the table discussing herps (of course!!), he asked what snakes I was keeping and if I kept venomous snakes. I responded that I kept a few rattlesnakes when I was younger but had decided they were not worth the hassle and potential danger. I am sure I sounded very full of myself and probably a bit judgmental as I explained to this renowned expert that I did not know of anyone who handled venomous snakes very long without eventually getting bit and usually loosing a digit or two. Without a word, Dr. Conant held up his hand and smiled as he watched me realize he was indeed missing a thumb. He related the story of how it happened but I was so embarrassed I missed most of it. I believe it was a rattlesnake at the Toledo zoo).

The bottom line is that if you decide you want to keep venomous snakes there are a few things you should do to keep out of trouble. First, obtain the required state and local permits. Second, talk to an expert like Bob Myers. As much knowledge and experience as you may have in keeping various herps, it never hurts to talk to an expert. There are any number of considerations that make keeping venomous snakes a different proposition than keeping any other herps.

## **NMHS BRAVES THE COLD AND SNOW FOR A TRIP TO THE LUNA AREA IN MAY**

**By Ted Brown**

NMHS has a well-deserved reputation for bringing wet weather to those areas we've chosen for our field trips, be they in the spring or fall. There are a few exceptions, of course, like the May 2006 trip to City of Rocks State Park near Deming. This year, however, was not an exception to the NMHS Weather Rule: "If we come, it will rain."

A late frost on 3 May in Albuquerque should have given us a clue as to how the weather would be three weeks later in the Luna area of western Catron County. Not that there is any real relation at all, but we still should have been ready for the cold and snow that struck the highlands of the Arizona-New Mexico border around 21-22 May. After all, don't we all watch the Weather Channel before we plan these things? All the way down from Albuquerque, we were discouraged by the dark clouds to the west and south, but hoped that maybe the rain would bring some of the smaller critters out from the depths of their shelters. Not quite. About 6-10" or more fell in our survey area the day before we arrived on the afternoon of Friday the 23<sup>rd</sup>, but most of it had melted by that afternoon. Enough remained for us to build a small snowman on one of the picnic tables at the Head of the Ditch campground 2 miles west of Reserve along US 180. Scott, Rebecca, and Logan Bulgrin were trying to warm themselves around a campfire as the Browns arrived around 6 PM. A herd of elk feeding along the highway south of Luna seemed to enjoy the moisture, as the usual dry spring in the San Francisco River Valley had returned after a short winter storm. Dave and Jean Burt arrived later that evening and set up their small tent, joining the Bulgrins in the "roughing it" mode. Ted & Sue decided to sleep in their van, rather than fight with their old canvas tent, as temperatures quickly dropped down to near freezing after dinner and the campers warmed themselves up around a nice campfire.

What a pleasant surprise to witness a warmer and sunny morning as we all emerged from our shelters for breakfast. A warm breeze promised a chance for a few critters, so we eagerly grabbed hooks, bags, containers and cameras and took off to search along the San Francisco River and nearby volcanic slopes for our scaly quarry. A word or two about the San Francisco River: downstream from New Mexico, this stream turns in a real river and is known for its damaging floods of winter and early

spring in some years, having destroyed highway bridges, parts of Clifton, and nearby farmlands. In the Luna area, though, it's just a small stream that probably wouldn't even have a name in wetter parts of the country. It did, however, have a lot of crayfish scurrying about in the muddy places on its rocky bottom, prompting Logan to try and "catch 300 of 'em so we can boil 'em up for dinner tonight!" More on his success at gathering dinner items later.

It didn't take us long for a few plateau or fence lizards (*Sceloporus tristichus*) to appear on the rocks to sun themselves and a few wandering garter snakes (*Thamnophis elegans vagrans*) to be seen and caught along the stream. Most of the garter snakes were light tan with bright yellow or golden stripes and reduced dorsal and ventral dark spots, suggesting the subspecies *T. e. arizonae* described by Wilmer Tanner and Charles Lowe (1989) and restricted to the upper Little Colorado River drainage of Arizona and New Mexico. Another snake from the stream is dull gray with larger black spots, reduced striping and a black-spotted venter, more typical of the subspecies *T. e. vagrans* of a much wider range in the Great Basin. The Arizona form is currently recognized as just a local variant and not a well-defined subspecies of this wide-ranging and rather variable garter snake.

Ted & Sue drove into Alpine, AZ, for some snacks and hats and photo'd Sue standing along the Arizona – New Mexico border in a few inches of snow. They also heard chorus frogs (*Pseudacris maculata*) calling from a marshy site along the river at the south edge of Alpine about 10 AM (Arizona time – the state chooses not to observe Daylight Savings Time) but were unable to get close enough for photographs.

After lunch, Dave and Jean decided to stay and hunt in a small canyon to the east of the campground while Rebecca and Logan pursued a Frisbee and a nap. Scott, Ted, and Sue drove a few miles northwest of the campground to the bridge over the San Francisco River for a bit of exploring. A new bridge has replaced the older one and the river and rocky bluffs below looked promising for narrow-headed garter snakes (*Thamnophis rufipunctatus*) and rattlesnakes. After a few hours of searching and finding only a few fence lizards, tree lizards (*Urosaurus ornatus*), and a wandering garter snake, they returned to camp. Temperatures for the afternoons reached 66° F on Saturday, 75° F on Sunday and it was warming up well on Monday by noon when we left the area to return home. We certainly did not suffer the heat of summer (it does get into the low and mid-nineties in summer here), but the warmth was enough to bring out a few herps.

Later that Saturday afternoon, Richard and Patricia Beery arrived and set up their tent and joined us in the hunt for more critters, but only a few more garter snakes, fence lizards and tree lizards were seen. Richard said they had seen a DOR bullsnake near Mountainair (in Torrance County and about 165 miles northeast of Luna) but no others along the highways, despite the sunny skies and warming temperatures.

We were expecting Jaci Fischer to arrive that afternoon, but she had been delayed in getting away from her work and managed to drive only as far as Reserve by evening, so she wangled a free room for the night with the family that ran the local

gas station. Her cheery voice woke us up to a chilly Sunday morning and she brought a new delight for us to enjoy at lunch, sliced apples in a salty lime-margarita mix – yummy! Later that day she joined the Browns and Rebecca on a fast trip to Alpine for phone calls and shopping and a search along the San Francisco River at the bridge again for more snakes. We only found one garter snake (a wandering female, not a narrow-headed or black-necked one) and a few more fence lizards, but enjoyed some really nice scenery and some warm water into which Sue and Jaci dipped their tootsies – another NMHS tradition.

Meanwhile, back at camp, Scott collected a nice adult many-lined skink (*Eumeces multivirgatus*) under a log in the ponderosa pines across the river and later gave it to Dave and Jean. He found some small tadpoles in the stream and brought 21 of them back to raise into toads, but all



perished by the end of summer. They appeared to be tadpoles of the Arizona Toad (*Bufo microscaphus*), a common species in



this mountainous area. Scott and Logan also attacked the hordes of crayfish in the river and collected enough (30, not Logan's projected 300) for a small dinner, so they boiled them up and shared them with the group. With the application of some spicy red sauce, they tasted pretty good, but Logan decided that they weren't really for him after just one. That night we were entertained by a few coyotes calling in the distance and near dawn a few wolves woke us up by calling from the highway a few yards from our tents. Once you hear that sound, you never forget it.

After breakfast on Sunday morning, the tents were packed up and all were ready to depart for home. The night before, Sue and Ted had noticed stars through the ceiling of their tent – time to get a new one. I guess old canvas tents just aren't designed to last a lifetime, but this old Camel tent did make it through almost 30 years. The Browns used a gift card from a friend at REI's new Santa Fe store to replace the old canvas thing with a new REI Hobitat tent – look for it on the NMHS field trip next spring.

Before leaving the Luna area, the Bulgrins and Browns explored the stream and rocks around Engineer Spring along US 180 a few miles north of camp in hopes of finding something other than garter snakes, fence and tree lizards. No such luck – the spring just oozes a trickle of water and there's no pool in which amphibians to breed. The stream was at a low flow and is fed by springs upstream a few miles. We did bring back a few elk vertebrae from an old mountain lion kill, but we saw no rattlesnakes, though the area sure looked good for blacktails, Arizona blacks, and rock rattlers. Only a single female bullsnake on the San Agustin Plains near Old Horse Springs graced the long trip back home for Sue and Ted and the rest of the herpers. A solar-powered windmill did garner some attention, though.

All in all, despite the snow and cold of the early part of the trip, we did have some impressive numbers to report to the Apache-Gila National Forest wildlife biologists. A total of 147 specimens of 6 species were observed in the Luna area:

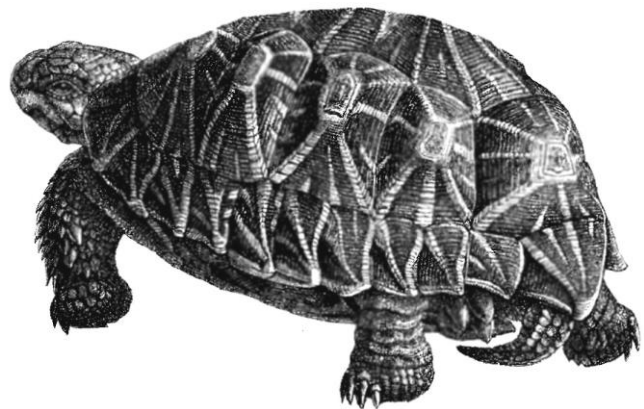
Arizona toad (*Bufo microscaphus*) – 21 tadpoles  
boreal chorus frog (*Pseudacris maculata*) – 3 separate calling episodes at Alpine, AZ  
plateau (fence) lizard (*Sceloporus tristichus*) – 84  
tree lizard (*Urosaurus ornatus*) – 24  
many-lined skink (*Eumeces multivirgatus*) – 1  
terrestrial garter snake (*Thamnophis elegans*) – 14

Some of the group expressed a desire to return to this campground later over the Labor Day weekend, but changed their minds by the end of summer. Perhaps some other year we could return here, depending on the NMHS members' wishes.

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Yes, it is that time of year again. You can pay your 2009 dues at the Christmas banquet directly to Garth Graves, or send them in the mail. Dues are \$10 for adult or family membership and \$5 for junior membership (up to 13 years of age).



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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,

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