NEWSBRIEFS

Absence of Lesser Antillean Iguanas on Île Forchue

After an extensive search, Karl Questel, from St.-Barthélemy, reports an absence of Lesser Antillean Iguanas (*Iguana delicatissima*) on the Island of Fourchue, despite the presence of appropriate food plants such as Prickly Pear (*Opuntia* sp.) and young Black Wood. He was unable to search Forchue's tiny neighboring islands of Petite Islette and Île-au-Vent, where researcher Michel Breuil had reported the presence of iguanas during investigations in 2000 and 2001.

KARL QUESTEL

This very large adult Lesser Antillean Iguana (*Iguana delicatissima*) lives in one of the more inaccessible and uninhabited uplands on St.-Barthélemy. Despite intense development, primarily for the tourist trade, the island supports a population of iguanas. Unfortunately, those not protected by private land owners or by living in remote areas, are vulnerable to poaching, and feral and domestic cats kill many juveniles, precluding effective recruitment.

Dogs Track Burmese Pythons in Everglades National Park

Wildlife Biologists in Everglades National Park are training a beagle named "Python Pete" to assist in a targeted eradication of Burmese Pythons (*Python molurus*). The Pythons, dumped in the park by pet owners who can no longer manage the massive snakes, can reach 6 m in total length and are thriving in the Park. Authorities fear that the snakes will prey on endangered birds and other endemic wildlife. Unlike many of the invasive plant and animal species in the park, scientists believe that the Burmese Python population is small enough that it can be eliminated with intensive intervention. A clear sense of urgency exists, however, given evidence that the snakes have been breeding. Sixty-one Pythons were caught and killed in 2004, and 15 have already been taken in January 2005. Aside from the tracking skills of Pete, who is being trained to follow scented trails, the targeted eradication program also makes use of a hotline for reporting sightings and a preventative education program aimed at pet stores and exotic reptile organizations with the slogan "don't let it loose."

Iguanas Eat at Airport

Landscapers at Simon Bolivar International Airport in Guayaquil, Ecuador are faced with a problem: the grounds are being overrun by Green Iguanas. Dr. José Luis Silva, has appealed to the IUCN Iguana Specialist Group for ideas on how to keep the iguanas away from ornamental plants without harming the animals. Ironically, the city of Guayaquil is home to the aptly named "Parque de las Iguanas," a public park that has become a favorite tourist destination. Trees in the park are filled with Green Iguanas and visitors come to admire and feed them.

JOHN BINNS

Green Iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) may wreak havoc with ornamental vegetation.

Lizards Banish Rats from Rat Island

Scientists from the Durrell Wildlife Trust in Jersey aim to create a rodent-free refuge on Rat Island, a small Caribbean island off the western coast of St. Lucia, in order to save one of the world's rarest creatures: the St. Lucia Whiptail Lizard (*Cnemidophorus vanzoi*). The Rat Island project involves a team of conservation workers who, in early February, began laying down blocks of waxy poison in a grid across the little island off of St. Lucia. They will return in March in order to conduct tests to make sure all of the rats are dead. Only when all of Rat Island's rats have been killed will breeding whiptails be introduced to colonize the island.

For hundreds of years, European ships have carried rodent stowaways across the world, where they have estab-

MATT MORTON

Critically endangered St. Lucia Whiptail (*Cnemidophorus vanzoi*).

BRIAN S. EDMOND

Playing on the public's fear of snakes, SnakeSnare intentionally promotes the killing of harmless and often useful snakes, such as this Common Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*) from Holt County, Missouri.

lished thousands of strongholds. Many efforts to deal with the problem have only made matters worse. When the sugarcane plantations of St. Lucia and other Caribbean islands became plagued with rats, landowners introduced the mongoose (*Herpestes javanicus*) to kill them. Unfortunately, the mongoose is active during the day and rats are nocturnal. Contact between them is minimal and they happily coexist — only now the mongoose, in addition to the rats, is decimating native island populations of birds and reptiles.

Rat removal, such as that on Rat Island, is not a one-time solution. Increasingly, conservationists are turning to small offshore sites in hopes of creating preserves in which threatened creatures might find sanctuaries.

Adapted from a story by Robin McKie, Science Editor, *The Observer*, originally published on 13 February 2005; http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1411804,00.html?gusrc=rss

Snake Snares Decapitate

A company called SnakeSnare, LLC, in Iowa has designed a device that is intended to intentionally decapitate wild snakes. The company's website promotes use of the snare in residential areas and on golf courses, "where gunfire is impractical or illegal," citing the old adage that "a good snake is a dead snake." Concerned about the marketing pitch promoting the extermination of wild snakes, Dean Alessandrini, Vice-President of the Greater Cincinnati Herpetological Society, suggests checking their website (www.snakesnare.com) and voicing your concerns.

Giant Garter Snake Habitat Sought

After years of improperly filling wetlands at the airport, federal wildlife regulators have ordered the Sacramento International Airport to purchase alternative wetland habitat for Giant Garter Snakes (*Thamnophis gigas*). The species is listed as threatened and protected by the U.S. Endangered Species Act. In competition for the purchase of 300 undeveloped acres in northern Sacramento and southern Sutter counties, land that commercial developers also are seeking as mitigation for construction elsewhere, the airport may end up paying more than $11 million.

Sacramento Business Journal

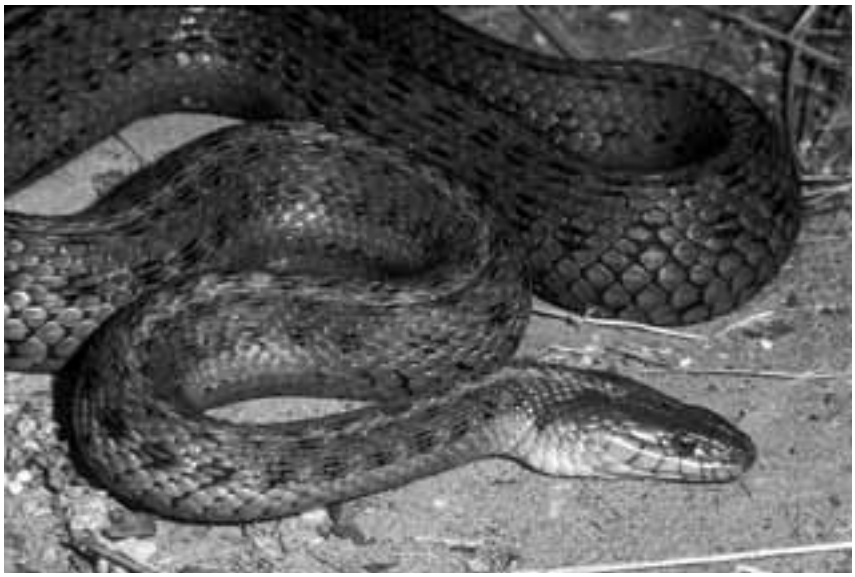
2005 Turtle Survival Alliance General Meeting Announcement

The 2005 IUCN/Turtle Survival Alliance General Meeting will be held 22–24 July 2005 at the Mission Valley Resort Hotel in San Diego, California. Don Boyer, San Diego Zoo, is serving as the Conference Committee Chairman. The meeting will run approximately from 8–5 on Saturday and Sunday with a lunch break. A trip to the San Diego Zoo is scheduled on Saturday evening. Following a buffet dinner, participants may visit the zoo grounds until 10 pm. Stragglers will be fed to the tortoises.

Papers and posters will be presented in three general areas: (1) Graduate Research (Brian Horne, briandhorne@hotmail.com, and Patrick Baker, bakerpj@

TSA

Turtle Survival Alliance



ROBERT W. HANSEN

Threatened Giant Garter Snakes (*Thamnophis gigas*) may gain some wetland habitat courtesy of the Sacramento International Airport.

muohio.edu, chairs), (2) Captive Husbandry (Fred Caporaso, caporaso@chapman.edu, and Chris Hagen, hagen@srel.edu, chairs), (3) International Conservation & Field Research (Rick Hudson, rhudson@fortworthzoo.org, and Dwight Lawson, dlawson@zooatlanta.org, chairs). Talks and posters focusing on captive breeding, nutrition, *in situ* conservation plans, range country education programs, population surveys, genetics, trade observations, legislative priorities, facility management and design, contagious diseases, and quarantine are encouraged. Titles and brief descriptions of papers are due by 15 April, although submission of a title, abstract, or paper does not guarantee acceptance for presentation. Presenters will be notified of the status of their proposal by 15 May. After contacting Session Chairs, submit papers or abstracts to Chuck Schaffer, Conference Program Chair (904-220-0678, chelonian1@aol.com, 13811 Tortuga Point Drive, Jacksonville, FL 32225).

ROBERT POWELL

Hawaiian Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) swimming off Kauai.

National Award for Turtle Studies

The National Wildlife Federation's Conservation Achievement Award has been awarded to Hawaiian NOAA Fisheries biologist George Balazs for his work on the threatened Hawaiian Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), which he helped place on the federal endangered species list in 1978. The population has recovered significantly since that time and Balazs's radio-tagging studies have shown that the turtles can take long open-ocean routes from their feeding sites to nesting areas and that they can navigate hundreds of miles from the main Hawaiian Islands to nesting beaches in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands without landmarks.

Honolulu Advertiser

Rattlesnake Roundup: Spectator Sport or Animal Cruelty?

The Taylor rodeo grounds, outside Sweetwater, Texas, are home to one of 28 annual rattlesnake roundups in the United States each year. This year's gathering is billed as the 33rd Annual National Rattlesnake Sacking Championship, and the main event is a race against the clock to see which two-man team is the fastest to pitch 10 snakes into a burlap bag. About 80 Diamondback Rattlesnakes (*Crotalus atrox*) squirm on a plexiglas stage, trying to hide underneath each other while handlers incite them to strike and rattle for onlookers.

Rattlesnake roundups have a long history, attract lots of people, set foolish examples of how to safely handle potentially dangerous animals, and typically provide highly misleading information about snakes in general and rattlesnakes in particular. Photograph courtesy of APNM.org.

Andrea Cimino, wildlife campaign coordinator for the Humane Society of the United States says, "The roundups are extremely cruel, but people can ignore the cruelty because a reptile can't scream." Some biologists suggest that the roundups could be depleting snake populations; however, the Western Diamondback Rattlesnake seems to be plentiful in Texas according to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Ken Garrett, member of the winning team, which bagged ten snakes in 30.75 seconds, says, "I'm a hunter. I believe in man's dominion over all animals. The snakes are there for the use of man."

After the roundup, the snakes are packed into plywood boxes and hauled off by a snake dealer who sells them for snake kebabs, coin purses, and cell phone cases.

Los Angeles Times

Search for a Shy Serpent

He's very shy; loves to eat small frogs, very small dead fish, and the occasional centipede; and has been known to hide under cow pies on warm summer days. The problem is, he has officially been seen only one time in Wyoming, way back in 1985, and scientists aren't sure if he's even around anymore.

So, Wyoming Game and Fish Department officials are asking for the public's help in gathering more data about the possible numbers and distribution of the tiny but mildly venomous Plains Blackhead Snake. "They're very, very secretive ... but then again we haven't had a whole lot of people looking for it," said herpetologist Bill Turner, a Game and Fish reptile/amphibian biolo-

SUZANNE L. COLLINS, CNAH

The Plains Blackhead Snake (*Tantilla nigriceps*) may or may not be present or even widely distributed in Wyoming.

gist. "We're curious to know if it's widespread, if they're uncommon throughout the state or if they're just peripheral to the state," he said. "We're trying to get the public to help us out, because this is an animal that we've had only one sighting of in the state so far."

Game and Fish officials say although there are about 40 reptile and amphibian species in the state, biologists have little or very limited information on most of the species. "One example of species we need to know more about ... is the Plains Blackhead Snake," Turner said. He said the reptile's population status is currently "unknown" in Wyoming. Turner has recently been working with scientists and other biologists to learn more about Wyoming's reptiles and amphibians. The effort is part of a larger department initiative to help preserve those nongame species with the greatest conservation needs.

The Plains Blackhead Snake was first found in Wyoming in August 1985 – near Glendo Dam in east-central Wyoming — by two eminent herpetologists, Ellen Censky and C. J. McCoy, during a "typical collecting run" through Wyoming, Turner said in a phone interview. The pair wrote an article about the discovery, which was the first official documentation of the species, he said. Turner said while the article was being printed, another important book on Wyoming herpetology — "Amphibians and Reptiles of Wyoming," by the late George Baxter and Mike Stone — was also published. But the Plains Blackhead Snake was omitted from the Baxter/Stone book, which later became the preferred reference for herpetology in the state. Turner said since then, the snake has been largely overlooked by scientists.

The snake has grooved teeth in the rear of its mouth. Turner said some scientists think the fangs help inject toxic saliva into its prey. "When we say venomous, that's just the venom in its saliva... It's a tiny snake, and the primitive injection system poses little or no threat to humans," he said. Turner said if the Plains Blackhead Snake is discovered again in the state, it would mean Wyoming has two venomous snake species. The other is the Western Rattlesnake, with its subspecies — the Midget Faded Rattler and the Prairie Rattler.

JOE WASILEWSKI

A pair of American Crocodiles (*Crocodylus acutus*) thermoregulating on a canal bank in South Florida, the northernmost extent of the species' range.

Turner was hired in 2003 by the Game and Fish Department to be the agency's first herpetologist, according to Walt Gasson, the agency's special planning coordinator. He said the department used federal funding from the State Wildlife Grants program to hire Turner. In 2001, Congress established the program to provide funding for states to help conserve species of greatest conservation need. Through September 2004, the state received almost $2 million in SWG money. Gasson said the department is in the process of writing a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy to continue receiving the federal funding. He said while the department is charged with conserving all wildlife, limited funding has sometimes hampered efforts to manage nongame species such as the Plains Blackhead Snake.

Jeff Gearino (*Star-Tribune*, Jackson Hole, Wyoming) 10 May 2005

Proposed Downlisting of American Crocodiles

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that annual monitoring of the American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) in Florida indicate that the criteria for reclassification (the number of nests and nesting females) from endangered to threatened have been achieved. The Service also proposes to initiate a five-year review of population data, ongoing conservation measures, and other factors affecting the species.

Since 1975, when the crocodile was protected under the Endangered Species Act, its numbers in Florida have grown from fewer than 300 individuals (with only an estimated 10 to 20 nesting females) to an estimated 500–1,000 individuals (and more than 61 nests), not including hatchlings. Approximately 95% of remaining crocodile habitat in southern Florida has been acquired by federal, state, and county agencies and is now protected from development. These protected areas should allow the crocodile population to expand and may provide additional nesting opportunities. If this proposal is finalized, the American Crocodile in Florida will continue to be federally protected as a threatened species.

The American Crocodile, a large greenish-gray reptile, ranges in size from a little more than 25 cm at hatching to a maximum length of about 3.8 m. It is one of two native crocodilians (the other, the American Alligator, *Alligator mississippiensis*) that occur in the continental United States. The American Crocodile is distinguished from the American Alligator by a relatively narrow, more pointed snout and by an indentation in the upper jaw that leaves the fourth tooth of the lower jaw exposed when the mouth is closed.

The American Crocodile is found in coastal regions of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, southern México, Central America, and northern South America, as well as some Caribbean islands. In the United States, the crocodile is limited in distribution to the southern tip of mainland Florida and the upper Florida Keys. The American Crocodile remains endangered throughout the remainder of its range outside of the United States.