

BOOK REVIEWS

Enamored with Snakes

Snakes of the Southeast. 2005. By Whit Gibbons and Mike Dorcas. The University of Georgia Press, Athens. 253 pp., 300+ color illustrations. Softcover — ISBN 0-8203-2652-6 — \$22.95.

Having grown up about a 2.5-hour car ride from the “frozen tundra” of storied Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wisconsin, my boyhood daydreams focused on snake hunting in much warmer places. I was especially taken with the American tropics, and devoured books by Bates, Wallace, Barbour, Ditmars, and Carr — but I was also fascinated with the southeastern United States and, compared to southeastern Wisconsin, its diverse and exciting snake fauna: Indigos, Yellow and Red rat snakes, Scarlet Snakes, Water Moccasins, and Eastern Diamondbacks. Kauffeld’s *Snakes and Snake Hunting* became an instant favorite, especially the chapter entitled “Okeechobee.” When my parents agreed to allow me to keep snakes in my bedroom, I chose species that were native to Florida, including an Eastern Diamondback, a Red Rat Snake, and my favorite, a Yellow Rat Snake. So, it was with much anticipation that I read *Snakes of the Southeast*.

The stated goal of the book is “to teach people about snakes and to foster appreciation of them as valuable components of our natural heritage.” This book easily accomplishes the first goal; only time will tell if the authors were successful with the second. Neither Gibbons nor Dorcas are “armchair” herpetologists; rather, both have devoted their careers to studying snakes in the habitats where they live. This, alone, makes their book desirable, as it is based on firsthand experience with snakes in nature, and not on information gleaned only from secondary sources or from captive animals. Geographic coverage of the book includes Virginia, Tennessee, the Carolinas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida.

The book begins with a heavily illustrated, clearly presented 24-page primer of snake biology divided into various topics (e.g., Diversity, Food and Feeding, Locomotion, Predators, Temperature Biology). A five-page section on identifying the snake species of the Southeast includes traditional morphological characters (scale type, body shape), but also geographic location, habitat, and when the snake is active. The heart of the book, however, is the 182-page section devoted to the species accounts. This section is divided into smaller sections dealing with “small terrestrial snakes” (13 species; e.g., *Virginia*, *Storeria*, *Tantilla*), “mid-sized terrestrial snakes” (10 species; e.g., *Ophedryx*, *Thamnophis*, *Heterodon*), large terrestrial snakes (8 species; e.g., *Pituophis*, *Elaphe*, *Drymarchon*), “watersnakes” (15 species; e.g., *Regina*, *Nerodia*, *Farancia*), “venomous snakes” (6 species; e.g., *Agkistrodon*, *Crotalus*, *Micrurus*), and “introduced species” (2 species; *Python*, *Rhamphotyphlops*). The last sections of the book include one on “People and Snakes,” a table for determining what species occur in which states, a map illustrating the distribution and diversity of venomous snakes in the Southeast and another for all snake species in the area, a useful

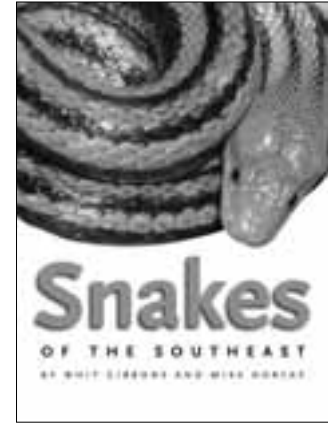
glossary, a short list of “further reading,” and an index to common names.

Each species account includes a brief description of the adult, a description of babies of that species, other common names, distribution and habitat, behavior and activity, food and feeding, reproduction, predators and defense, and conservation. Each account has a kind of sidebar that provides a thumbnail key for identifying that species (e.g., scales keeled or smooth, anal plate single or divided, body shape, body pattern and color, distinctive characters, and size). Also included is a map delineating the species’ distribution in the Southeast and throughout the US. If multiple subspecies occur in the area (e.g., *Elaphe obsoleta*, *Lampropeltis getula*), photographs of the subspecies are color-coded with the distribution map. Multiple color photographs accompany each account, and these range in quality from adequate to excellent.

I have a strong feeling that a great deal of thought went into the content and design of this book. It is extremely user-friendly. The writing is clear and concise, the species accounts provide useful and interesting information, maps are clear and attractive, and virtually every page includes at least one color photograph of a snake (usually in a natural setting). One of my favorite features, however, is the “Did you know?” spots (described as providing “interesting or anomalous facts”).

The 15 pages addressing people and snakes are as important as anything in the book. They provide information to a young person who may be interested in a career in herpetology, including the importance of following state and federal laws, snakes that might be encountered in one’s backyard or other places in close proximity to human activity, as well as what one can do to encourage snakes to take up residence in their yards. This section goes on to provide the pros and cons of keeping snakes as pets, but stresses the importance of choosing a captive-bred snake as opposed to one from the wild. A section on conservation discusses the roles of snakes in nature, their importance as bioindicators or biomonitors of environmental integrity, and threats to snakes (with habitat destruction being the primary conservation concern). The authors feel that public education is the best hope for protecting snake habitats and preventing malicious killing.

I really can’t recommend this book strongly enough. Nothing in it will be particularly eye-opening to professional herpetologists, except, perhaps, the enlightened design and layout. The photographs, of course, will be enjoyed by everyone, although the only possible shortcoming of the book is the absence of photographs depicting different habitats. However,



as the authors' introductory remarks state, the book is aimed more at young people and adults who may not yet appreciate snakes and their place in nature. This book makes a valiant and, I hope, successful effort to "develop an acceptance of — better yet, an admiration for — snakes that equals that expressed for many other wild creatures."

I still think of the Southeast as a herpetological paradise, but friends who grew up in Florida suggest that it ain't what it used

to be. Nevertheless, at least from a distance, it seems very exotic, and, despite having cumulatively spent years in the Neotropics studying many wonderful snakes, the snake fauna of the southeastern United States still has a romantic quality — and I'd still like to have another Yellow Rat Snake for a pet someday.

Robert W. Henderson

Milwaukee Public Museum

Reptile-Assisted Coming of Age

Lizard Love. 2008. By Wendy Townsend. Front Street, Boyds Mill Press, Honesdale, Pennsylvania. 196 pp. Hardcover — ISBN-10: 1932425349 — \$ 17.95.

Wendy Townsend is a newly minted graduate of the Vermont College MFA Program in Writing for Children and Young Adults, but she has been writing all her adult life and has long been a personal hero of mine. Fifteen years ago, when I was struggling to understand Green Iguanas well enough to rehabilitate seriously damaged individuals, Wendy's writing (much of which appeared in early issues of the *IGUANA TIMES*) was an inspiration — not only could she write a clear and concise technical description of iguana husbandry, she also spoke eloquently of her detailed behavioral observations, delineating complex group dynamics, as well as the personality differences and moods of the various individuals in her charge. With Dr. Frederic Frye, Wendy co-authored the pioneering *Iguanas: A Guide to their Biology and Captive Care* in 1993. In that same year, she, sadly, predicted that ill treatment at the hands of the pet trade would lead Green Iguanas down the same path as "dime-store turtles and county fair anoles, doled out as token prizes, like [so many other] valueless objects."

Wendy brings all her love of nature, her sympathetic touch with language, and her observational skills to bear in her delightful debut novel for young adults. The book's protagonist, a young mammalian female named Grace, appears in the prologue as a six-year old at her grandparent's country home. Her best friends are the local birds and insects and the denizens of the garden and the local pond, which include the beloved bullfrog that she blissfully hugs to the party dress she has worn to her aunt's wedding.

We next encounter Grace as an adolescent living with her mother far from her childhood Eden in the gray concrete metropolis of New York, replete with dim winter light, constant mechanical chatter, and oppressive odors. Grace finds her haven at a local pet shop, "Fang and Claw," where she meets an amphibian surrogate in the form of Walter. "He was chubby, with soft-looking skin almost as white as the T-shirt he wore. Across the front it said Bronx Zoo Reptile House. His shaggy hair was a pale color. He made me think of the tree frog who blends in with silvery lichen on tree trunks." She also meets Spot, a wonderful creature with a "great spiky crest and a black banded tail," his head covered with colorful jewel-like scales. Grace learns about reptiles while helping the gentle Walter rehabilitate damaged animals. Just as Walter pro-

vides a hide box in order to help a frightened monitor adapt to her surroundings, Spot the iguana helps Grace adapt to the unfamiliar environment of the city, her love for her pet bolstering her self-esteem as she crawls through the school year.

Back at her grandparent's house with Spot for the summer, Grace finds that even Eden is not eternal. Grandpa has given up gardening to avoid spending so much time in the sun, and all of the habitat provided by the unruly blackberry brambles has been uprooted by "helpful" neighbors from the newly built houses along the now much busier roadway. Nevertheless, Spot enjoys his time in the summer sun, gradually becoming more and more orange even as Grace succumbs to the physiological changes inherent with the onset of adolescence. By the time she's due to head back to the city, Grace finds herself so much altered that she desperately wishes she were more reptilian and less pronouncedly mammalian.

Teased mercilessly at school and even subject to a "love bite" from Spot, Grace struggles to come to grips with her changed physical self. Experiencing the sexual maturity of the iguanas, snakes, and monitors in her world, Grace finally has some measure of success at adapting with the help of her animal and human friends, especially the kind and "naturally" wise Walter.

Townsend makes excellent use of her natural history knowledge to elaborate, yet not overwhelm this charming coming-of-age tale. Many of her animal characters are taken from real life. Spot the iguana, for instance, lived a remarkable 24 years, and, having been privileged to tour "backstage" at the Bronx Zoo Reptile House, I suspect that much of the detail from that part of the story is also very real. Young readers, especially animal lovers, will empathize with the embattled Grace and her coping mechanisms. Older readers/animal lovers (who enjoy young adult fiction as I do) are liable to see their youthful selves reflected.

AJ Gutman
IRCF

