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## A BULLSNAKE

by Michael E. Dorcas

I got a letter today. Not an email, an actual letter. It was from a 12-year-old boy who has dreams of becoming a herpetologist and was looking for advice. Reading this letter and formulating a response reminded me of the letter I sent to Roger Conant when I was about 12 years old. I had a copy of the *Peterson Field Guide* and Dr. Conant was, at that time, the only real herpetologist of which I was aware. I remember writing out that letter by hand and revising it several times. My dad then proofread it for me and helped me type it. I was thrilled when a couple of weeks later, I received an encouraging letter in return from Dr. Conant with all sorts of useful advice for a 12-year-old boy on how to become a “real” herpetologist.

Like most budding herpetologists, my interest in herpetology was first focused on snakes—primarily catching them and keeping them in captivity. I guess it was mainly my father’s fault. I remember listening as a young boy to him telling me about the times he used to go looking for snakes when he was a Boy Scout. He was different than other members of my family and most other people I knew. He considered snakes interesting parts of nature, worthy of our consideration and curiosity. His perspective rubbed off on me.

I can remember, as a young kid, catching lined snakes (*Tropidoclonion lineatum*) under limestone rocks in my grandparents’ alley in Fort Worth, Texas and rough green snakes (*Opheodrys aestivus*) in my own backyard. In fact, I can remember the first green snake I ever captured. As they often do when stressed, it everted its cloaca. I was probably about six years old at the time and I thought the snake’s everted cloaca was an injury. So, wanting to help, I put a bandage over its cloaca and added copious layers of scotch tape on top of the bandage to secure it before I released the animal. I only hope the tape came off before the snake reached an “unnatural” girth.

But the most memorable snake I ever captured as a kid was a large bullsnake (*Pituophis catenifer*) which my dad and I found in a field at the end of our street. At that time, I’d read quite a bit about snakes and was positive of the identification when we found it crossing a dirt road. I still remember my father asking me before I grabbed it: “Are you sure that snake is not venomous?” I kept that snake as a pet for about four years. It bit me frequently and never really tamed down, perhaps because I did not understand how to help a captive snake feel unthreatened. Despite its proclivity for making me bleed, this snake fascinated me and consumed much of my spare time. I felt a connection to this animal and I remember feeling confident that my fascination with snakes was not just a “phase” I was going through, but actually a trigger for a direction in my life. I wanted to understand what made this bullsnake “tick,” and thus I used to sit for hours watching the snake in its cage and making records of my observations. I would record everything this snake did—how long it took it to eat, which direction it wrapped its coils around its prey, and every time it would bite me. I still have those notes today and periodically going back and looking them over brings back many fond memories and even makes me feel like a kid again. I eventually released this magnificent animal, but it was not until many years later that I realized what a pivotal point in life capturing and keeping that animal in captivity represented.

As I grew, my interest in herpetology grew too and expanded to include more than just snakes. Over the last 35 years, herpetology has provided me with opportunities to work with a variety of people who have influenced my career and my life in profound ways. I have had the opportunity to learn systematics from Jonathan Campbell and to learn physiological ecology from Chuck Peterson. I have even had the opportunity to collaborate on three books and numerous other projects with one of the most influential herpetologists of our day, Whit Gibbons. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of my career these days is advising and working with students. My most satisfying experiences have been watching some of the students I have worked with most closely eventually develop into colleagues with whom I continue to collaborate.

Today, the field where my dad and I captured that bullsnake is a busy neighborhood. In fact, most of the places I used to go looking for reptiles and amphibians as a kid are now either golf courses, apartment buildings, or other representations of our species’ tendency to dominate our world. The evolution of herpetology into a field primarily focused on conservation issues reflects our recognition of the desperate need to be better stewards of our world. If I think about it too much, it is easy to become discouraged and develop a “what’s the use?” sort of attitude. But when I am with my own kids I realize that such an attitude is selfish and irresponsible. I want them to grow up with places they can go and be as excited as I was while catching their first bullsnake. Thus, my only logical course of action is to take my fascination with reptiles and amphibians and, through research and education, try to make a positive difference in our world.

Like many professional herpetologists, I now get requests, like the one I made of Roger Conant, all the time. These days, they are more frequently in the form of emails, but it is nearly always the same: “I’m fascinated by amphibians and reptiles. How can I become a herpetologist?” Implied in this request is something I’m just starting to appreciate. I am blessed to be in the extremely fortunate position to do for a living what I dreamed of as a kid, and it all started with a bullsnake.

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*Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you.*

-- Frank Lloyd Wright