



New Mexico Herpetological Society

March- December 2006 Newsletter

Volume 40 (2)

New Mexico Herpetological Society

Annual Christmas Banquet



9 December 2003

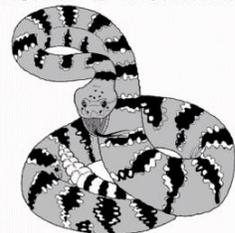


6:00 pm – Refreshments and gab at the **American International Rattlesnake Museum** in Old Town. Bob Myers is once again hosting our pre-dinner gathering and providing beer, wine, chips & salsa. Thanks to Bob who has graciously hosted this event for over a decade.

7:15 pm – Dinner and a short business meeting (election of NMHS officials for 2007) at **Little Anita's** on Mountain Road and Rio Grande Blvd (normally a pleasant walk, but if the weather is too severe plan on bundling up). This is always a fun event and culminates the NMHS yearly activities. Plan to attend!

9:00 pm – A **Herp Excursion to Morocco** by **Vince Scheidt**. Vince is a professional Biological Consultant, specializing in endangered species studies, habitat mapping, and (of course) herpetology. He has traveled the world in pursuit of herps and will present some of his findings from Morocco, an area not often visited by US herpers.

American International



Rattlesnake Museum

Cost: \$15, payable (as are 2007 dues) that evening.

Please let **Jaci Fischer (344-2957 or Branch217@aol.com)** know if you plan on attending so we can get a good head count.

THE NEW MSB AT UNM: GETTING CERIAS

By
Ted Brown, President NMHS

When I was but a wee lad of 11, my brother Bill and I found a dying prairie rattlesnake on Candelaria Rd. a few blocks east of Eubank, way up in the Northeast Heights of Albuquerque. We had just moved into a brand-new Snow home in June 1954 and Bill and I were eager to explore the endless East Mesa lying between our housing area and the Sandia Mountains. Back then, the housing areas ended at Morris and all the roads in this area were graveled dirt; only Menaul west of Eubank was a two-lane paved road. We knew enough to be very careful in handling the snake, so we used some sticks to knock off some of the gravel and put the snake into a gallon jar and took it home to show my grandmother what we'd caught. She was a bit amazed at our snake-handling skills, to put it mildly, and our reward was to wait for my parents' return home from work before doing anything with the snake except staring at it for a few hours. All the neighborhood kids just HAD to stop by our garage and see our unbelievably dangerous trophy: our first venomous snake. Bill and I were all thrilled to pieces at the local notoriety, as kids would sneak out of their houses against their mother's admonitions just to sneak a peek at a real live rattler! What a day!

When our folks got home and wondered why there was such a crowd of kids in their garage, my mom almost fainted, while my dad expressed an amazement similar to Grandma's, but in more colorful Texas lingo. He carefully examined the snake through the glass and remarked, "Well, let's see if anyone at the university would be interested in your snake." A quick phone call later and he returned to the garage to announce, "A Dr. William J. Koster said he'd be glad to take the snake, we can deliver it to him tomorrow morning at the new Biology Building at UNM. He also said you can come along and take a quick look at the other snakes they have preserved there."

I was as excited as I'd ever been before any Christmas at the thought of going to the UNIVERSITY and seeing their collection!! I awoke at dawn to check on the rattler – it had died overnight – and I felt bad for it, but my excitement at going to the university and meeting a real professor soon overcame any sadness over the snake's demise.

We drove down to UNM (not fast enough for me) and met Dr. Koster at the entrance to the new Biology Building. A tall, thin fellow with graying hair and a big smile, he led us upstairs to his office and took a closer look at the dead rattler, pronouncing it a fine specimen and putting it in a refrigerator in his office. He then opened a door to another room and turned on a light. I'd never seen so many snakes and lizards and frogs and toads and other things in so many large glass jars!! He said I could look at the collection for just a few minutes, as he had another appointment elsewhere on campus. He asked if I could return again some other day and take my time in looking at the critters. You bet!! I spent many a Saturday morning carefully taking notes on those preserved herps, jotting down localities where patch-nosed snakes, whiptail lizards, whipsnakes and so many other rare things had been found in New Mexico and elsewhere.

Eight years₂ later I helped Dr. Koster in labeling some of the fishes in the



A prairie rattlesnake that looks set for business. Once a common sight on the mesas both west and east of Albuquerque, it has been pushed out of many of these areas by development. Photo courtesy of Thomas Wyant.

collection and shortly after that I helped take care of the live herps Dr. Bill Degenhardt maintained in the basement live animal room. There are a lot of stories I could tell from those days! Ask me some time about feeding Orvie the African rock python.

All those memories and so many more filled my mind as I met Bill Degenhardt, Tom and Donnie Eichhorst and a good-sized crowd of biologists and artists under the canopy on Sunday October 8th outside the former UNM student bookstore for the dedication of the newly designated Center for Environmental Research, Informatics and Art (CERIA) at UNM. When plans were being made for conversion of the bookstore to other uses, the Biology and the Art Departments submitted ideas that allowed for use of the building by both schools of thought. The artists are safely ensconced on the top floor while the Museum of Southwestern Biology occupies the lower two floors, as jars of pickled critters are a bit heavier than artist's tools.

After a fine meal of soft tacos, meatballs with cheese and green chile and all the trimmings, we were treated to some music by the bluegrass group Whiskey and Holy Water (who just happened to be members of the Biology Department staff) before the introductions of dignitaries by MC Terry Yates (Vice Provost for Research & Economic Development). Speaking on the importance of art and the sciences were Vera Norwood (Interim Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences) and Christopher Mead (Dean, College of Fine Arts). Then came the ribbon-cutting and the crowd poured into the remodeled building to see what was inside and to gobble up more fine food provided by the UNM Student Union chefs.

Bill Degenhardt and I headed for the herp range, but were sidetracked by a layout of delicious shrimp, spring rolls, chickens and other tasty treats in one of the nearby rooms. Wiping our fingers and wondering how on earth we could possibly eat anything more, we wandered into the room where the fishes and herps were stored in large and small jars on movable shelves in row after row, the fishes on the north and the herps on the south of a large center aisle. Tom Giermakowski, herps collections manager, proudly pointed out the many jars, each numbered and identified with the accession numbers of the contents and opened several of the cabinets along the back wall to reveal the boxes of herp skeletal material (and skins and turtle shells). I looked about for some familiar shapes and found a jar of some of my former captive water and rat snakes. That reminded me to get busy and preserve some more of the frozen critters I have in my home critter freezer and thus fill up more space in the collection. More than 72,300 specimens represent the most comprehensive and complete collection of New Mexico herps in the world.

After chatting briefly with Tom, Bob Parmenter (Director of the Long-Term Environmental Research site at Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge near Bernardo), Howard Snell (curator of the herp range), we headed upstairs to look at the mammals and birds. The hallways of each level displayed biology-related art, an obvious benefit of resident artists. Bob Dickerson, curator of the avian collection, had set out on top of the cabinets a variety of local birds (owls, whippoorwills and others) and some exotics – a cassowary, hoatzin and a magnificently green-feathered quetzal. We then visited the nearby display of mammals to look at rabbits, rodents, shrews (no desert shrews on exhibit, but the curators were excited to hear about the many we've found on our Sandia Pueblo bosque survey) and pack rats. There was even the original UNM Lobo mascot, a Mexican wolf that was led around the old UNM stadium (ironically, the former site now occupied by the newly dedicated CERIA) after the football Lobos scored touchdowns in the 1930's. No, I'm not reporting this from my personal memory, but from an article I'd seen a few years ago in some athletic department publication.

After finding some chocolate goodies for dessert (surprise, surprise!) in the museum director's office and paying our respects to "Beauregard," the Alaskan brown bear standing outside his door, we found the insect collection and chatted briefly with Clifford Crawford about some of the adventures of keeping so many beetles and bugs safe from those ever-hungry dermestid beetles. Then it was around the corner to visit the herbarium and view Jane Mygatt's slide show on some of the plants of the bosque of the middle Rio Grande. She and Tim Lowry are writing the plants portion of a new book on that area, due out in late 2007 or early 2008. The slide show helped us confirm the identities of many of the weeds and flowers we've seen in our Sandia Pueblo study site, although some of the new plant names did cause some mild consternation among the old-timers viewing the pictures and among the younger botanists present.

Time flies when you're having fun, and chatting with folks at the Museum of Southwestern Biology can be a lot of fun, especially when I ran into some of the fellows who were starting their graduate studies about the time I did. If memories were money, I'd probably be rich, but I cherish those days so long ago when I used to hang out with



the older grad students and listen to their adventures out in the field. I certainly enjoyed making my own memories of field and lab work at UNM over the past 50 years.

2006 EVENTS

11-12 March - Herp Expo at the Howard Johnson's on Eubank. NMHS once again sponsored and operated a raffle table along with the Rio Grande Turtle and Tortoise Club. There were twice as many people at this expo than we had seen at previous expos and both clubs benefited.

22 April - Snake Awareness Day at the Wildlife Rescue Center in Arroyo Seco south of Espanola. Super-nice folks run this place and we had a great time. Not as many visitors as we see during the Festival of the Cranes, but more time to interact with each visitor.



6 May - Earth Festival 2006 in Rio Rancho. The NMHS set up in a tent and we all enjoyed a mild day with just enough breeze to keep things cool in the shade. We were one of a myriad of displays and had a visit from the mayor of Rio Rancho who stopped by to thank us for participating in the event.

27 – 29 May – NMHS field trip No. 1 and herp survey to the City of Rocks State Park in southern New Mexico.

May to September - Sandia Pueblo Herp Survey in the bosque on the Sandia Reservation. Like last year, the NMHS once

Right: *Kochia scoparia*, a common plant in open areas along the Rio Grande and associated ditches. Below: a western hognose (*Heterodon nasicus*) crawling through the bosque.

again performed a survey of the herps on specified lands on the Sandia Reservation. Volunteers dug and set up about 20 pitfall traps in early May and then checked these traps every Tuesday and Saturday morning. This year we had traps on a burned out site. It was an amazing experience to witness the transformation of barren black land into an area of thick green ground cover (if you can call six foot tall kochia (*Kochia scoparia*) ground cover). Scott Bulgrin once again headed up this effort and will turn in a complete report to the pueblo. This is one of the few activities where the NMHS actually gets paid.



9 – 10 September - NMHS field trip No. 2 and herp survey at Villanueva State Park on the Pecos River in San Miguel County. Participants were Ted and Sue Brown; Scott, Rebecca, and Logan Bulgrin; Dave and Jean Burt; Jaci Fischer; and Carl Johnson (see article on page 5.).

24 June - Annual Potluck was at the home of Letitia Peirce, 4264 Indian Springs Ave., N.E., Albuquerque. It was a perfect evening with pleasant weather and great food and company. We enjoyed our eats in Letitia's beautifully landscaped backyard with over-sized patio and pond. After sunset we moved inside for a slide presentation by Ted Brown on herps and native plants found at the City of Rocks State Park.



18 – 19 November – Festival of the Cranes at Bosque del Apache Wildlife Refuge. The New Mexico Herpetological Society was represented this year by Ted and Sue Brown; Dave and Jean Burt; Scott, Rebecca, and Logan Bulgrin; Jaci Fischer and Fred Yost; and Tom and Donnie Eichhorst. The refuge center had been remodeled since our last visit and we were in a new room, a very nice room with a view of the bosque and the distant mountains. Our display filled six tables and included numerous species of snakes and lizards, as well as a couple of toads and a

musk turtle. Young and old alike seemed fascinated by the herps and Logan did an excellent job of handing out small plastic

herps to our younger visitors. We had several thousand visitors over the two days and listened to many herp tales – some fairly tall ones. As usual we answered many questions, including the two most common: “Do bullsnakes kill rattlesnakes?” “No, they do not.” and “Are kingsnakes poisonous? [*sic*]” This last is normally a declarative, “Kingsnakes **are** poisonous.” To which we have to respond that, “No, kingsnakes are not venomous.” Ignoring a chance to educate on the difference between poisonous (harmful if ingested, a toadstool may be poisonous) and venomous (capable of injecting a harmful or even deadly substance [venom] through a bite or sting). Hopefully some of our visitors left with a better understanding of herps.

NMHS AT VILLANUEVA STATE PARK ON SEPTEMBER 9TH & 10TH

By
Ted Brown, President NMHS

Having missed last year’s Labor Day NMHS trip to the San Mateo Mountains, Sue & I were definitely eager to join the gang at Villanueva State Park on the Pecos in southwest San Miguel County this year. Wary of crowds at certain favorite parks, we decided to conduct our survey at Villanueva on the weekend following the Labor Day holiday, September 9th & 10th.

And were we ever lucky in the weather department!! A huge storm had dumped several inches of rain on the area that Friday night, causing the Pecos River to flood lower parts of the campground, depositing a layer of mud, sand, and debris in some spots. By the time our early-bird herpers the Burts and Bulgrins arrived at about 10:30 AM on Saturday, the sun was out and warming up the place. We had an inkling of the amount of rain that had fallen when we noticed several low crossings along St. Rd. 3 from I-25 south had been flooded with the red sand typical of the area. An overturned metal picnic table (it weighs about 200 lbs.) told us we’d missed some pluvial fun and games by a few hours. As we drove past rope clotheslines hung with sleeping bags, blankets and tarps in the campground, we were sort of sorry we missed a great photo opportunity but not so sorry we’d missed the downpour.

Luckily for NMHS campers, we’d asked to have certain uphill parts of the El Cerro campground set aside for our use. Getting there up the eroded dirt road was a small effort for our vehicles. It was as dry as could be expected and getting better as the sunny hours passed. The rock shelters were ideal for our small group of 6 adults and Logan, Scott and Rebecca’s irrepressible 3-year old.

Scott and Dave had already been out looking for critters. Scott had a nice large female fence lizard (*Sceloporus tristichus*), a small red-spotted toad (*Bufo punctatus*), a slightly larger Woodhouse’s toad (*B. woodhousii*), and a fine large Great Plains skink (*Eumeces obsoletus*) he’d found near the hilltop campsite just after arriving. It’s always a good sign of things to come when you can catch critters in the camp area. All I had to show was a DOR Great Plains rat snake (*Elaphe emoryi*) from the road in Villanueva as we came through the village about 45 minutes after the Burts and Bulgrins had passed that spot.

After a light lunch, the herpers decided to start out on the various trails in the park. Dave, Jean, Scott, Rebecca, and Logan headed out downhill towards the Pecos and the trail across the footbridge that leads to a picnic shelter atop the sandstone canyon. Sue & I headed up El Cerro trail to the top of the hill for views of the area. Although we saw only 3 fence lizards along the route, the trail was an easy one and adorned with fall flowers in abundance – spiderworts, blackfoot daisies and wild zinnias, not to mention the ferns and club mosses springing forth among the rocks. In places the trail was wet from a small seepage and there was even a trickle of water over a fall at the head of the canyon between the two hills west of the campground. The view from the hilltop and cliffs overlooking the Pecos Valley was worth the climb. We took a few photos of the area and watched a red-tailed hawk glide below us on its search for a meal. Then it was back to camp for some water and cookies and to see what the other folks caught.

Dave and Jean reported seeing a total of 8 fence lizards (6 adults and 2 young ones) from the trail to the canyon top that passes along the Pecos and then ascends the canyon wall for a kilometer or so. The Bulgrins showed the two small (9” and 4”) prairie ring-necked snakes (*Diadophis punctatus arnyi*) they’d found in broad daylight crawling on that trail. Scott mentioned seeing a hatchling Chihuahuan spotted whiptail (*Aspidoscelis exsanguis*) along the river.

After a break and short rest, we all headed out in different directions once again. By then it was about 3 PM and the warm air felt good on our bare arms. Sue and I walked across the footbridge to get some photos of the Pecos after its rampage and then worked our way along the muddy bank through the day use area. Jaci Fischer pulled up in her little Toyota pickup right then and joined us in trying to either catch or photograph a nice spotted whiptail that was dashing in and out of a juniper stump. We settled for a nice photo and the lizard was pleased to stay inside the stump until after we had left. Just a few yards away, right out on the open mud, was a large (13”) male ringneck that

Red-spotted toad (*Bufo punctatus*).



Another large ringneck disappeared in the tall grass and weeds on the riverbank a few minutes later. We were soon distracted by the shouts, screams, and wailings of some kids who had managed to get their parachute toy stuck up in the branches of a cottonwood – sorry, kids, but my arms just were not long enough to reach the toy, even using my longer snake hook. I was sort of hoping they'd found a snake there, but no luck. Sue and Jaci decided to make a little shrine of flowers and rocks in an old box elder that was clinging to its last years. We then hitched a ride in Jaci's truck back to the campsite. The others had returned to camp and reported on their hikes to El Cerro and around the other camps, but no new critters were seen.

Scott volunteered to get the charcoal going and soon had some sizzling burgers and franks cooking to perfection on the grill. Gobbling down burgers and franks always makes herpers feel better. As we were finishing our meals, a storm blew in from the north, prompting Jaci's comment, "Don't worry, 'cause those clouds are moving fast and we won't get too much rain." And wouldn't you know it, she was absolutely right!! A few raindrops later, we bid her adios, as she took off to return to her computer work at home and we gathered to hear my 3rd presentation this summer in the visitor center's garage.

Twenty-two folks braved the lovely evening to see the critters we'd caught that day at Villanueva and see my slides on other critters found in the area. The mosquitoes weren't too bad this time in comparison to the night on 19 August when we had 55 folks and a hundred times as many mosquitoes chomping on us. After the show, Scott and I decided to go cruising St. Rd. 3 for some more rat snakes and whatever else showed up. As it turned out, nothing showed up on the road, but the full moon rising over the canyon as we turned around in San Miguel del Vado (where the Santa Fe Trail crossed the Pecos 150 years ago) was a nice sight. Then we received a rather unpleasant surprise as we returned to the campground: the gate was locked! I'd forgotten that the campground is closed after 9 PM – and it was 9:30. We parked the truck and walked in to Sammy the caretaker's house. Luckily for us, he was headed back to the gate to let in some other people. When he found out who we were, he became a bit excited that he was opening the gate for Ted Brown, "the Amphibian Expert", he called me – and so, for once in my life, my name actually OPENED a door (or gate). A few more minutes around the nice campfire and we all hit the sack.

A sunny Sunday morning greeted us with the promise of another fine day at Villanueva. After we had breakfast (Rebecca's coffee kept me bouncing along the trail all day), it was time to get out the cameras and critters for a herp photo session. First on the list was the large female fence lizard Scott had caught the day before in the juniper near their tent. As I was maneuvering it into position to show its underside, the lizard bit my right index finger and hung on. What a great photo op, so all had cameras out and clicking as the lizard dangled from my finger. We detached it and put it on a log to photograph and Logan grabbed it as the lizard was about to escape, and it bit *his* left index finger, his first lizard bite! Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, he remained rather still and posed for the cameras as the lizard hung on for dear life. Rebecca attended to his slightly damaged finger as we all enjoyed the moment. Welcome to the big leagues, Logan! I somehow doubt this will be his one and only lizard bite. As long as he can avoid Gila monsters and monitors, he'll be AOK. Next up to be photographed was the large Great Plains skink, and Logan was careful to keep his fingers at a safe distance from that critter's jaws as it wriggled around in the grass and was soon on its way back home on the rocky hillside.

Getting the red-spotted and Woodhouse's toads to pose on some nearby mushrooms took a bit of skill and patience, they had other ideas, but our persistence paid off. Scott had planned to keep the red-spotted one and was going to release the Woodhouse's toad. Rebecca innocently asked Scott, "Do you think we could keep the larger toad in a terrarium for Logan?" Before

Scott could answer, Logan supplied the answer: "Why, of course we can!" And so it was done. A brief discussion between consenting adults regarding safeguards and security issues followed as Logan gazed at his new pet with true love.

After the photo session, Dave Burt found another small red-spotted toad with a scar on its face, so he decided to keep it. We then were treated to the arrival of Carl Johnson, who had driven over from Albuquerque that morning. He was ready to go after critters and took to the Cerro trail right away as the rest of us decided which direction to head off into for more herps. The



Ring-necked snake (*Diadophis punctatus*). A small inoffensive snake found from Florida to California and Maine to Washington. They are rear-fanged and possess a mild venom. The venom is harmless to man and the snake lacks the inclination to bite, preferring to flash its bright red or orange underside and then find cover and hide or play dead (National Parks Service photo).

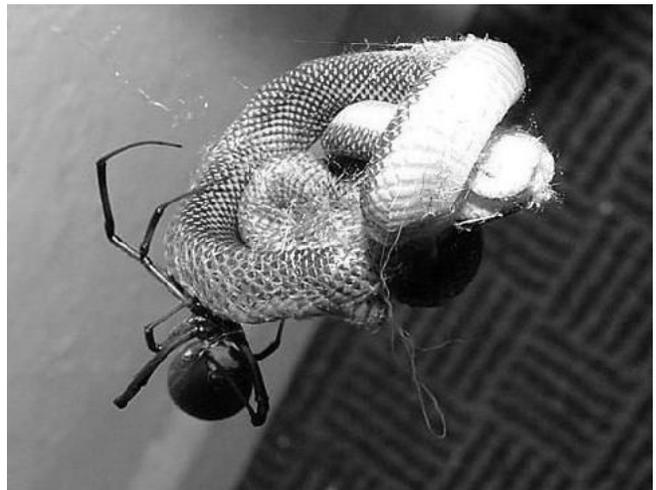
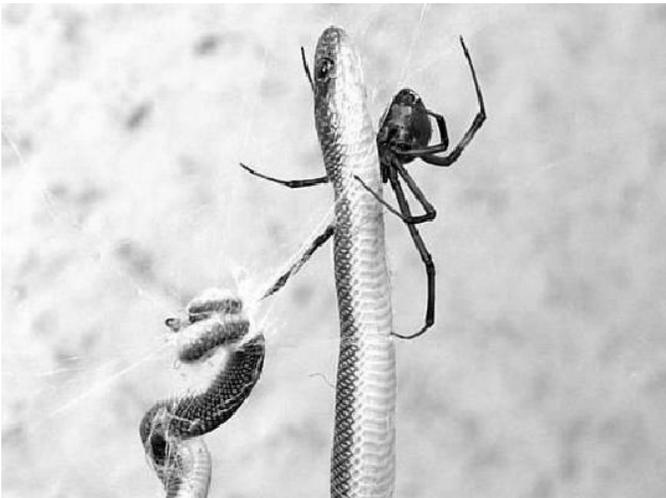
Browns and Bulgrins took off down the trail to the day-use area to search for black-necked garter snakes (*Thamnophis cyrtopsis*) and other things along the river. Scott did return with 4 wandering garter snakes (*T. elegans*) but no black-necks. Sue and I walked along the west bank of the Pecos as far as the park boundary, perhaps a quarter to a half-mile. The fence had been damaged a bit by the high waters of the Friday night flood. A few more fence lizards and a hatchling Plateau striped whiptail (*A. velox*) later and we returned to camp. Carl had caught a nice large female Great Plains skink with a regenerating tail tip and decided to keep it (got band-aids, Carl?). The Bulgrins had seen a few more fence lizards, a couple of spotted whiptails and another large ring-necked snake. The Burts had seen a fence lizard on the Cerro trail, and that about wrapped it up for this trip.

On our way back to Santa Fe, Sue & I saw a DOR western coachwhip (*Masticophis flagellum testaceus*) just north of Ribera, and Scott reported that they saw a DOR bullsnake (*Pituophis catenifer sayi*) about 3 miles south of Villanueva. That brings to 49 the number of herps of 11 species we recorded on this trip. Let's hope the rest of you can join us on next spring's field trip to ???

NOTICE

The insert in this issue is the 2007 ballot for NMHS officers. After filling it in you may mail it to Jaci Fischer (as addressed on the insert) or bring it with you to the December meeting and banquet.

Finally, in the “So you thought you had seen everything department,” we present images of a black widow spider (*Latrodectus mactans*) and her hapless victim, which looks like it might be a young speckled snake (*Leimadophis* sp.) from South America.





Dues Time! If you haven't paid those 2007 dues, it is time to dig into your wallet or purse and get that money into Garth Graves at:

**Garth Graves
NMHS Treasurer
1709 37th St.
Rio Rancho, NM 87124**

You can also send in your \$10 (adult and family membership or \$5 for juvenile under 13) to the address on this newsletter or bring it to any meeting.