

Rules and Tools for the Young Herpetologist

First, using books and the Internet, learn as much as you can about the species of reptiles & amphibians (herps) that live in your area. In particular, be sure that you can recognize the Copperhead, which is found throughout Virginia. Also learn to identify the state's other two venomous snakes, the Timber Rattlesnake (western and southeastern VA) and the Cottonmouth (southeastern VA only).

To see which herp species are expected to occur in your county, go to:
www.virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com/ (click on pages in the left column) and/or
vafwis.org/fwis/?Title=VaFWIS+Species+Information+By+Name&vUT=Visitor

As you search for herps in the wild, move slowly, use your eyes and your ears. Be alert for quick movements and faint sounds. Many herps have a well-camouflaged pattern which is hard to see, but the rustling of leaves and a dash for cover can give them away.

Many herps like to hide under logs, rocks, leaf piles, or other cover. When searching for them, don't put your hands in places where you can't see. Use a garden hoe, potato rake, or snake hook instead. Be sure to put the rocks and logs back in place so that you don't destroy herp habitat.

Your hands are often the best tool for catching harmless herps. A dip-net is a useful tool for catching wetland species like turtles and frogs. A small aquarium net or a modified tea-strainer can be helpful when searching for salamanders and their larvae. A slip-noose on a long stick can be used to catch out-of-reach lizards. Snake hooks, tongs, and cloth sacks (pillow cases) are often utilized in capturing large snakes. The Peterson *Field Guide to Reptiles & Amphibians of Eastern & Central North America* contains a nice chapter on using these and other herp-catching tools, as well as suggestions for proper handling of the animals.

In most cases, captured herps are kept only briefly for observation, measurements, and photographs. Then they are gently released in the same place where caught. Here are some other things you might want to carry with you on a herp field trip:

- Zipper-lock bags of various sizes - great for holding & observing both aquatic and terrestrial herps in the field. Clear plastic jars are also useful.
- A magnifying glass will help you get a close look at the captured herps.
- Include a small ruler or measuring tape, preferably with both mm/cm and inch scales. A flexible cloth tape (used in sewing) is a good choice, light and easy to carry.
- A digital camera for photographing the animals you find, and their habitats. If possible, take both dorsal (back) and ventral (belly) photos.
- A notebook to record information about the animals and their habitats.

You can contribute to our knowledge of Virginia reptiles and amphibians by reporting notable locality records and observations. To see which herps are documented (verified by photograph or preserved specimen in a museum or other accessible archive) for each Virginia county, go to:
virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com/county/county-herps.htm

Compare this to the list of expected species and you will probably see that many common herps have yet to be documented for your area.

If you have a discovery that merits reporting, email the Virginia Herpetological Society at: animal-identification@virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com. The attached Specimen Data Sheet will give you an idea of what data to report along with your photograph(s). Don't worry if you can't complete every item on the sheet.

Questions? Contact Mike Clifford, VHS Education Committee at mjc4h@vt.edu