

VA Herpetological Society Newsletter

Vol30 N2 Oct 2020

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DGIF = DWR!!



Many folks still have not heard the news that the Department of Game & Inland Fisheries is now the Department of Wildlife Resources!

The new name is shorter, but more importantly, it demonstrates that they do a lot more than hunting and fishing related work. In fact, DWR is who regulates the use of all VA wildlife, including our native reptiles and amphibians. They do regulate hunting and fishing, but also other natural resources within our beautiful state.

The new name was first suggested in 2013 and took effect July 1, 2020. See their new website at <https://dwr.virginia.gov/>

Virtual Statewide Herp Survey Results

A "virtual" statewide herp survey was done on Saturday, June 27, 2020. Despite the hot, dry weather, a total of 84 participants surveyed 33 localities with some participants surveying multiple counties and independent cities. Participants were asked to compile a list of species within their locality but did not need to include numbers of individuals found. The land and waterways surveyed included both private property and public lands. No set amount of time herping was required, and participants didn't have to flip logs or set traps if they chose not to. Surveying styles and time spent in the field was entirely up to the individual participant. (cont'd next page)

Virtual Survey Results (cont'd from previous page)

The survey resulted in a total of 43 species. Broken down by taxa, that is 14 frog and toad species, 8 salamander species, 4 lizard species, 9 snake species, and 8 turtle species were reported. A full report is available on the VHS website.

MIKE CLIFFORD, VHS BOARD MEMBER, RESPONDS TO EMAIL REGARDING RESIDENT WINDOW WELL AMPHIBIANS

Window wells can be fatal traps for many types of small wild animals. Depending on the size and shape of your window wells, you can try to place "exit ramps" for the animals to use to escape. Here are some ideas to consider:



PICTURE CAPTION: These toads were amongst five that were living in a window well in Vienna, VA



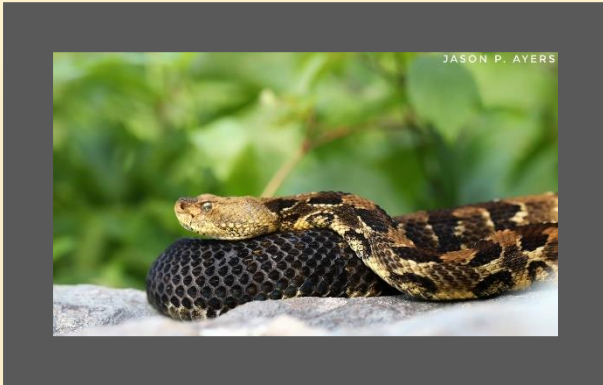
PICTURE CAPTION: A Fowler's toad picture sent in for ID verification.

- <https://www.wildlifeillinois.org/get-help/solve-a-wildlife-problem/animal-in-my-window-well/>
- <https://diy.stackexchange.com/questions/77519/prevent-dead-animals-in-basement-window-wells/150347>

Once you have removed all the animals and debris, you can install clear window well covers which allow light into your basement but keep out the critters. An internet search will display a huge assortment of sources and types of covers.

You might miss seeing your window well toads, but you could help your local toads with these ideas:

<https://www.welcomewildlife.com/make-a-toad-house/>



HERP HIGHLIGHT : TIMBER RATTLESNAKE

Crotalus horridus

by VHS member Yona Britto

Timber Rattlesnakes would rather “bark” than bite! Yet, they are the most feared and misunderstood snakes in the eastern US.

They can be defensive towards humans when scared, but snakes are not aggressive animals. Once spotted, Timbers typically flee, freeze, rattle, or get into a defensive posture. Timber Rattlesnakes are reluctant to bite, saving their venom for catching and digesting prey.

Etymology: The genus *Crotalus* is from the Latin “crotalum” (rattle). The species *horridus* is from the Latin “horrid” (dreadful).

Description: These large snakes are 30-60 inches. The Virginia record length is 67.1 inches. They have 16-27 dark zig zag or chevron markings on a background color of yellow, tan, black, dark brown, or grey. The snakes found in the western, mountainous part of Virginia are typically the yellow or black color “phases.” The “canebrakes” found in southeastern Virginia are typically grey, yellow, or pinkish with black chevrons and an orange middorsal (down the back) stripe. “Canebrakes” used to be considered a separate subspecies (*Crotalus horridus atricaudatus*). Timber Rattlesnake males are larger and have 21 or more subcaudal scales (scales underneath the tail) while females have 20 or less. The bellies are cream with dark specks. The tail is usually black and looks velvety, earning them the

vernacular name “velvet tail.” The juveniles look similar to adults but are usually more grey.

Fun Facts: You can’t determine age based on the number of rattles! They gain one keratinized segment every time they shed, and they shed multiple times a year (and rattles can break off). Yearlings have 2-5 segments.

Benjamin Franklin favorably described the Timber Rattlesnake saying, “She never begins an attack, nor, when once engaged, ever surrenders: She is therefore an emblem of magnanimity and true courage.” This rattlesnake was also featured on the First Navy Jack and Gadsden flags.

Similar Species: Many people assume small, harmless snakes are “baby rattlesnakes.” This is partially because many harmless species will vibrate their tail when threatened. If you’re not sure a snake is safe to handle, it’s best to give it space and leave it be. “Triangle head” is not a reliable identifier, as most of our harmless species will flatten their heads into a triangular shape when scared. The Timber Rattlesnake’s chevron pattern is their most unique feature other than the rattle.

Prey and Predators: Timber Rattlesnakes are excellent ambush predators of small mammals—mainly rodents—and occasionally birds, frogs, and lizards. One study showed that each Timber Rattlesnake eats up to 4,500 ticks on mammals every year! (continued, next page)

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Timber Rattlers, (Cont'd from prev pg)

Humans are the main killers of Rattlesnakes, but they also play a natural role as prey to hawks and other snakes.

Habitat and Range: In the northern range, they're found in mixed wood forests with south facing rocky ledges and talus slopes (piles of rocks at cliff bases) which are utilized as basking spots and dens. One study showed 70% of dens were on south facing slopes, and the other 30% were on southwest or southeast facing slopes. Unlike most heavy-bodied snakes, Timbers have been spotted basking and hunting in trees 20 feet off the ground! "Canebrakes" inhabit canebrakes, cane fields, swamps, mesic (moist) woodlands, and open areas. They have the largest range of any rattlesnake, covering most of the eastern US.

Behavior and Reproduction: They often hunt using the Reinert position, placing their upper body and chin on a tree to feel for the vibrations of prey. They are very hesitant to bite predators (and humans). To be safe, be mindful where you put your hands/feet and give these wild animals the space they deserve. They are more diurnal (active during day) in the cool spring and fall, and more crepuscular (dawn and dusk) and nocturnal (night) in hot summer. They enter their winter hibernacula in fall and emerge in spring. The northern populations use large communal dens, but the southern "canebrakes" hibernate in small groups or individually in stumps. They are viviparous, giving birth to live young. They give birth to 3-16 babies once every 3-5 years. If you're near a den, you could see babies in August-October. Unlike most snakes, these baby rattlesnakes spend up to two weeks with the females before leaving. At this point they're independent and return to a hibernaculum in winter by following scent trails from other snakes. They are sexually mature at 4-6 years.

Conservation: They have drastically declined throughout their northeastern range. They are extirpated (local extinction) in Canada, Maine, and Rhode Island, and protected in much of the rest. Humans are the main threat to this species. Habitat loss, including den destruction, is devastating to a species that relies on the same den for generations. Intentional killing like in the "rattlesnake roundups," where they are taken from their dens, are another threat. They are also killed by non-native hogs, sheep, dogs, and chickens. Between 1973-1987 W. H. Martin III studied Timber Rattlesnakes in the Shenandoah National Park. The population was estimated to be 35-50% of its original size, and the mortality rate of younger snakes had increased significantly. The oldest snakes in this study were 30-50 years old.



More info about this snake:

https://www.virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com/reptiles/snakes/timber-rattlesnake/timber_rattlesnake1.php
<https://wsed.org/viperid-spotlight-timber-rattlesnake-crotalus-horridus/>

Additional resources (relocation, education, and identification groups): <https://bit.ly/3bjrZ6D>

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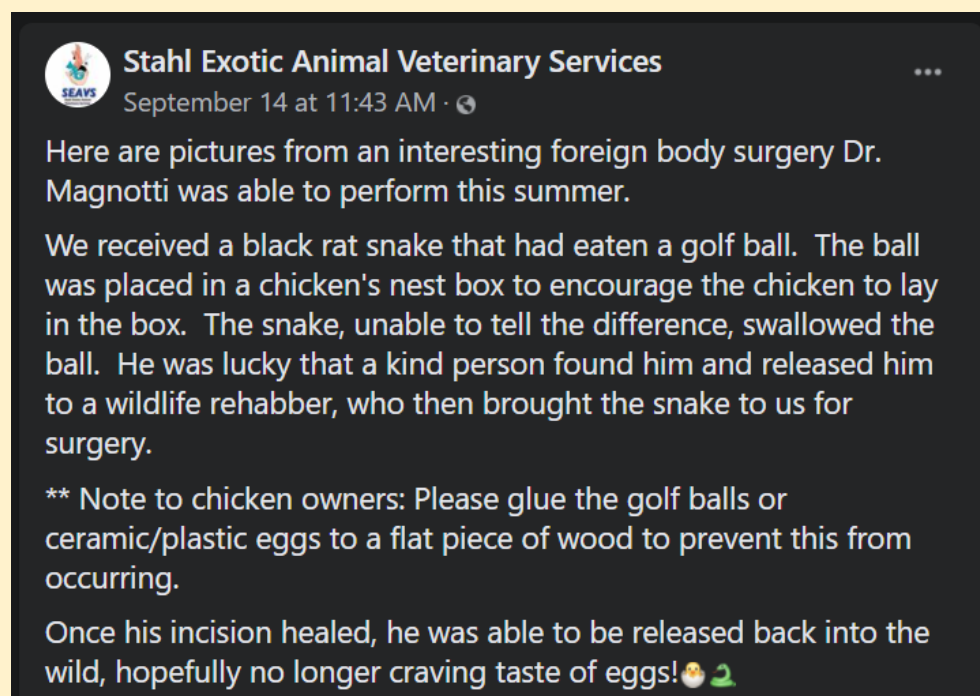
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VHS members help a snake in trouble when it has a ball!

The VHS gets dozens, if not hundreds of emails each year asking members to ID photos of various organisms. Most are herps – reptiles or amphibians – a few are not. And some emails aren't even ID requests, they are people asking for help.

One such situation started on July 8 when an email arrived advising that a snake had eaten a golf ball intended to stimulate egg laying in a chicken coop. VHS Newsletter Editor and former operator of VA Reptile Rescue, Bonnie Keller, sprang into action. The snake was nearly 2 hours away, so Keller enlisted the help of fellow VHS member and friend Amy Kovats, who lived closer to the unfortunate snake. She met the person who had the snake captured, and transported it to Keller, who then transported it to Stahl Exotic Animal Veterinary Services (SEAVS) in Fairfax, VA. Keller has a long -standing relationship with this practice, and knew they would help.

Here is the Facebook post about the situation, posted on Sep 14:



Link to post embedded in the screenshot. The actual Facebook post includes additional photos not shown below.

The snake has been released near to its original location.

(cont'd next pg)

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Here are some of the pictures, including the original photo sent to VHS, as well as those from SEAVS:



On the left:

The Eastern Ratsnake just after it ingested the golf ball. Had we been able to intervene immediately, surgery would not have been needed.



On the right:

The snake as it was when it was received at SEAVS. Note the large swelling where the golf ball is located.



On the left: X ray of the snake with golf ball inside.



On the right: Dr. Magnotti of SEAVS after removing the golf ball.

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FOR THE KIDS (OR KIDS AT HEART)

BY VHS MEMBER ALLY CRISP

How many can you find?

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| B | L | A | C | K | R | A | C | E | R | Q | L | V | S | C |
| W | W | S | F | D | R | H | U | O | K | H | G | N | C | B |
| D | O | G | I | E | K | E | K | A | N | S | N | R | O | C |
| G | R | A | I | N | B | O | W | S | N | A | K | E | P | O |
| R | M | A | Y | L | L | A | C | R | J | F | P | P | P | T |
| E | S | I | T | P | H | R | K | A | X | P | W | O | E | T |
| E | N | V | L | T | W | G | I | X | K | I | Q | F | R | O |
| N | A | E | B | K | L | L | E | S | O | N | G | O | H | N |
| S | K | X | P | I | S | E | W | Z | O | E | E | M | E | M |
| N | E | C | E | C | O | N | S | W | B | S | L | P | A | O |
| A | B | U | L | D | G | C | A | N | F | N | W | H | D | U |
| K | E | D | O | J | C | R | M | K | A | A | O | K | M | T |
| E | K | I | N | G | S | N | A | K | E | K | P | R | Z | H |
| Q | C | K | T | U | S | E | M | H | Q | E | E | L | E | P |

Kingsnake

Corn snake

Milk snake

Pine snake

Hognose

Rainbow Snake

Green snake

Worm snake

Copperhead

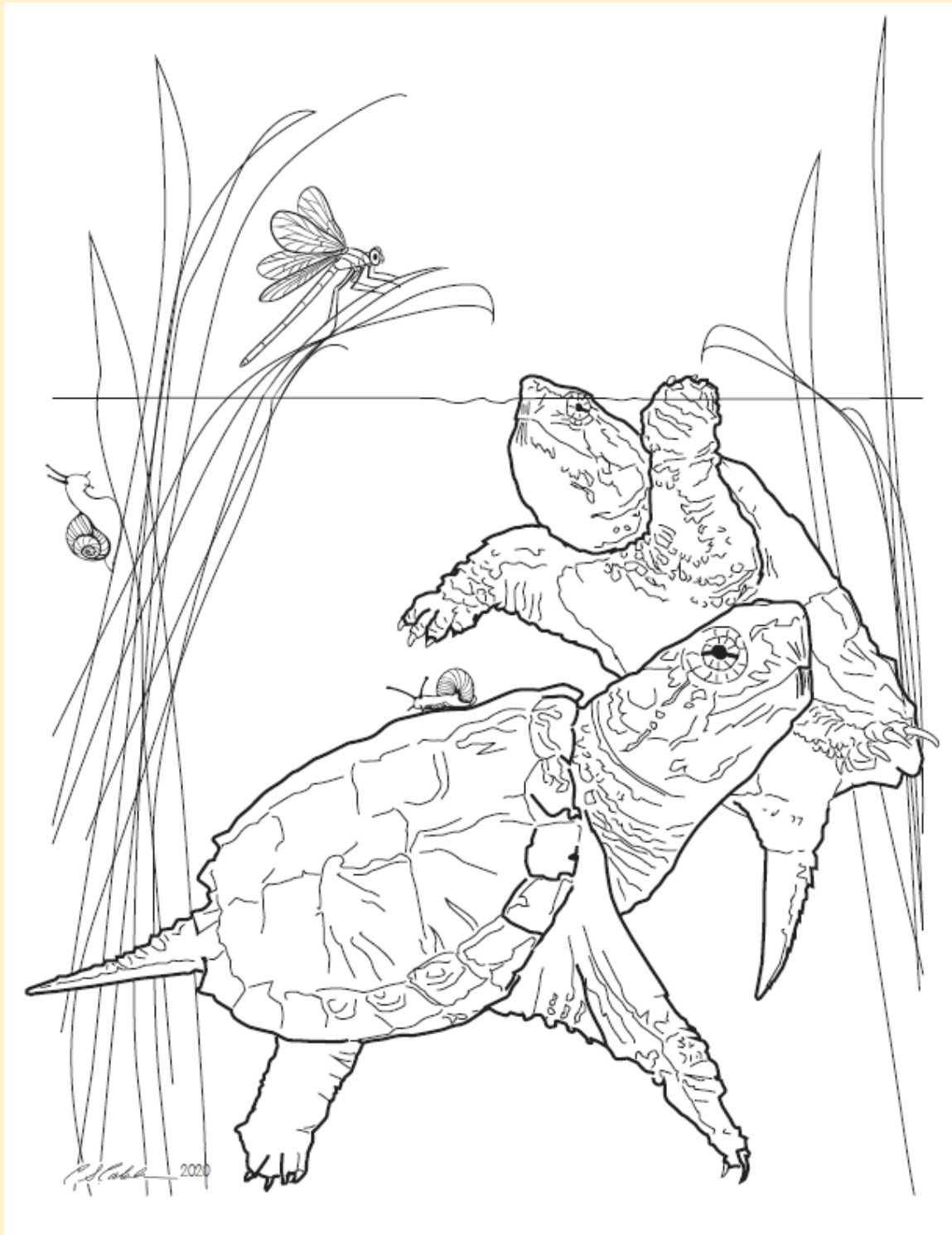
Black Racer

Cottonmouth

Rattlesnake

Are YOU under 18? Do YOU have an idea for something fun that other kids/teens might like to see or do in this newsletter? Send me your ideas! Maybe your idea can be part of the next newsletter. Send them to newsletter@vahersociety.com

Snapping Turtle Coloring Page – by VHS member Carol Cable



Are you an artist? Can you create a coloring page for us? Send it to newsletter@vaherpsociety.com

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Wrapping It Up and Looking Ahead

The last few months have been, well, weird. We all have experienced the sudden changes in our routines, leaving some folks more time to get outside and see what's out there. That has been the silver lining for some – having a chance to appreciate the nature at their doors. In my local area I saw a noticeable increase in the posts on social media like NextDoor asking about various wildlife – birds, flowers, trees, and yes – reptiles. Most of the locals know me as “the Snake Lady” but have also resorted to sending me questions about skunks, squirrels, and other mammals. While they aren't my specialty, I help when I can, and send them to others when I can't.

I encourage everyone to keep venturing outside, even as our temps cool and the crisp air of Autumn invades. There will be some herpetological movement even now, and if we are lucky, we can observe it. Keep sending pictures in for ID, or just to show us what you see. We enjoy them all.

The Fall meeting will be announced shortly, so please be on the lookout for the dates. It will be virtual, I'm sure, but I've heard we have some absolutely AMAZING speakers. (Think internationally known folks you see on TV).

I'll leave you with a few photos for your enjoyment.

Respectfully,

Bonnie Keller

VHS Newsletter Editor

