

## The sinuous, slithery ones and us

Rich Heffern | Apr. 1, 2010 NCR Today

I saw it before my brain lobes even registered I'd seen it. Its beige coils striped with deep russet hourglass shapes blended well against brown leaves, yet a mere glimpse as I approached sent a spark down my spine at light speed that jerked me back like a horror-struck puppet on a string even before my cerebellum announced to my awareness that I'd almost vexed a venomous copperhead by stepping on it.

My brother Bob and his wife Sue live in the Missouri Ozark forest. They wake spring mornings to bluebird serenades outside their window and evenings watch the moon rise through the fragrant native pines.

Every summer for the past dozen years, though, they've been plagued by copperheads. Last June I met one of them up close.

A half dozen or more of these beautiful (but somewhat dangerous) snakes at a time slither near their house on very warm evenings, coiling up on the steps leading to their front porch, even draping themselves over the loops of garden hose that hang nearby.

Bob tries to relocate them by means of a garden hoe and a covered bucket. When he finally loses patience with the outbreak, he kills them with a shovel.

In search of a better strategy, he e-mailed the state's herpetologist and copied me the answer. The expert opined that this seasonal outbreak could be triggered by large numbers of emerging cicadas, a copperhead delicacy, or perhaps a grouping instinct gone awry during the unusually warm nights that lately come to these latitudes, or perhaps a delayed mating assemblage.

"As you can see, I don't know what the hell is going on," the expert concluded.

A lifelong snake admirer, I just finished reading *Snakes: The Evolution of Mystery in Nature*, by Harry W. Greene, an expert on these creatures that move in such sinuous elegance over the ground by just writhing.

If you just read one snake book in your life, Greene's is the one.

He points out that without these icons of mystery on the planet we humans wouldn't be equipped as we are. An evolutionary arms race between early snakes and mammals triggered the development of improved binocular and color vision and large brains in primates, a new theory suggests.

Proposed by anthropologist Lynne Isbell, at the University of California, the theory suggests that, after the dinosaurs disappeared 65 million years ago, snakes and primates shared a long and intimate history, one that forced both groups to evolve new strategies as each attempted to gain the upper hand.

To avoid becoming snake food, early mammals had to develop ways to detect and avoid the reptiles before they could strike. Some animals evolved better snake sniffers, while others developed immunities to serpent venom. Our own ancestors, the early primates, developed a better eye for color, detail and movement and the ability to see in three dimensions — traits that are important for detecting threats at close range.

“All mammals have a sensitivity to snakes, and their brains are shaped in ways that allow them to detect snakes,” Isbell said. “It was only the primates that went the visual route, strengthening the visual system to detect snakes.”

This shows well the interconnectedness of all life.

In Genesis’ third chapter, we read: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

The biblical authors were perhaps tuned into a collective unconscious awareness that recognized the direct competition between snakes and primates helped win us the “supremacy” in the natural world we boast of today. Our “supremacy,” of course, is also problematic for us when we fail to recognize that interconnectedness and it’s not good news for snakes either.

Elements in our religious and cultural views don’t help.

Legend has St. Patrick driving these reptiles from Ireland, though there never were any snakes there. Sure enough, Jesus’ left sandal crushes a serpenty head during his arrest in the Garden in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion*. The film *Snakes on a Plane* was a 2006 cultish horror film that probably helped send airline stock into the tank.

In spite of outbreaks in selected spots, copperheads, and snakes in general, are more threatened by us than we are by them. Their habitat is diminished, as farms and forests disappear. Sister Snake is commonly killed on sight, even the most helpful varieties that consume pesky rodents, even by folk with a Francis-adorned birdbath in the garden.

Fr. Thomas Berry reminded us: “If the outer world is diminished in its grandeur then the emotional, imaginative, intellectual, and spiritual life of the human is diminished or extinguished.”

Our inner being is as threatened as the snakes if we continue to transform natural beauty into soul-deadening, concrete-laden, box store landscapes. We still need each other, the snakes and us.

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