

TIM SPUCKLER BIO

I have always been interested in cool creatures. As a kid who grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, I would collect and keep insects and other invertebrates as pets. It's a pastime that I still enjoy today. Eventually a family member presented me with *A Golden Nature Guide to Familiar American Insects*. I was fascinated at all the neat six-legged "aliens" that I had yet to encounter. I still remember specific passages from that book.

When playing behind a friend's garage, I flipped a rock and found a Redback Salamander – my first "wild" herp. I was hooked. How could something so amazing be living behind someone's garage? And what more was out there? It wasn't long after that I was given, from the same Golden Guide series of books, *Reptiles and Amphibians - A Guide to Familiar American Species*. I was blown away. Not only were the illustrations awesome, featuring paintings of herps in their natural habitats, but to someone single digits in age, the species accounts were astonishing. For example, "Hog-nosed snake - is unique and amusing. When molested, it hisses, spreads, and strikes, as though to appear dangerous, but it never bites. If threats fail, it rolls over and plays dead." I'd never heard of such a thing before.

The book was filled with novelties like Alligator Snapping Turtles, Collared Lizards, Mud Snakes, Tailed Toads and Mudpuppies – all unique and interesting in their own way. Reading about a yellow snake that could grow to be seven feet long that resided in the United States was an eye-opener. At this time it was the mid-1970s – snakes were not widely available in pet stores and the captive breeding of them was just beginning.

I knew that I wanted to seek out all the herps in my "Golden Guide," and have spent much of my life doing just that. I learned that I could ride my bike to vacant lots in Cleveland and find DeKay's Brown Snakes - a thrilling experience. My family moved to a suburb when I was 14 and there were new herps to be found: Milk Snakes, Garter Snakes, Snapping Turtles, Wood Frogs and more. As time went on, I sought out more strange and wonderful beings (just this year I found my first-ever Ringed Salamander and Prairie Kingsnake).

In high school, I discovered the book *Snakes: The Keeper and the Kept*, by Carl Kauffeld. On the topic of keeping snakes as pets, he wrote, "this original impulse exists in many of us as an urge to capture and hold beauty, and incidentally to learn." This struck a chord with me – I wanted herps, and more specifically snakes, in my life every day. At that time I would keep wild-caught snakes for a while releasing them back where I found them. In 1980 joined a herp society - The Northern Ohio Association of Herpetologists (NOAH) and found other people with similar interests. The monthly meetings not only featured presentations, but members also often brought in their herp pets.

I still remember the first time someone presented a Pueblan Milk Snake at a meeting – a species that was only discovered a few years earlier. I'd never seen anything like it (there was no internet in the early 1980s). Not long after that, a striking orange and black snake was available at a local exotic pet store. It was my first encounter with a Honduran Milk Snake. Three hundred bucks was a lot of money for a teenager back then, but I bought it. That snake lived for 27 years in my care.

After keeping snakes as pets for 10 years, the idea of breeding them seemed like a fun prospect. With a resource like NOAH, I could learn how to "fine tune" the aspects of breeding reptiles and raising their

offspring. In the late 1980s I produced Honduran Milk Snakes, Pueblan Milks and Southeastern Five-lined Skinks.

It's hard to describe the excitement of seeing reptile eggs hatching or looking into a Garter Snake enclosure and see it filled with newborn baby snakes. The enjoyment that came from producing a few reptiles eventually caused me to expand to Corn Snakes, Kingsnakes, Rat Snakes and a number of other North American colubrids.

The art of selective breeding has been a fun path to pursue as well, interesting and "out of the norm" colors and patterns of snakes offer genetic pathways to investigate. "High black" and "high white" are just two variations of Honduran Milk Snakes that I am currently working on. Hopefully another project of mine, the world's first ghost Baird's Rat Snake, will pan out in 2024.

On the other hand, finding herps in the wild has caused me to really appreciate not only their lifestyles, but also the geographic variations of wild snakes. I continue to be enamored with many of the "classic" snakes in my "Golden Guide," no matter how common they may be in the wild or in the pet trade – I have a nice collection of Yellow Rat Snakes and am still amazed that a seven-foot, mostly-yellow serpent can be found right here in the United States and I can keep them in my home and enjoy them.

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