

“Foul and Loathsome Animals”

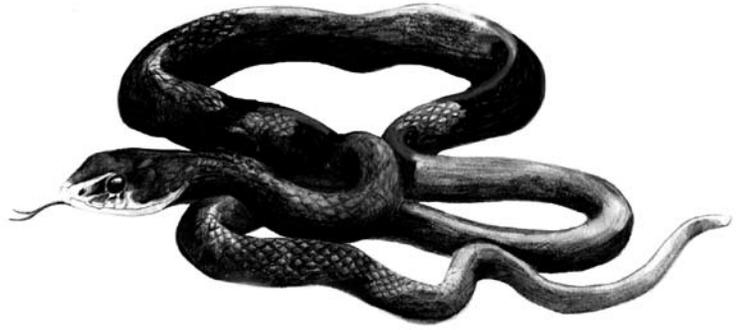
Like most humans, I like to order my world with labels and categories. I don't suggest this is a good human trait, just a way of making sense of an amazingly complex world. I have created, for example, two categories to classify people's attitudes toward reptiles and amphibians: *Linnean* and *Larson*.

All high school biology students learned of Carl Linneaus, perhaps the most famous categorizer in history. In 1735, his *Systema Naturae* was published, in which he developed the hierarchical system of taxonomy that is still used to classify plants and animals. Linneaus famously described reptiles and amphibians in the following passage: “These foul and loathsome animals are abhorrent because of their cold body, pale color, cartilaginous skeleton, filthy skin, fierce aspect, calculating eye, offensive voice, squalid habitation, and terrible venom; and so their Creator has not exerted his powers to make many of them.”

The other category is named for Gary Larson, of course. All who remember his “Far Side” cartoons know of his keen interest in science. He was especially interested in herpetology (the study of reptiles and amphibians), and his affection for these creatures dates back to his boyhood. Snakes often appeared in his cartoons. A personal favorite bears the caption “God makes the snake.” The panel shows The Bearded Fellow on his cloud rapidly spinning a block of clay into long, limp ropes. The thought balloon reads, “Boy . . . These things are a cinch!”

Now that the first warm sunny Saturday of spring has arrived, I imagine you will be outdoors enjoying some thermal therapy. Assuming you're in the Larson camp, you'll find yourself in good company. Consider how welcome this heat will be to those cold of blood just roused from winter torpor. Garter snakes may stretch out on your door step, painted turtles will appear on logs, and throughout the lower elevations of our region, vernal pools will be alive with spotted salamanders and the cacophonous music of wood frogs.

There is one particular member of this herptile group that I am hoping a Larson will spot: the North American racer (formerly the eastern racer). Chances are you won't. The racer has likely regained its status as the rarest snake



in Vermont. Also known as black racers, these snakes grow up to six feet long, are a solid silky black, and are as fast as the name implies. When herpetologist Jim Andrews organized the first Vermont Reptile and Amphibian Atlas project, he found that while reports of racers were not uncommon, nearly all were at least forty years old. The Bonnyvale Center helped to organize volunteers to search southeastern Vermont for racer anecdotes that might help to pinpoint remnant populations. I spoke with quite a few people who had seen racers years before, and remembered them vividly! Thanks to these anecdotes, Jim located a small population on the Guilford/Vernon town line in 2003.

I accompanied Jim and his snake team on visits to monitor the population, and now include myself among those with vivid memories of racer encounters. My first racer, an impressive, weathered beast, lay still in a thatch of grass, his head raised enquiringly. We managed to corral him, and three of us held the nervous but cooperative captive for measurement and photographs. He was a few inches shy of six feet in length. Though scruffy in a skin about to shed, the snake was an elegant creature—slender, with a narrow head, sculpted brow, white chin, and dark eyes.

No other snake in southeastern Vermont could have prepared me for the experience of watching the released racer move through the open brushy habitat. As various snake segments appeared and disappeared in the vegetation, he seemed unbelievably long. Like quicksilver, he moved with the flowing grace and speed that exist on the frontier of solid and liquid. “Snake” did not even seem an adequate word to describe the amazing creature. “Serpentine,” perhaps.

In Zadoch Thompson's *Natural History of Vermont*, published in 1853, he noted that the racer “. . . was formerly very generally believed to possess the power of fascination . . . but the notion is now very generally exploded.” I'm not so sure the explosion is warranted. Fascination is an apt description of the awe I felt during my interactions with racers.

Despite the efforts of Jim Andrews, the VT Department of Fish & Wildlife, and other conservation cooperators, the population seems to be declining. Last summer, no racers were found at all. This spring, Jim hopes to mount a camera near their den site to photograph racers as they emerge to bask. If they're still there, I'm sure they're out today.

Racers have become rare for many reasons. The open fields and early successional habitat they need has become less abundant. Modern hay-making equipment is also more lethal, especially to large snakes like racers. Roads are also snake traps, especially in the spring and fall when asphalt holds heat and just begs for basking. Jim found that the radio-tagged racers moved over three miles from their den site to foraging sites. Few places remain in our region where a snake can travel three miles without encountering a road. Another reason for the disappearance of racers is the reaction they evoke from the Linnean clan: many of those who reported historical racer encounters participated in the demise of the snakes they met.

I am hopeful that there are enough Larsons out there that more populations of racers will be found in our region, and perhaps in areas where the existing habitat will allow them to recover. I hope that this amazing Vermont native won't disappear on our watch.

Whatever herpetological stripe you wear, should you encounter a magnificent big black snake on your sunny Saturday stroll, I hope you will contact me. Larsons are encouraged to take photos. Linneans are encouraged to take a deep breath, remember that these snakes are harmless and timid, and contact me right away. I'll be right over with my camera, and hopes for a fascinating experience.

