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# Don't Fear the Racer

It's simple, but sound advice for coping with anything that elicits fear: learn about it. Knowledge is a powerful weapon – often, not a weapon to be used in a physical sense, but one that ultimately flips your perception of something you previously thought insidious.

Like destructive fallout from an unfounded rumor, a morsel of misinformation about a wild animal can travel a long way – warping interpretations of its behavior and intent. Through more than 28 years of interacting with the public about Michigan wildlife topics we've heard citizens voice misinterpretations and misperceptions about wild things with remarkable, if not, unsettling frequency. Some of the erroneous statements come from children, but most are from adults! Too many accounts end in the persecution of the “offending” creature. Snakes are the most common victims, and the Blue Racer may be the most misunderstood of them all.

Right out of the gate, even the assigned scientific name of our state's second largest snake, *Coluber constrictor*, connotes a lack of clarity regarding its behavior. While it may use its body to help control or “pin” prey to the ground, it is definitely incapable of actual constriction. This was once a common snake in rural areas throughout most of the Lower Peninsula. Now, it has become locally extinct or nearly so in many locations. Why? Simply put, for a variety of reasons, if you are a large snake living in a world near people, being large gets you killed. With females reaching up to seven feet in length (males closer to four) the racer definitely qualifies. The “big three” decimating factors for any large snakes are habitat loss, road-kill, and direct persecution.

The Black Ratsnake, (Michigan's largest) is a forest-dwelling, tree-climbing constrictor that suffers this trifecta of human-induced scourges, but widespread loss of forest habitat in the southern half of the LP makes consideration of the other two factors almost moot. By contrast, habitat loss is a relative non-factor for the racer, a fairly adaptable species that is at home in almost any large spread of natural habitat. Farmland, as long as there is ample cover and usually some proximity to wetland habitat, is quite suitable. So, why so rare? Too many lethal encounters with *Homo sapiens* – whether on foot or on wheels.

Here are a few common, but *wrong* statements made about Blue Racers: 1. They are poisonous. 2. They are aggressive. 3. They will chase you. To a certain segment of macho men and shovel-wielding women

any one of these beliefs grants them license to kill. Here is the more benign reality subverted beneath a relative barrage of often-repeated, widely-circulated, erroneous statements...

The state-protected Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake is Michigan's only venomous species. This is such a shy snake we tell audiences that if you get bitten it was almost certainly *your* fault. The racer is not a venomous species, however, if a wild one is captured it will often bite viciously in an attempt to free itself. A large one will draw blood, but the wounds are skin-deep, delivered from its short, sharp, barb-like teeth. Their main function, like teeth in most snakes, is for gripping, not killing prey. An adult racer can't even kill a frog – one of its most regular prey – with these teeth. Thus, it is swallowed alive.



*Utility rights-of-way are excellent avenues in which to look for racers and other snakes. We found an adult racer at this one south of Manistee over Labor Day Weekend basking on a pile of bleached-out, dead timber. Racer populations appear to be faring better on the west side of the LP than elsewhere.*

The Blue Racer is the wildest, most high-strung, nervous and difficult-to-tame Michigan snake. It also possesses an innate hyper-sensitivity to objects that move in its field of vision unmatched by any other Michigan species. Movement of a large object nearby elicits wariness, nervous tail vibration, and often, a panicked response. It can disappear in an instant when cover is near. It will also quite adeptly climb a tree to escape perceived danger if shrubs or low branches are available to give it a start from ground level. When a living object small enough to eat suddenly moves in its line of vision, a “chase, grasp and swallow” response is elicited. Conversely, the object - large or small - in its field of vision that remains motionless elicits no response whatsoever. It's as if the object in view can only be *perceived* as “alive” if it is moving.

So, if a racer approaches you and you run, were you “chased?” To those unfamiliar with its reactive, motion-sensing behavior and uncomfortable with wild snakes to begin with, the answer is usually *yes*. One might also be inclined to interpret this as an act of aggression on the snake's part, then label the snake itself as “aggressive” when relating the account to others.

We've never in our lives felt as if a racer (or any other snake) was intentionally coming after us, but Carol and I have had such claims relayed to us countless times over the years. In some circumstances the person was standing motionless when the snake approached. In others, the person was merely walking down a trail and looked back to find a racer trailing, perhaps, ten feet behind. When the person stops, the racer stops. When the person resumes walking the snake resumes following.

Two more accounts of racer encounters hint at finely-tuned behavior that apparently aids its ability to locate and capture any items on a remarkably diverse menu:

On separate occasions we were told that a person saw a Blue Racer or two following a group of deer as they slowly ambled, foraging, through a field. In one account the man noted that the deer actually seemed to ignore the presence of the snakes.

Additionally, about twenty years ago, we met and talked with an old farmer we encountered on the roadside next to his acreage north of our house. First, he stated that he liked seeing racers on his property and looked forward to every encounter, but then lamented that he hadn't seen one in years. He suspected they were being hit by cars and killed by people who didn't like them. He recalled days when he would turn around on the seat of a moving tractor to see one, or sometimes two, trailing behind it

through the farm scape. Alert with heads raised, they would regularly dart back and forth, stopping suddenly, he assumed, to capture and eat a grasshopper or frog stirred up by the tractor.

Although hardly based on scientific methodology, we've formulated an interpretation of the Blue Racer's behavior, feeding, and survival strategy that seems to corroborate every one of a slew of oral accounts, despite all the circumstantial variations. It also closely mirrors many other scientifically-studied examples of interspecific symbiotic relationships...

The racer has evolved a unique feeding strategy to capture prey in open spaces. This strategy requires that the snake's body temperature be warm enough to allow it to act and react quickly to the stimuli of other animal movements in its field of view. Since, like many snake species, it has a difficult time locating motionless prey, it has evolved behaviorally to take advantage of the movements of larger animals - usually mammals (sometimes vehicles) - as they move through the environment. By trailing a short distance behind the mammal the snake watches for hopping, scampering or slithering motion of grasshoppers, frogs, mice, young birds or smaller snakes disturbed by the large moving object. Since the snake will "lose sight" of the creature the moment it stops, it is imperative that the snake darts instantaneously to seize it while it is still in motion. The hyper-alertness and hyperactivity serve a secondary function. If the large creature suddenly reverses course or bolts toward it, the racer can quickly flee out of harm's way.

Which brings to mind one more oft-repeated account: playing "tag" with a racer. When the person being followed sees the racer, rather than running in alarm, he or she turns and goes after it. The snake responds by quickly darting out of the way. Then, shortly after the person resumes walking, the racer is right back to following them. Some have reported this back-and-forth exchange to occur several times in succession!



*This beautiful two-year-old Blue Racer is still our most "nervous" snake, but it has settled down enough to be carefully handled. Give it a try this Sunday!*

Are racers aggressive? No, just in unique possession of specialized survival traits that, when realized, should generate human responses of wonder rather than dread, *and* induce desires for preservation in lieu of persecution.

In May, 2015, we had an opportunity to videotape a close encounter with a wild five-foot Blue Racer while surveying for reptiles and amphibians in Ottawa County with MDNR non-game wildlife biologist, Lori Sargent. Although we approached it cautiously so as not to make it panic and flee, its wariness, attention to motion, and tail-vibrating are amply displayed. A portion of one of the videos was used in the MDNR's *Sixty Second Snakes* YouTube video featuring the Blue Racer.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mWL0nQdxCO>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39A7Z0L7KQM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiWHtq7ziPM>

On Sunday, September 11, meet our two-year-old Blue Racer during Nature Discovery's Seventh Annual Celebrate Michigan Snakes Day. True to racer form it reacts strongly to sudden movements, but we will give any willing visitor special opportunity to handle it under our supervision! Read on for details...

*Jim McGrath*



# *Come Celebrate our 7th Annual*

# *Michigan*

# *SNAKES*

# *Day*



***Sunday, September 11***    ***1 to 5pm***    ***\$5/person***

Join us for **Michigan Snakes Day**. If you love snakes, this day is for you. If you loathe snakes, this day is *definitely* for you! Meet live specimens of 10 of our state's 17 species! Do you know anyone who is afraid of, dislikes, or otherwise has uncomfortable feelings toward snakes? Coax them into coming. We bill this event as the most benign setting you will ever encounter to help you feel better about them!

At 2pm, sit-in on the presentation, ***Facts Over Fear: What Everyone Should Know About Snakes***. While showing live Michigan-native specimens discussion touches on an array of erroneous beliefs spread through society that produce bad feelings toward these surprisingly gentle reptiles. Will a snake bite? Are snakes slimy? Will a snake chase you? Do snakes have fangs? Will a venomous snake ever appear in your yard? One question after another produces a factual explanation that sheds light on the unthreatening reality of these needlessly-persecuted reptiles. We will help you identify all of them through up-close inspection.

There's more! Watch a snake climb a tree. See snakes eating worms, fish, frogs and mice. Lots of handling and photo opportunities, too. Visit Nature Discovery's entire zoo that also includes Michigan-native turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards. Knowledgeable staff is on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit.



*Watch a Black Rat Snake eat mice. Handle many of our gentle snakes like this Western Fox Snake. Photo ops galore!*



## *Catch Us on WLNZ Radio's Coffee Break on Friday, September 30*

Jim is scheduled to appear on Friday, September 30 at 9:15am, discussing Michigan wildlife topics. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at [lcc.edu/radio/onair/](http://lcc.edu/radio/onair/) or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at [lcc.edu/tv/watch](http://lcc.edu/tv/watch). We'll post a reminder on our Facebook fan page.

## *Saturday Gifted/Talented Youth Classes thru LCC*

Carol is teaching 5-week Saturday LCC Fall GATE classes (East Campus) beginning October 22.

Creepy Crawlies (9am-noon, Grades 2-3) Learn about Michigan wildlife, plenty of live animals in class each day! Includes a field trip to Nature Discovery.

Fun with Physics-ADVANCED (1-4pm, Grades 4-6) Learn how to build a simple motor, generate electricity from renewable sources, build a solar cooker and more in this hands on, project based class. To register or for more information visit [lcc.edu/seriousfun](http://lcc.edu/seriousfun) and click on Fall/Spring GATE.

## *Thank You!*

*To Elisabeth Baumann, Wendell Hocking, Jessica Robach and Natalya Swartz for much-needed volunteer hours over the summer.*

*David Meyer & family donation.*

*John McCoy for sponsoring two separate Nature Discovery presentations this summer at Huron County Nature Center.*

## *Around the State in September*

- ❖ Saturday, September 10: 9am to 3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Sportsmen for Youth Day, Muskegon Co. Fairgrounds.
- ❖ Saturday, September 17: 10am to 3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Salmon Festival, Grand Haven.
- ❖ Saturday, September 17: 10am to 4pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Chippewa Nature Center, Midland.
- ❖ Sunday, September 18: 10am to 2pm. Michigan Salamanders Interactive Exhibit; Williamston Farmers Market.
- ❖ Saturday, September 25: 1:30pm. MI Snakes Presentation; Wild Birds Unlimited, Grosse Pointe Woods.



*Our six-foot female rat snake cozies up to visitor, Michelle Bak, during our exhibit at Ludington State Park over Labor Day weekend.*

# *The Choice of Voices: Scientific & Religious Leaders vs Political Talking Heads*

It is refreshing to hear a world religious leader siding with the world's top climate scientists to sound the alarm about the seriousness of man-made climate change, then calling for each and every human to take personal steps to curtail it. In his recent message marking the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation Pope Francis makes a series of poignant statements regarding the most serious (yet, effectively subverted) issue of our time. Be sure to click on "message" in this column:

*Pope Francis Calls Climate Change a Sin*

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/sep/1/pope-francis-calls-climate-change-sin/>

Although our cola of choice, it's a small sacrifice to give it up until they not only stop funding climate-denying legislators. See what other mega-corporations are misrepresenting their images to the public to maximize profits.

*U.S. Companies Tout Climate Policies, Fund Climate Skeptics*

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-climate-donations-idUSKCN11C0ED>

-JM

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**NATURE DISCOVERY 5900 N. Williamston Road Williamston, MI 48895**

**(517) 655-5349    [naturedisc87@gmail.com](mailto:naturedisc87@gmail.com)    [www.naturediscovery.net](http://www.naturediscovery.net)**