

# THE FORKED TONGUE

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE GREATER CINCINNATI HERPETOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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February 2008

## The Editor's Den

The February Forked Tongue features an article by Al Winstel on the flower pot snake

## Calendar of Events

February 23 and 24 – Educational Program at the Krohn Conservatory.

March 5, 2008 – Monthly meeting featuring Jason Folt speaking on Herping in Arizona

March 15, 2008 – Ohio Amphibian Research and Conservation Conference. See details below.

April 2, 2008 – Monthly Meeting featuring Kristen Wiley of the Kentuck Reptile Zoo speaking on a Timber Rattlesnake Study.

## New Forum on GCHS Website

Please take advantage of the forum on our website. Jason Folt created this to provide a tool for communications between GCHS members. It can be used for what ever you want. For example, you may want to organize a road trip to the Columbus or Indianapolis show, or coordinate a rodent shipment between several people to defray costs.

## Digitization of old newsletters

I have a new list of newsletters that we need.

1980 – January, April, and October

1994 – July, October, November, and December

1997 – January

2000 – March through October

If you have a stash of old newsletters, please go through them to see if you have any of these. If you find any bring them to the next meeting. We will gladly return them after they are scanned.

## Flowerpot Snake

By Al Winstel

I'm not sure if I attended the first Herp Show in the U.S. or not, but I recall hearing that the Columbus Shows were the beginning of the show craze that has swept our country and even other countries to the point where there

is pretty much a show somewhere every weekend of the year. I've always enjoyed attending these get togethers alone or with friends to converse with folks that I might not otherwise see, pick their brains for info on herp care, and of course to wander the aisles finding new and unusual species or strains of reptile. After many years of herp show attendance, several times a year I still discover species I haven't had the pleasure of seeing before in my life. Each trip is filled with anticipation. I stroll along enjoying tables full of captive bred corn snakes, kings, gophers, bulls, pines, rat snakes, bearded dragons, leopard geckos, fat tail geckos, crested geckos, veiled chameleons, ball pythons, boa constrictors, and rosy boas. Occasionally there will be some European or Asian rat snakes, an albino garter snake, armadillo lizards, or blue tongue skinks.

Recently, I was browsing around the aisles of a Columbus show searching for attractive representatives of species that were old friends or possibly even a new herp that I had never seen before. I had a European legless lizard and a twin spotted rat snake that both needed mates. I passed several Surinam toads, an animal I've always wanted to keep. However, since I have been recently working with fish, my desire to spend my time changing gallons of tank water each week is at an all time low. Nearly hidden behind the toads was a small deli cup marked "brown snake." Sure enough, this turned out to be a *Storeria* subspecies from out West. Then I noticed a second deli cup underneath the brown snake cup. The cover had, "smooth round snake" written on it in magic marker, with no additional information. After over 40 years of collecting, keeping, and writing about herps, this was a new one. A lingering look through the clear cup top yielded a view of .....dirt. Whatever it was, it wasn't very large. I asked the gentlemen behind the table if the cup was empty. He explained that it wasn't. I got permission to open the cup and look through the dirt and there actually was a snake in it. The snake was about 6" long and the thickness of coat hanger wire with no obvious head or tail and colored dark brownish black just like the dirt. The body was very shiny and appeared to be all the same thickness, with just a hint of tiny scales covering the surface. When touched, this serpent began to wriggle madly in an attempt to hide itself.

Based on the title of this article you probably have guessed by now that I had been poking a flowerpot snake

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(*Ramphotyphlops braminus*). The critter was a long way from home. This tiny blind or thread snake of the family Typhlopidae is native to southern Asia, but has been transported all over the world. Including Florida and Texas, in the soil placed into flowerpots to nourish commercially sold potted plants. A further look at the snake (yes, if I squinted I could almost see it) showed a purplish belly, two light colored scales at eye position on one end, and a tiny spine on the other end. The body seemed able to wrap around my finger and hold on tightly while the head prodded my skin. The closest I had come to a blind snake previously in my life was in 1983 on a zoo collecting expedition to Trinidad and Tobago off the coast of Venezuela. I believe I was shown a specimen of *Typhlops brongersmianus*, a tiny brownish snake with a couple of lighter spots, but did not photograph it. It could also have been *Leptotyphlops albifrons*, these things are so hard to see! Prior to this during my childhood I seem to remember a blind snake invading an ant nest either in a National Geographic article or a Disney nature film (strange what we remember). Anyway, I paid the tiny price for the tiny snake and placed deli cup and snake into my inside coat pocket for the trip back to Cincinnati (sometimes I use Styrofoam containers with hot water bottles, but I figured the tiny cup would get lost in there).

Once home it was time to research exactly how such a serpent should be kept. My library and the internet helped me confirm the species (as well as possible without counting head scales and scale rows, something not likely until the little girl expires). I do know it's a girl since this species is parthenogenic. All specimens are female and lay eggs without being fertilized. Some references suggest that live birth has also been seen on occasion and the incubation time for the eggs is just a few weeks. Guess I will find out if rice grain sized eggs appear in the enclosure. Most references suggested a layered substrate consisting of gravel, sandy soil, and mulch topping in that order. I set up a 1 gallon jar with the substrate and added a tiny lid for a water bowl. Food consists of "ants," ant eggs, larvae, and pupae, as well as termites. These snakes have been observed grabbing termites by the abdomen, snapping off the heads, and swallowing the rest. A scientist at Stony Brook University has actually videotaped blind snakes feeding on ant larvae and pupae (the latter are often sold freeze dried as "ant eggs" by bird food suppliers). The tapes are available on the internet at <http://gibbon.anat.sunysb.edu/kleylab/videos.html> if you have a slow evening. One keeper said their snakes ate the freeze dried pupae after rehydrating, freezing, and thawing them.

In an attempt to avoid spending over \$30 for a jar of ant pupae, I checked with an entomologist friend on

exactly where I might find ant nests in the middle of the winter. He was not terribly encouraging, but his advice boiled down to, "Remember to bring a shovel," wherever I decided to hunt. I spent 2 or 3 days outdoors flipping all manner of cover and was lucky enough to find 3 ant colonies. In one the ants were buried too deep for recovery, in another the ants were on the surface but there was no sign of larvae which I thought might be in a nearby piece of wood that I wasn't equipped to demolish, and in the third, both ants and larvae were congregated tightly together under a board. At first I didn't even know the larvae were there, they were so tiny. A naked eye view showed tiny black ants intermingled with white dust that might have been sawdust. Use of a hand lens turned these dots into squirming white larvae. I placed them, along with the ants, into the original deli cup with the snake. I had yet to move her into my jar habitat-I was concerned I might never find her in there! Anyway the ants bunched up again under a wood chip in the cup and the larvae slowing disappeared. Whether the ants or snake were eating them was unclear. I'm still not convinced that the snake actually eats adult ants. By now I had become desperate enough to order the ant pupae (luckily they found a cheaper way to ship, so I was only out a little over \$20). Upon their arrival, I prepared them as suggested in the internet reference I found and introduced 6 to the cup. The next day, a couple were gone as far as I could tell. I also introduced the larvae of some wood boring beetles, some slug eggs, and a few tiny earthworms to the cup. So far, the flower pot snake is still alive. I'm not certain that she is eating or what she is eating and I'm hoping for a break in the weather so that ants begin to bring their larvae and pupae up above the ground to warm them up. I still haven't moved the snake into the gallon jar, since I have been trying to photograph her and would like to keep her catchable for a few days more. I've also noticed that the blind snake has a tiny whitish forked tongue that is protruded occasionally.

This tiny creature has so far given me a lot of enjoyment, as well as an education (and quite a bit of exercise). My wife has pronounced her as just the right size for a "pet" snake. I discovered there are over 300 species of blind snakes worldwide, the really big ones getting to 3 feet long. They are found on nearly every continent. Some occur in root masses of epiphytes above the ground. They not only climb trees, but also cross roads during rainstorms. Some have teeth only on the lower jaw, some only on the upper. Colors vary and patterns include spotted and speckled. Some species have anal spurs like boas and pythons. Blind snakes are able to secrete chemicals that repel ants so that they can penetrate ant nests and catch their food without being destroyed or becoming ant food themselves. Now if I could just see her!

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### Classified Advertising Policy

GCHS Members may run a free classified ad of 7 lines or less at no charge for an unlimited time; however, the ad will be canceled after one month unless the editor is informed to continue it. Please include scientific names for the animals with your ad as well as your phone number and area code.

Ads of up to 7 lines for non-member are \$2 per issue; ad charges for items more than 7 lines long are as follows:

Business card size	\$3 per issue
1/4 page	\$6 per issue
1/½ page	\$10 per issue
Full page	\$20 per issue

**The GCHS is not liable for the quality of the merchandise advertised. The Society also reserves the right to refuse any ad considered inappropriate.**

### Requirements for Submitting Articles to the Forked Tongue

Articles can be submitted via CD or hard copy to Editor, GCHS 11470 Gatch Hill Road, Aurora, IN 47001.

Articles may be e-mailed to Grady Calhoun at [gradycalhoun@embarqmail.com](mailto:gradycalhoun@embarqmail.com).

Black and white photographs can be included with articles. Photo submissions should include your name, phone number, and description of photo on the back. Photos can be returned. All time dependent submissions must be in the editor's possession no later than the meeting previous to the publication.

### Classifieds

Discount: A 10% discount is offered to all card-carrying members of the GCHS at *All Creatures Animal Hospital*. Dr. Dan Meakin, All Creatures, 1894 Ohio Pike, Amelia, OH 45102, 513-797-7387.

Discount: A 10% discount is offered to all card carrying members of the GCHS at Dr. Dahlhausen's Veterinary Clinic, 5989 Meijer Dr., Suite 2, Milford, Ohio 513-576-0131

(Number to left of decimal indicates males; number to right of decimal indicates females; number to right of second decimal indicates number of unknown sex. For example, 3.2.1=3 males, 2 females, and 1 unsexed specimen)

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### Currently Held Positions

President	Grady Calhoun	(812) 926-1206	Vice President	Dean Alessandrini	(513) 347-0099
		(513) 564-6041	Editor	Grady Calhoun	(812) 926-1206
Treasurer	Peggy Fille	(513) 528-4452			(513) 564-6041
Sergeant-at-Arms	Bruce Fille	(513) 528-4452	Education Committee Chairman		
Advisor	Vacant		Peggy Fille		(513) 528-4452
Secretary	Kyle Becker	(513) 831-4898			

### About the GCHS

The Greater Cincinnati Herpetological Society holds monthly meetings which typically consist of a short business section, a refreshment intermission, and a program related to herpetology. Both members and nonmembers are invited to attend. Membership is open to anyone with an interest in reptiles and amphibians. New members may sign up by mail or at the monthly meetings. Members receive monthly issues of *The Forked Tongue* and free classified advertising. Annual dues should be directed to the secretary at the society's mailing address, according to the rates below:

Student	\$10.00	Corresponding	\$10.00
Individual	\$15.00	Sustaining	\$25.00
Family	\$20.00	Institutional	\$30.00
Contributing	\$50.00		

### Why Be a Member?

Receive monthly issues of *The Forked Tongue*

- Meet individuals knowledgeable about herpetoculture
- Have access to captive-bred herps and feeder animals
- Participate in society-sponsored field trips, and outings.
- Receive a 10 percent discount on herp-related items and services when you show a valid membership card at the following establishments:

Delhi Pet Center	(513) 451-4015
Kentucky Reptile Zoo	(606) 663-9160
Harrison Pet Center	(513) 367-1115
All Creatures Animal Hospital	(513) 797-7387
Dr. Dahlhausen's	(513) 576-1990

P.O. Box 14783  
Cincinnati, OH 45250

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