

VHS EDUCATION COMMITTEE REPORT for OCTOBER, 2019 to OCTOBER, 2020

Compiled by Mike Clifford (mjc4h@vt.edu), Education Committee Chairman. VHS members are encouraged to submit a brief report of their herp educational activities for the annual report.

The past 12 months have posed many challenges and some opportunities for the Virginia Herpetological Society's education efforts. Beginning in March, the threats from the COVID-19 virus pandemic have resulted in postponement or elimination of environmental festivals, Master Naturalist classes, herp programs at schools and libraries, large-group field surveys, and our other normal educational activities. On the other hand, we've seen a substantial increase in on-line herp ID requests & reports from the stay-near-home and outdoor-recreation public. Our VHS educators are exploring innovative new ways to safely work with the public. Two virtual statewide VHS herp surveys this past summer and participation in the virtual VAS Virginia BioBlitz on September 26 serve as examples. Starting in November 2019, we formed a "VHS Educational Presenters Committee" to handle the increasing number of requests from around the state for live presentations and/or tabling exhibits focused on our reptiles and amphibians. Most of these requests come to the chair of the Educational Committee, who then forwards the requests to the presenters committee instead of the entire executive council. VHS members who would like to serve on the Educational Presenters Committee should contact Mike Clifford (mjc4h@vt.edu).

EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES REPORTS

Mike Clifford fortunately was able to teach the herpetology class to 25 trainees of Pocahontas VMN Chapter on March 7th. Later on, he was twice scheduled to teach at the Central Piedmont VMN training but the classes ended up being cancelled until 2021 because of COVID-19. In July, Mike performed in a video presentation about the Northern Cottonmouth in Virginia in a segment of the "Wonder Project" put together by Virginia Cooperative Extension agents. In September, Mike provided snake management and safety information to Roanoke area Master Gardeners for their use with the public. Quite a few non-identification requests for information were emailed to Mike as the education committee chair. Many of these were "home and garden" questions: how to keep snakes out of the house, how to keep kids and pets safe from copperheads in the landscape, how to protect turtle nests in the yard, etc. Two sets of parents asked for recommendations about books and other educational materials for their herp-enthusiast children. Among other things, he sent them free copies of his Snakes of Virginia book.

Larry Mendoza: I will be having a videographer coming to my house from the Chesterfield public county library to film a snake edutainment video they will be hosting for one of their edutainment programs. It will be more geared for adults, but we are going to film it at my house since COVID-19 and all. So for the first 30 days they have to host it on the Chesterfield Public Library website exclusively, after the 30 days though, I

think we will be able to use that video on our website as well. We will probably shoot it sometime in October, and not sure when it will be finalized yet, but this should be a cool vid.

Travis Anthony et al: On Wednesday March 25th, 2020, myself along with Ana Sparks presented a virtual herpetology class for the Rivanna chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalists. Approximately 12 students were in attendance. I taught the amphibian portion of the class, and Ana taught the reptile portion and also showed off some of her captive snakes. On Wednesday March 11th, 2020, myself along with Larry Mendoza and Ana Sparks represented the VHS at the annual Science Night at Reynolds Community College in Henrico. Larry and Ana brought several captive species of reptiles and amphibians for participants to observe. The event saw about 300 participants checking out scientific vendors and organizations from all over Virginia.

Susan Watson: VHS Permits Chair, and as usual, Susan 'wears two hats' to all activities as a VDGIF/VDWR FWIS Biologist/Wildlife Information Biologist, and as an officer of VHS. All activities were done through work at VDGIF/VDWR, but VHS information is always presented, as well.

Susan instructed the Herpetology Classes for recruits of the following chapters of Virginia Master Naturalists (VMN): James River, Historic Southside, and Riverine. In addition to a PowerPoint presentation, several handouts pertaining to herpetology and herpetofaunal conservation, in Virginia, were provided, as well as live examples of herpetofauna kept by the agency. James River, on Tuesday, November 5, 2019, in Goochland County, with 25 participants, and with the Red Cornsnake and Eastern Tiger Salamander. Historic Southside, on Tuesday, March 10, 2020, in Isle of Wight County, with 22 participants, and with the Eastern Kingsnake and Eastern Tiger Salamander. Riverine, on Thursday, March 12, 2020, in Henrico County, with 22 participants, and with the Eastern Ratsnake and Eastern Tiger Salamander.

Susan presented a snake program at the Fulton Montessori School, in Richmond, on Wednesday, November 13, 2019. For this program, two of the agency's live snakes, Eastern Ratsnake and Eastern Kingsnake, were presented to the audience, and the school was provided with a few copies of The Guide to the Snakes & Lizards of Virginia, as well as some educational activity materials related to the snakes. There were 23 students in attendance, along with 4 adults.

Susan provided a herp program for Hampton University's Mid-Atlantic Watershed Biodiversity course, lab portion, on November 15, 2019. Live Eastern Ratsnake, Eastern Kingsnake, Red Cornsnake, and two Eastern Tiger Salamanders, all kept by VDGIF/VDWR, were used for this program. Each participant received a copy of The Guide to the Turtles of Virginia, instructors were provided with a few copies of The Guide to the Snakes & Lizards of Virginia and The Guide to the Frogs & Toads of Virginia. In addition, a few handouts were provided to each participant, providing information on VAFWIS, the Virginia Herpetological Society, and resources for more information on herpetofaunal biology and conservation in Virginia. There were 15 students in attendance.

Susan conducted a herp program at an evening meeting of Cub Scout Pack #799, in Henrico, on Tuesday, February 11, 2020. The agency's live Eastern Tiger Salamander, Red Cornsnake, and Eastern Ratsnake were displayed and discussed during the program. There were approximately 30 cub scouts, as well as approximately 20 adults and family members.

Susan presented a snake and salamander program to members of the Pocahontas Chapter of VMN, on Wednesday, February 26, 2020, in Chesterfield County. The presentation included some basic facts about snakes and salamanders, in Virginia, including slides of all the different species that are known and likely in Chesterfield County. The agency's live Eastern Ratsnake, Eastern Kingsnake, and Eastern Tiger Salamanders were displayed as part of the presentation. There were approximately 35 participants.

Susan, along with colleagues from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and VMN, presented a Vernal Pool Cooperative of Virginia training session (identification and monitoring of vernal pool habitat on public lands) to members of the following chapters of VMN, on Saturday, February 29, 2020: Pocahontas, James River, Middle Peninsula, and Historic Southside. This was held at the VDGIF/VDWR Region 1 Office and on the property of VCU's Rice River Center, in Charles City County. First, a presentation and handouts were provided all about vernal pool habitats, the wildlife associated with them, information regarding identifying and monitoring these habitats and wildlife on public lands, and information on recording the associated data. VDGIF/VDWR's live Eastern Tiger Salamander was also on display for the class. Then, the class was lead to a vernal pool on the VCU Rice Rivers Center property, where they could see the habitat and associated wildlife first hand. There were approximately 40 participants.

Erin Anthony:

- Recorded two 3 minute radio segments about herpetology on the Delmarva peninsula for the WESR radio station (103.3 FM) on the eastern shore of Virginia. These segments aired in late August and early September in 2020.
- Spoke about Virginia herpetology for the Virginia Academy of Science's bioblitz for 5 minutes on 9/26/20
- Educated two 7th grade classes and one 1st grade class about native snakes at Broadwater Academy in Exmore, VA, using five freshly hatched eastern kingsnakes on 9/2/20

From Bonnie Keller:

Mark Khosravi does snake relocation throughout Fairfax County, and requests donations to be sent to VHS. He educates the homeowner about the local snakes, and how they can discourage snakes from taking up residence. He also teaches them about the local snake species and which ones to enjoy. He has done approximately 20 calls this summer, since May.

Bill Crisp is a VHS member in Bristow, VA. He does live animal programs for birthdays and other events, and always promotes VHS. He also does snake relocations. In

October, 2019, Bill and I did a public display in his neighborhood that was attended by about 90 people. We had a variety of native and exotic species, and had DGIF/DWR materials on hand for the public, as well as info about VHS.

Yona Britto is a VHS member near Winchester. She has an active presence on Facebook, and is part of our ID team. She also has a weekly post called “Snake Facts Saturday” that is cross posted to at least 6 different national sites. Her subjects are almost always native to VA, and she constantly promotes the VHS website.

Bonnie Keller: I have done approximately 25 snake relocations since May in Prince William and Fairfax Counties. I am also on my NextDoor community online, and often post information and links from the VHS website. In the 2+ years I have been doing this there has been a remarkable change in the composition of snake-related posts and replies. The posts from my neighbors often are answered by others now, who have learned from my posts, and who also will post links to the VHS website. The number of calls to remove/relocate non-venomous species has dropped to only 2 this year, as where the first year I was getting requests to move ratsnakes, racers, and other small species – even after attempting to educate the person about why they should leave them. Now I rarely get those requests, and other neighbors are teaching each other and encouraging them to leave the snakes alone! It’s been a marvelous change. As other people join in outlying areas, the word is spreading to those areas, too, so my reach is expanding naturally due to word of mouth.

WEB-BASED PUBLIC EDUCATION

The VHS website and the FaceBook page continue to serve as the leading public information sources concerning the state’s native reptiles and amphibians. Our herp identification and information service for the general public is heavily utilized. Visitors are directed to submit their questions and photos to: animal-identification@virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com . Over 900 ID inquiries and information requests were handled the past year. VHS members Yona Britto, Bonnie Keller, Alonso Abugattas, Mark Khosravi, Kory Steele, and Mike Clifford handled most of the requests.

VHS Website Traffic 2020 vs. 2019

2020 Website Traffic 01/20 – 09/20

Month	Unique visitors	Number of visits	Pages
Jan-20	22763	31042	52495
Feb-20	27139	36856	68443
Mar-20	60300	79985	139410
Apr-20	107923	140802	228498
May-20	171746	236087	403877
Jun-20	101358	138895	235137
Jul-20	65797	87889	155384
Aug-20	65172	84013	141095
Sep-20	78981	102295	174624
Total	701179	937864	1598963

2020 Website Traffic 01/19 – 09/19

Month	Unique visitors	Number of visits	Pages
Jan-19	22571	33218	61698
Feb-19	27042	35862	67215
Mar-19	40833	51481	102417
Apr-19	82701	104586	198227
May-19	124272	162408	295650
Jun-19	100709	128269	223107
Jul-19	74192	93331	162112
Aug-19	70218	88329	152070
Sep-19	80054	100572	171867
Total	622592	798056	1434363

Congratulations to Mike Clifford, Education Committee Chair for being awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Virginia Herpetological Society.