

"To Bathe a Snake... and other skills!"

By Pat Francis, Naturalist, LLCC

As I sit at my dining room table, I look over at a nearby aquarium and wonder when I should bathe the snake. CJ is a six month old Bullsnake that normally calls Long Lake home. Two weeks ago, he became very congested. He went to the vet, was diagnosed with a respiratory infection, and is here on R&R for a dose of antibiotics every forty eight hours. He's also in molt and the outer dead skin is not releasing nicely. A bath will soak it loose from the underlying new skin.

Naturalists acquire all sorts of interesting skills. Bathing snakes is just one offshoot of working with Long Lake's program snakes. When our aging milk snake quit eating and was diagnosed with internal parasites, we learned the fine art of worming a snake. First, get a helper. Second, have the helper grasp the snake firmly behind the jaws (no small feat as it twists and squirms). Third, take the round stick of a Q-tip and roll it repeatedly against the snake's lips until it obligingly opens. Then insert the eye dropper with wormer into its mouth and squeeze. Last, wipe spit-out wormer off your fingers and be glad it doesn't need to be repeated for a week!

Sometimes, even feeding a snake is cause for amusement. Aitkin County has two main snake species: Garters and Redbellies. The Redbelly is a small, innocuous snake 8 to 10 inches long with a darkish back (often lengthwise striped) and a bright red belly. Its preferred foods are slugs and earthworms. When we tried to keep one in captivity, it turned up its little nose scale at anything but slugs. So we dug around under the favorite slug hangout bush, and grabbed a few fat ones. Our thinking was: rub slug slime on worms and maybe the worms would become an acquired taste. The slugs slimed prodigiously, our fingers stuck together, and the snake said "no thanks". We turned it loose.

As we head towards spring, I'm reminded of a cold April day when students were in the woods for an outdoor lunch. I was called over to see tiny juvenile Redbellies that the students had uncovered while clearing leaves near an anthill. The Redbellies, which like to hibernate in abandoned anthills, must have emerged on an earlier warm afternoon and been caught by an evening freeze. I put 7 or 8 in my coat pockets to show later to other staff, and finished lunch with the kids. By the time we returned to the dining hall, my pockets were squirming. Although seemingly frozen, the snakes hadn't died. This has been documented in Garters, but I had never experienced it.

There's one skill with snakes I don't plan to acquire: CPR. A recent WCCO newscast showed firefighters learning how to revive people's pets: "dogs, cats, ... even reptiles." I have three words for LLCC's snakes – in your dreams! Appreciation only goes so far.