

5 RIVERS

# TRIBUTARY

Fall 2006

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Five Rivers Environmental Education Center

518-475-0291

[www.dec.state.ny.us/website/education/5rivers.html](http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/education/5rivers.html)

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## A Really Big Snake

Size does matter. At least when it comes to wildlife. In all my years of working at nature centers, no one, not once, has ever reported a sighting of any type of wildlife that was small. “A huge snake!” the caller will say over the phone, panting. Or “An enormous bird!” “A monstrous toad!” No one has ever called in to report a tiny bat or a small spider.

But a visitor came to the center one early autumn day who was willing to put his money where his mouth was, so to speak. He hadn’t just phoned in his sighting, he’d brought it with him. He was a tall, thin young man with dark hair, and he knocked on the door on a weekend afternoon, as I was just finishing my lunch. He was carrying a large brown grocery bag.

“I have a snake skin like you’ve never seen before,” the newcomer announced, putting the bag on the office table. “It’s big! I mean it’s really big!”

“Okay, let’s take a look,” I said. I was expecting to see the most usual snakeskin found in these parts: the skin shed by a common garter snake. True, there are some good-sized snakes in New York

State--black racers or black rat snakes could get to be five feet or so--but they’re rarely seen. When people said they’d seen a big snake, it was almost always a 12-inch garter snake.

“You won’t believe it,” he said. “Really big, I tell you.” He thrust his arm into the bag and carefully took out what looked like a piece of flimsy, rolled-up cloth. He set the object on the table and gave it a push, and I watched wide eyed as it gently unrolled past me, all the way down the six-foot-long table and off the far end. It was a snake skin, sure enough, eight feet long and almost a foot wide.

“Wow,” I said, touching the fragile, papery skin that was a perfect replica of the massive snake who had outgrown and cast it off. The skin was complete even to the layer of translucent membrane, thin as a soap bubble, that had covered the eyeballs, and the tiniest scales of tail and nostrils. The skin was transparent, as though it were the ghost of the great reptile.

“You found this in Delmar?” I asked. “No way this is anything native!”

“Yep, not far from the Vlomankill Trail,” the young man said, surveying his trophy with pride. “Wound around a log, looped all over it like a Christmas decoration.”

“Snakes sometimes wind around something rough to help pull the skin loose when they’re shedding,” I said. Peering closer, I could see a faint pattern of intricate stripes and diamonds on the back. After lengthy consultation with A Guide To Reptiles and Amphibians of the World, we identified the skin as that of a South American reticulated python.

“Well, he’s not long for this world,” I said sadly, holding up the skin, which draped over my shoulders and across the floor. “It’s got to be an escaped pet, poor thing, he’ll never survive the winter.” With the onset of cooler weather, the snake would hole up in a hollow tree someplace and die there when the frost set in.

After the visitor left, I went out to check a trail. I knew it was a remote possibility, but I wondered if I might perhaps be able to catch a glimpse of the python.

The air was cool as I stepped outside the building and crossed the parking lot, heading for the Vlomankill Trail. Summer was ebbing all around, an almost imperceptible change, like the tide slowly withdrawing from a bay. The green leaves of the Vlomankill were being overtaken by pale yellow, brown, and russet, with occasional touches of traffic-light red, as a leaf here and there began the fall change early.

The September sun still had some strength to it, and the shade of the tall trees along the Vlomankill felt good. Through the green tunnel of leaves, I could see quite a few people on the trail; it was a lovely

afternoon, and the trail was crowded. I stiffened every time I saw a long narrow shape among the trees, but it always turned out to be a grapevine or a branch. I had almost reached the trail’s end when I heard a voice calling “Ranger! Oh, ranger!” and turning, I saw a woman hastening towards me, with two small boys trailing behind.

“Excuse me,” she said breathlessly. “I thought we should tell someone. There’s a huge snake just over there.”

“Oh, great!” I exclaimed with enthusiasm. “I was actually out here looking for it.”

“Really?” she said, visibly impressed. “You knew it was here?”

“Oh, yes, we had a report of it earlier today,” I said. “I’ve been keeping my eye out for it, but never thought I’d find it.”

“It’s right over there,” she said, pointing into the woods. “Absolutely enormous.”

“Are they poisonous?” asked one little boy eagerly.

“Oh, no,” I said. “They use constriction to kill their prey, I believe.”

“Their prey!” said the woman, shuddering. “What do they eat?”

“Oh, lots of things,” I said airily. “Rabbits, birds, stuff like that.”

“Wow,” said the other boy. “A snake like that could eat a rabbit? How?”

“Well, these snakes are constrictors, you see. They wrap around the animal and squeeze them to death, and then swallow them whole.” (Continued on p. 7)

# Five Rivers Environmental Education Center

## Fall Program Schedule 2006

Programs are free of charge unless otherwise noted. Dress for the weather! We regret that we cannot accommodate organized youth groups at these programs. Call to make special arrangements.

**We welcome those who have any type of physical challenge to all of our programs. If you call ahead to let us know your needs, we will be happy to learn how we can best serve you.**

For further information or for pre-registration, call Five Rivers at 518-475-0291. In the event of severe weather, programs may be canceled. Please call the center to confirm.

### THE EARLY BIRDER

The early birder gets the bagels! Plus some great birding in Five Rivers' woods, fields, and wetlands. Join us at 7:00 AM for coffee and bagels as we watch birds at the feeder. At 7:30, we head outdoors for a bird walk. Bring binoculars if you have them; we have some to share. Beginners are welcome!

**Bird walks are held on Thursdays, on September 7, 14, 21 and 28.**

### FALL FESTIVAL

**Saturday, September 16 Noon-4:00 PM**

Come and join us for our annual Fall Festival! It's a multitude of activities and hands-on crafts, games, and nature explorations. While you're here, walk the trails and enjoy migrating birds, fall wildflowers and brilliant foliage. Environmental exhibits and hands-on activities make the festival fun for the whole family.

Popcorn and Cider	Music	Nature Crafts
Silent Auction	Insect Safari	Birds of Prey
Reptiles and Amphibians	Nature Walks	Booksale

**Admission and parking are free!**

Saturday, September 23                      FRUITS AND NUTS                      2:00 PM

Late September is a great time to assess the mast crop. Wild fruits and nuts are important food sources for wildlife at this time of year, and the competition is keen. Join us on an outdoor survey of nature's bounty and see who's eating what.

## Fall Opportunities for Home School Families 2006

All programs are “hands on” and interactive between parent and child. Each family member will receive a journal, and time will be devoted to making entries.

Wednesday, September 27                      **Exploring the Outdoors**                      1:30 PM

An exploration walk with emphasis on the five senses. Safety and feeling comfortable in nature will also be important themes.

Thursday, October 19                      **Learning about Trees**                      1:30 PM

Participants will learn how to measure a tree, collect leaves and learn identifying characteristics of some common NYS trees.

Please call to pre-register.

Materials fee per program: One adult and one child; Members \$3.00 + \$2.50 for each additional child. Non-members \$5.00 + \$2.50 for each additional child.

Members or non-members - Payment for both - take a 10% discount.

Saturday, October 7    **PROJECT WILD**    1:00-4:00 PM

Join us for a participatory workshop for educators featuring ways to use Wildlife In Learning Design (WILD). Participants receive a free Project WILD workbook full of activities for students K-12. In-service credit may be arranged through the Greater Capital Region Teacher Center. Please call to pre-register by October 5.

Tuesday, October 10                      **BIRD SEED SALE ORDERS DUE**

This is the last day to pre-order bird seed for the Friends of Five Rivers Annual Bird Seed Sale. This benefit sale not only helps the birds but also generates supplemental funding for Five Rivers programming. Order forms will be available at the center in late August. Bird seed pick-up date is Saturday, October 21. For more information, call Friends of Five Rivers at 475-0295.

Saturday, October 14    *How To Do It:* **FEEDING BIRDS**    10:00 AM

Birds do not need to be fed in winter as much as we have a need to provide them food. And what a treat it can be for birds and people! Join us for an in-depth, indoor workshop on how to feed birds, what to feed birds and how to deal with health and safety issues such as disease, vermin and predation.

Saturday, October 14    **TREES OF THE SEASON**    2:00 PM

As broad-leaf trees shut down for the winter, the woodlands become a riot of colors. Many of these pigments are already present in the leaves but are hidden by the green pigments of photosynthesis. Other colors form only as sugars are trapped in the dying leaves. Join us for an outdoor study of the trees of the season and learn how to identify hardwoods by color.

Sunday, October 15    **AQUATIC PROJECT WILD**    1:00-4:00 PM

This hands-on workshop for educators will explore ways to enhance classroom instruction using aquatic biology as a touchstone. Participants receive a free Aquatic Project WILD workbook with ideas for grades K-12. In-service credit may be arranged through the Greater Capital Region Teacher Center. Please call to pre-register by October 13.

Friday, October 20                      CREATURES OF THE NIGHT                      7:00 PM  
Get into the Halloween spirit with a guided evening walk on the trails of Five Rivers, and find out about the lives of our nocturnal residents. Learn how they use their senses, cunning and claws to survive their darkened realm.

Saturday, October 28                      HALLOWEEN OPEN HOUSE                      1:30-3:30 PM  
Halloween is a perfect time to discover new things about animals that have a bad reputation: snakes, spiders, bats. Animals of night and animals of story will all be featured at our slightly scary open house, as well as games and prizes, surprises and more. Come any time between 1:30 and 3:30 PM. This is an indoor program; come in costume if you wish.

Saturday, November 4                      PROJECT WET WORKSHOP                      10:00 AM- 3:00 PM  
This workshop will introduce "Project WET" (Water Education for Teachers). Participants will receive a manual of activities suitable for teaching about water science, aquatic wildlife and environmental issues. Pre-register by November 3. Dress for the outdoors. Teacher in-service credit can be coordinated through arrangement with the Greater Capital Region Teacher Center.

Saturday, November 11                      NEW YORK'S ENDANGERED WILDLIFE                      2:00 PM  
Come and learn about some of our rarest and most fascinating animals, and find out about the lives of these rarely seen creatures. We will discuss some of the reasons for our disappearing wildlife and some things you can do to help.

Wednesday, November 15                      FRIENDS OF FIVE RIVERS ANNUAL MEETING                      7:30 PM  
The Friends of Five Rivers cordially invites members and friends to its annual membership meeting. This year's meeting will feature a slide-illustrated talk presented by NYSDEC mammals specialist Al Hicks, who will share insights and anecdotes about bat conservation. A business meeting reviewing The Friends of Five Rivers' accomplishments and projects of the past year will precede the program.

Friday, November 17                      STARS ABOVE!                      7:00 PM  
An indoor/outdoor program. Meet Orion, the winter hunter with the famous belt, and get to know the Big Dipper, the Great Bear and other sky sights. If it's cloudy, we'll do some star gazing indoors, making star maps and miniature planetariums.

Saturday, November 18                      *How To Do It:* SCORING DEER ANTLERS                      10:00 AM  
Bucks need three things in order to produce trophy racks: good food, good food and good food. Join us for an indoor study of deer antlers to learn how to measure a buck's Boone and Crockett score using racks from the center's collection. Bring a flexible measuring tape. Your racks also welcome. Please call the center by November 15 to pre-register.

Saturday, November 18                      *Watchable Wildlife:* WHITE-TAILED DEER                      2:00 PM  
Mid-November is an excellent time to go "scouting" deer. Deer are very active at this season, fattening up for the winter and chasing prospective mates. Join us on a field study of the natural history of deer as we search for tracks, rubs, scrapes, mast and other good indicators of the season's prospects.

Saturday, November 25      TALK AND WALK TURKEY      2:00 PM

Wild turkeys have staged an amazing comeback! They're the symbol of Thanksgiving, but they're also the symbol of a conservation success story. We'll discuss the lifestyle and success of this beautiful bird, then walk a forest trail to explore turkey habitat.

Saturday, December 16      DECK THE HALLS: *A Family Program*      2:00 PM

Come make some holiday decorations using recycled and natural materials. We'll share some stories of the season while we indulge our creative side. Please call by December 14 to pre-register. Materials fee for program: One adult and one child; FFR Members \$3.00 + \$2.50 for each additional child; non-members \$5.00 + \$2.50 for each additional child.

Wednesday, December 27      ANIMALS AND WINTER: *A Family Program*      10:00 AM

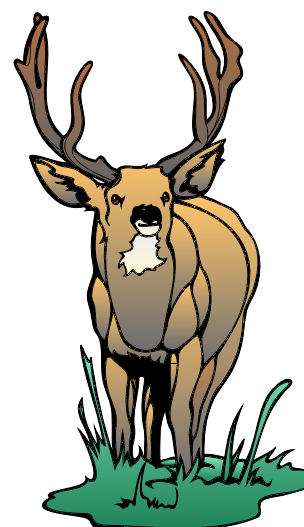
This program begins with the reading of a children's book; then we head outside to look for animal tracks, winter food and other signs that animals are active. The program ends back in the building, watching the birds outside the window while we share a traditional snack. Please call to pre-register by December 23. Materials fee for program: one adult and one child; FFR members \$3.00 + \$2.50 for each additional child; non-members \$5.00 + \$2.50 for each additional child.

Friday, December 29      ANIMALS AND WINTER: *A Family Program*      10:00 AM

A repeat of the Dec. 27th program

Monday, January 1      ANNUAL NEW YEAR'S DAY BIRD COUNT      9:00 AM

Come help us ring out our old annual bird list and ring in the new, as we search high and low for our fine feathered friends. In the last 27 years, 68 different species have been found at Five Rivers on New Year's Day. Bring binoculars and dress warmly.



**Staff: Nancy Payne, Anita Sanchez, Dee Strnisa, Craig D. Thompson, Lori Whiting, Kimberly Roberts (SCA), Kitty Rusch (SCA)**

(A Really Big Snake--Continued from p. 2)

“Cool! I saw that in a movie! Could they do constrictions to people?”

“Well, I don’t know, really,” I said. I wasn’t a python expert. “I suppose so.”

“Well, it’s right over here,” said the woman, cautiously leading me towards a tangle of vines and fallen logs a little off the trail. “Stay behind the ranger now, kids.”

“There it is,” said the little boy, grinning. “It’s really big.”

“Where?” I asked, surveying the logs. I knew pythons could be well camouflaged, but I couldn’t see anything that looked like a snake.

“Right there on that log,” said the woman, pointing with a trembling hand. “Johnny, stay back now.” She clutched the neck of his sweater. The littlest boy clung to her other hand. I stared in the direction of her pointing finger, examining the moss-covered logs minutely, and finally I spotted the creature. It was a 12-inch-long garter snake.

The snake sat motionless on the log, dapper in long green and yellow stripes. A black enamel eye regarded us fixedly. Finally the snake turned its head towards us and flicked a tiny pink tongue out of its mouth. The mother screamed and jumped back. “Will he constrict us?” asked the little boy, staring at the snake expectantly.

“Oh, dear,” I said, wishing I wasn’t wearing my nametag.

“What? What?” asked the woman, taking a step backwards.

(Continued on last page)

## DIRECTOR’S NOTEBOOK

### *History: It’s Coming Soon*

During the summer, the Friends of Five Rivers hired a consultant to begin developing a pamphlet interpreting the history of the Five Rivers site. From the Civilian Conservation Corps era, through the Game Farm period, the Five Rivers site has an enriching story to tell about the history of wildlife conservation in America. Hopefully this ambitious initiative will help make even the casual visitor appreciate the pivotal role our site has played in wildlife management.

Maybe you don’t, or won’t or can’t know the history of the site as well as staff does or love the site for the same reasons we do. That’s perfectly fine. But you should at least be aware of and proud that activities conducted here changed the wildlife management profession and profoundly affected New York’s landscape.

What sets Five Rivers apart from just any old park or hiking area is this nagging historicism: every time you turn around, there’s an old stone stairway leading nowhere, an ages-old apple tree, or an old barn begging you to ask why it’s there. These are all narrative elements of a story only the landscape remembers.

Now, thanks to this exciting Friends of Five Rivers initiative, these touchstones to the past will all finally make sense. They will help you to better understand how special a place this site was and to appreciate how important they are today in advancing our educational program and in ultimately forwarding DEC’s conservation message. I believe you’ll find that, in looking at old things in new ways, you can observe a lot just by watching.

--Craig D. Thompson

(A Really Big Snake--Continued from p. 7)

“Um...well, this actually isn't the snake I'm looking for,” I said lamely.

“No?” she breathed. “You mean there's another one?”

“Well, this one...it's not, um, well...big enough,” I explained.

“Not *big* enough?” she repeated in horror. “How big is the one you're looking for?”

I hesitated, wondering how to put it tactfully, but in the end I told her. It was downhill from there. The mother gathered her children about her and fled, the little boys looking back regretfully.

I walked the trail twice that day, and as often as I could throughout the rest of the month. I looked in hollow logs, and holes in trees and under shrubs and rock ledges, hoping against hope to find the big python before the frost set in. I found a few good-sized garter snakes curled up under rocks, and a handsome milk snake, snuggled beneath a log and ready for the winter hibernation.

But the python had vanished, and when the first snowflakes fell, I finally stopped looking. No further trace was ever seen of the really big snake.

--Anita Sanchez