

48 Hours of the Serpent

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Northern Water Snake - Thomas Ganley

In July of 2008, I returned to northern Alabama for another week of fish collecting. My sons TJ and Grant were with me and were extremely excited to be coming along on the trip. I had previously collected in the same area during April of 2008. I had loved it and had told my boys all about the trip. I showed them pictures of all the great fish we caught so by the time we had arrived in July the boys' enthusiasm for collecting fish was at a fever pitch.

My boys have accompanied me on numerous collecting trips and in February of 2008 we had gone on a collecting trip to Uruguay in South America. We have also collected the Okefenokee region of southern Georgia and the Everglades region of southern Florida many times as well as many less exotic locations throughout the United States. Even though my boys are still relatively young, they are already very experienced fish collectors and outdoorsman.

When taking children on these trips, one has to be cognizant of the potential dangers to them. I have often taken the boys to remote wilderness areas and if one is not careful, bad things can happen. I allowed the boys to accompany me on collecting trips to Georgia and Florida once they were six years old. They were fishing and collecting with me in Connecticut soon after they could walk. Not to be overly dramatic, but there are many potential hazards that can befall the unwary when your working a dip net in a subtropical or tropical swamp. Alligators can grab a small child in the blink of an eye. Fire ants can get your attention in an instant

with a barrage of red-hot bites. Some plants can make you miserable for days. And the bite of venomous snakes and spiders can be deadly. What this all means is be prepared of the potential hazards and act accordingly.

Both my boys are very interested in all plants and animals found in nature and always eager for me to discuss the reptiles and insects we encounter on our collecting trips. We have established protocols that we stick with and don't do anything dangerous (most of the time anyway). My boys know not to handle snakes and turtles unless they get the okay from me. They never handle spiders and give alligators a wide berth. Just plain and simple common sense stuff. However, even when following the rules, "interesting" natural encounters can happen.

On a previous trip to Alabama, I had learned from others that the northern Alabama region is well known for its very healthy populations of various snakes including many venomous ones. The state has several species of rattlesnakes as well as Copperheads and Cottonmouths. During the April trip, I had observed several Cottonmouths and other water snakes in swift, mountain creeks where I would never thought they would frequent. With this in mind, I had forewarned my boys to be especially careful when walking through vegetation, reaching blindly under logs or into the seine net before we could see what was in it.

We were collecting in a little backwater during the April trip. This natural cove had over-hanging vegetation, aquatic plants, and a thick layer of dead leaves and branches on the bottom. It was

connected to the main channel of the river but offered a shady reprieve from the current of the river, and consequently, held tons of fish and frogs. The abundance of frogs alerted me to the potential presence of snakes and I was not surprised that while we seined, we scared up a few Northern Water Snakes between a foot and a foot and a half long. Naturally they wanted nothing to do with us. Other than giving us a shock when they crawled out of the writhing mass of fish in the seine, we let them go on their way and continued with our collecting.

And collect we did. We were catching unbelievable specimens of Northern Studfish (*Fundulus catenatus*), Longear Sunfish (*Lepomis megalotis*), Redbreast Sunfish (*Lepomis auritus*) [see page 14], Redspotted Sunfish (*Lepomis miniatus*) and many species of darters and shiners. After only a few seine pulls, we had quickly loaded up our collecting buckets. The three of us started back across the river, walking abreast of one another in water no more than two feet deep. I was on one end, TJ was in the middle, and Grant was on the other end.

Grant noticed the big snake first. It was a large Northern Water Snake and it was on the shore where we had been dragging the seine net to sort our fish. My assumption was that he was helping himself to any shiners that jumped out of the net that we missed throwing back into the water. The snake stared at us and we stared at him. It was such a cool pose with his head up fairly high above the vegetation. I was debating whether to get across the river to grab my camera when the snake's head went down and disappeared into the grass. We turned away and started back towards the other bank when Grant announced that the snake had swam back out into the main channel where we were. Again, the snake, the lighting, and the color of the water over the rocks just screamed "photo opportunity." I started towards the other bank for my camera, telling the boys to keep an eye on the snake. I had taken about two or three steps when TJ gave a yell because the snake was swimming towards him; not just swimming with the current but definitely moving towards him. When the snake stopped, TJ laughed and admitted it had given him a start. I thought it was weird that the snake was moving towards us and across the current to do so but didn't really pay much attention as I really wanted to get my camera. I turned to walk away when TJ gave out a tremendous shriek. I turned and saw the snake swimming very fast and with purpose towards TJ now right across the current. That snake was staring at TJ and he was coming fast. TJ spun around and ran just about on top of the water for the other bank with the snake following in hot pursuit. The funny thing is the snake swam right in between Grant and me, not paying the slightest bit of attention to us. The snake followed TJ nearly all the way to the other bank before heading downstream. Grant, ever the master of the understatement, chuckled and said, "Dad, TJ looked pretty scared." Grant never broke stride and just waded across the river with me. TJ kept asking me why the snake chased him, which it absolutely did, and I didn't have an answer for him.

I later tried to think why a snake would do that. It had not been caught in the seine like the smaller ones, we didn't think we stepped on it, and I can't believe the snake would zero in on the fish and frog scent we may have had on our hands. And we didn't tease it or provoke it. We all had a laugh about the snake that night when we talked about it again. I mean who ever saw a snake chase

someone like a dog chases a mailman.

The next day, we ended up at our favorite collecting spot again after trying some other places. It was late in the day and we only had a few hours to collect. I was interested in getting some more darters from a location a hundred yards downstream from the scene of the "serpent encounter" the day before. We hustled down to the spot I had in mind and found that a beaver had started a dam right through my prime Rainbow Darter spot. I was annoyed, but the boys were only too eager to tear the dam down. I didn't care; it really was just a pile of sticks and branches that had been stacked up over night, no big deal.

The boys set about with their destruction and I entertained myself taking pictures of a heron which had been following us around. We had fed it some of the wounded shiners the day before and now it was our buddy. I just happened to glance back towards the boys when I heard TJ let loose with a primal scream; the ones that signify real trouble. Grant was also leaping back away from TJ. TJ did an aerial spin and I swear he really walked on water as he sprinted towards me in a complete panic. Trailing behind him was a Cottonmouth which had tried to crawl into the back of his sandal. No doubt it had been in the pile of sticks hunting frogs and when confronted by the boys, just tried to crawl into a dark nook to get away from them. The dark nook was the space between the heel of TJ's foot and the sole of the sandal. When TJ's heel came back down, the snake was stuck head first in the sandal and taken for a ride ... towards me.

As TJ ran towards me in a blind panic, the snake managed to flop out of his predicament and get the hell away from us. TJ was truly scared to death. I was feeling the same way because there is no doubt in my mind that this snake was in fact, a Cottonmouth, not an another belligerent Northern Water Snake, and very capable of giving a venomous bite. As a father, to watch this happen in a millisecond and take this information in and process it, well, I don't wish that on any parent. Luckily, it turned out okay and by supper time, TJ was able to chuckle about it (a little anyway). It was a hell of a scare for all of us. Really, it just reinforced some of our own rules.

We got careless and didn't pay attention when we knew better. This was the snake's home, not ours and the snake didn't do anything wrong. We did. I've collected all over the United States, South and Central America, and Southeast Asia and have rarely even seen snakes. What did I come away with from this experience? Now I know which kid I can torment with a rubber snake in his bed from now on. I mean, hey, that's what they make psychologists for anyway. 🐍



Red Breast Sunfish - Thomas Ganley