

Snake Whisperers

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Loren Valliere gently holds a 4 1/2-foot black racer she captured after a morning-long search in Concord. “Isn’t he beautiful?” she asks

Loren Valliere knows what to expect when she tells people she’s looking for black racer snakes near their homes. The response is often confusion (*what’s a black racer?*), surprise (*they live here?*) and sometimes, outright loathing (*why bother looking for them, anyway?*)

The latter attitude always reminds her she’s not at UNH anymore. As a wildlife and environmental biology student (she graduated in 2011), Valliere felt surrounded by likeminded people who valued wildlife in all its forms.

The real world is different. The real world fears snakes. “You have to remember that not everyone thinks like you do,” Valliere said.

So, educating homeowners and recreationists living and playing near prime black racer habitat has become part of her job as a biological aide with the Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program of the N.H. Fish and Game Department.

“I like to tell people their property is rare habitat. Hopefully they’ll think about it before they bulldoze that field or something,” she said.

For the past three years, Valliere and fellow UNH alum Brendan Clifford (wildlife management, 2005) are part of a team conducting a first-of-its-kind study of black racer habitat usage in New Hampshire. The study started shortly after black racers were listed in 2008 as a threatened species in the state. Biologists fashioned the study to discover the creature’s habitat needs to gain information for conservation planning and environmental reviews. Conserving habitat, however, can only go so far when it’s snakes you’re trying to protect.

Black racers are common throughout much of the eastern U.S. but not in New Hampshire, which is at the northernmost edge of their range. They’re named for their color and speed. They streak away from people and predators – like raptors, foxes, and coyotes – and can even climb into branches of shrubs to escape. They catch frogs, toads, rodents and insects in their mouths and swallow them whole. They grow up to six feet long and are nonvenomous, but they will bite in self-defense if handled.

Because they’re long and black, one of their defenses is to lie still and look like just another stick on the ground or coil up under some foliage. “That’s what makes me laugh when people are so scared of them,” Valliere said. “They just sit there and hope they’re not seen, or they bolt.”

Before the study, biologists knew little about New Hampshire’s black racers except that isolated reports showed them living in the southern third of the state. They wanted to find out what types of habitat racers use, how far they travel in their home ranges and where they hibernate.

To get that data, the team had veterinarians surgically implant tiny transmitters under the skin of 30 snakes in Concord, Weare, Goffstown, Webster, Hopkinton, Raymond, Nottingham, Deerfield and Allenstown. Using radio telemetry equipment, they tracked the snakes over three field seasons. Every capture yielded detailed information such as ground and air temperature, types of shrubs, trees and grasses within one meter of the snake and the density of any foliage – right down to counting the number of stems on nearby bushes.

This winter, the biologists are analyzing the data, which has turned out to be both abundant and revealing.

“It’s been a very successful study,” Clifford said. “We feel we have a lot of insight now when looking at environmental review projects and conservation planning.”

Clifford said racers in the study traveled as far as three miles, showing that roads through racer habitat could be a factor in their survival. Another surprise was that racers in the study utilized burrows of chipmunks and other small mammals for hibernating. “We expected to see them hibernating in big communal rocky areas, which we thought would be a limiting factor,” he said.

Analyzing the data will continue through the winter, as will Valliere’s advocacy for snakes of all kinds. She’s hopeful that the team’s research and conversations with people who live near racer habitat will help the racers hold their ground in New Hampshire. She realizes that many people may never come to admire racers as she does, but she hopes that if they see one, at least they won’t kill it.

“That’s what I always stress to people – just leave it alone. I promise it will take off,” she said.

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