

LIVING HERE FAMILY

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Snakes slither into S.F. for summer exhibit

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As an ambassador, Balthazar helps shed the image of his much-maligned kingdom without ever saying a word.

He's traveled extensively as companion to Chris Andrews, director of the Steinhart Aquarium at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco.

But when some people meet Balthazar, a 7-foot red-tailed boa, they recoil in fear.

"Based on evolution, there's something deep inside us, in our DNA, that makes us be very careful and respectful of snakes," Andrews observed as Bal-

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Balthazar, a red-tailed boa, travels with Steinhart Aquarium director Chris Andrews.

IF YOU GO

What: Snakes and Lizards: The Summer of Slither.

Where: California Academy of the Sciences, 55 Music Concourse Drive, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco.

When: Through Sept. 5. Academy hours: 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays.

Admission: Adults, \$29.95;

youth age 12-17, \$24.95; seniors, 65 and up or students with valid ID, \$24.95; children age 4-11, \$19.95; children age 3 and younger, free.

Details: www.calacademy.org or (415) 379-8000.

Highlights: "Amazing Snakes of the Bay Area" presented each day at noon; "Snakes: Shedding the Myths" presented each day at 2 p.m.

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thazar twisted around his shoulders. "But that fear has gotten out of control. People kill them on sight. Their reaction is to whack them with a shovel."

Balthazar is one of the stars of "Snakes and Lizards: The Summer of Slither," a summer-long show at the academy. Andrews, the academy's resident "slitherologist," developed family-oriented exhibits for the show as a way to teach people of all ages about these misunderstood reptiles.

"The theme of the show: Give snakes a break," Andrews explained. "They're part of ecology. They eat rodents, they do a lot of good things. They're beneficial."

"And they're all around us. In the Sierra, you're hiking past hundreds of snakes that just want to be left alone."

Some snakes are dangerous; for example, California is home to six species of rattlers.

"Of the world's 2,700 species of snakes, about 20 percent are venomous," Andrews said. "If they come into our areas (such as backyards), venomous snakes need to be removed carefully. With a rattler, drop a bucket over it, put a brick on top and call animal control. But most snakes won't harm you."

Featuring about 60 species of reptiles, the academy's show is geared toward children.

"Kids are more open to learning about snakes," Andrews said. "They see snakes as not all bad. All rattlers are dangerous; you need to teach them to absolutely leave them alone. But snakes are pretty fascinating creatures."

On a recent visit to Sacramento, Andrews displayed other "Summer of Slither" stars, including a blue-tongued skink (an Australian lizard), a West African ball python (the "perfect pet snake") and a black pine snake (an American native). His menagerie traveled in coolers and covered buckets with nary a hiss of complaint.

Daily at the academy, they'll be out in the building's piazza (along with the 40-foot animatronic snake from the movie "Anaconda") as their handlers answer guests' questions.

Are they slimy? ("If wet, yes, but usually no," Andrews said.) Do they bite? ("Sometimes, but so do small children and dogs," he quipped.) And, yes, they "move weird," but that's part of the fascination.

Said Andrews, "The more you learn about snakes, the more you respect them."

Call *The Bee's* Debbie Arrington, (916) 321-1075.