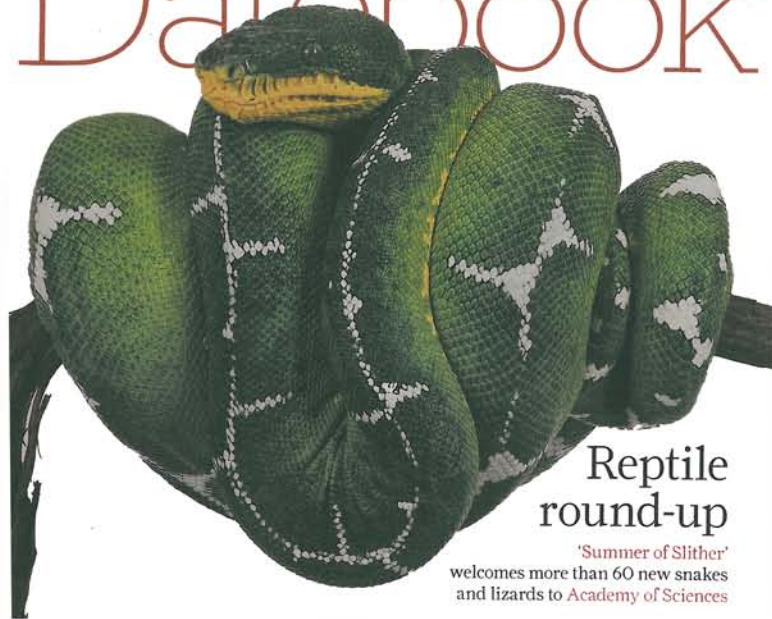


San Francisco Chronicle

Datebook



Reptile round-up

'Summer of Slither' welcomes more than 60 new snakes and lizards to Academy of Sciences

Among the species that will be on display in "Snakes & Lizards: The Summer of Slither" are (from top) the ball python, uromastix lizard and red spitting cobra.



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle



California Academy of Sciences

All just a matter of scale



Not long ago, Chronicle staff writer Julian Guthrie did her best to avoid encounters with scaled reptiles. Yet she "jumped at the chance" to tackle today's cover story about the new "Summer of Slither: Snakes & Lizards" exhibit at the Academy of Sciences — thanks to a very influential person in her life.

"My son, Roman, who is 4½, loves everything that slithers and scurries," she says. "In trying to stay one step ahead of an inquisitive child, I welcomed the chance to learn more."

Spending a few hours with herpetologist Chris Andrews at the academy opened her eyes — "I learned how wonderfully adaptive lizards and snakes are," she says — but her dedication was put to the test when Andrews draped a boa over her arm.

"The snake wrapped his tail tightly around my arm," she says. "Andrews encouraged me to 'remain calm and act like a tree.'" She passed.

Guthrie says working on the story changed her view of snakes and lizards — at least partially.

"Are they a great teaching tool for science, history, evolution and the environment? Yes," she says. "Do I want them in my home? No."

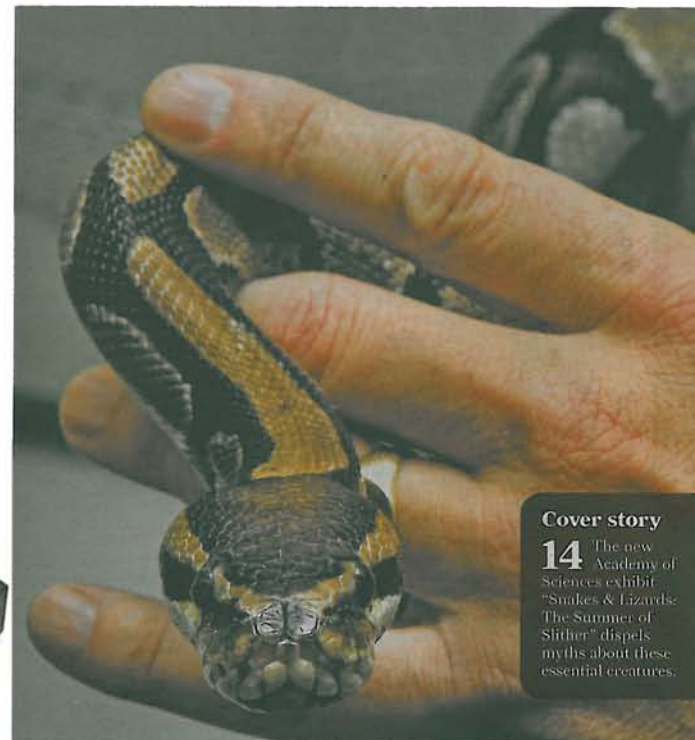
But, she acknowledges, if Roman has anything to say about it, "I will probably end up with one or more." Guthrie's story begins on Page 14.

Next week: Summer movie preview.

Sue Adolphson, Sunday Datebook Editor



5.01-5.07



Cover story

14 The new Academy of Sciences exhibit "Snakes & Lizards: The Summer of Slither" dispels myths about these essential creatures.

"There is this idea, presented in movies and the media, that snakes want nothing more than to hunt down humans and kill them. They really don't want anything to do with humans."

Chris Andrews

A serpentine tale of snakes and lizards

By Julian Guthrie
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

They can fly, climb, dig, crawl and even swim. They change colors to send signals, warm their eggs by shivering, occupy every continent except Antarctica, and have survived for more than 200 million years. They are snakes and lizards, and dozens of the so-called squamates will be on display this summer at a special exhibit at the California Academy of Sciences.

The exhibit, "Snakes & Lizards: The Summer of Slither," opens May 9 and features more than 60 snakes and lizards, including a 15-foot albino python named Lemondrop, a lizard that can walk on water, a Gila monster — one of only two highly venomous lizards in the world — and a spitting cobra with a 6-foot range.

Slither continues on page 15



Rhinoceros iguanas occur on Hispaniola and neighboring islands, where they live mostly on cactus fruits, flowers, and other plant matter.



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Slither from page 14

"Snakes are marvelous," said Chris Andrews, director of the Steinhart Aquarium and the academy's chief reptile expert. "Snakes and lizards provide a window into the world. There is geography and history and social history and culture. They share a common ancestor, and snakes became offshoots of lizards."

In addition to the dozens of live reptiles, the "Summer of Slither" exhibit, designed to address and dispel the myths and misconceptions around scaled reptiles — particularly snakes — will include lectures, video and audio. A 40-foot, animatronic anaconda snake built for the movie "Anaconda" will take up residence in the academy's piazza, where information will be presented separating fact from fiction, reality from Hollywood drama.

"There is this idea, presented in movies and the media, that snakes want nothing more than to hunt down humans and kill them," said Andrews, who has been drawn to snakes since he was a child growing up in England. "They really don't want anything to do with humans. They play an important role in controlling pests. And they are actually supremely well-adapted creatures."

Snakes, he notes, are lizards without legs. And of the 2,700 species of snakes, fewer than 500 are venomous, and only a few dozen pose a threat to humans. They "live in an olfactory world," he added, and they are ectothermic creatures, getting their body temperature from the outside.

Andrews, who got his first pet snake at age 8 by trading a bird's nest and two tennis balls for a grass snake, marveled, "Pythons can coil

over their eggs and kind of shiver to raise their body temperature to warm their young." While some types of snakes — pythons, in particular — are egg layers, boas give birth to live young.

Continuing to marvel over snakes, he added, "They can fly and crawl and dig and swim and do all of these things, yet they have one simple body form. They can find their prey, kill their prey and eat their prey, all without hands or legs."

Andrews started working in his local pet shop when he was 14, and his interest in snakes only grew.

"They don't really need us," he said. "I've got two dogs and two cats and parrots at home. They recognize you and greet you, mostly because they see food. I see snakes as being a lot more honest."

They are also ceaselessly interesting, Andrews said, ticking off more facts: Snakes have no eyelids; lizards change colors not for camouflage but based on mood; some species of snakes can shoot venom several feet; snakes are not to be handled when they are getting ready to shed or have just eaten; lizards have a notched tongue and snakes have a forked tongue; and the world's longest snake is a python (reaching 30 feet), while the world's biggest snake is an anaconda.

Male snakes have longer tails, he added, and females are thicker and heavier.

While Andrews has handled countless snakes — and keeps two in his office, including a red tail boa named Balthazar — he has never

Slither continues on page 16

Exhibit curator Chris Andrews, who developed his interest in snakes as a child, shows his Asian rat snake, Savvy, in his office at the California Academy of Sciences.



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

daughter.)

Backyard zoo

"My dad would tell me he'd come into my room at night and I'd be asleep, but all of these animals would be scurrying in their cages," Andrews said with a laugh. "I had snakes, monitor lizards, frogs, toads and turtles — anything I could find. And I had a small zoo in my backyard."

Walking around the Academy of Sciences, where the slither exhibit was under construction, he said, "For me, as a kid, snakes were my security blanket. I was shy, but I would carry a snake to school or somewhere to give a talk, and I could do it. Everyone was looking at the snake. And I think my parents were just happy I'd found something I was passionate about."

Andrews has worked closely with scientists at the American Museum of Natural History, where the exhibit is coming from, and hopes the new show will help the public develop a broader understanding of snakes and lizards.

"Snakes and lizards are a very successful group of animals," Andrews said. "There are about 8,000 species of them on the planet. Their lineage has been around for 200 million years, but the potential threats they face today include habitat destruction, hunting by humans (for food and leather) and climate change. The world would be very disrupted if snakes and lizards were to disappear."

Threatened species

He said that about 22 percent of all reptiles are listed as threatened species because they are critically endangered, endangered, or vulnerable.

"Our hope," Andrews said, "is that visitors who come see 'Snakes & Lizards' will realize what important, fascinating and diverse creatures they are, and learn to appreciate them as key players in the world's ecosystems." □

E-mail Julian Guthrie at jguthrie@sfchronicle.com.

Snakes & Lizards: The Summer of Slither May 9 through Sept. 5. Special programs will include daily talks on snakes native to the Bay Area, Africa and its biodiversity, myths and misconceptions around snakes and lizards, and a look at how different species of snakes and lizards hunt, eat and move. California Academy of Sciences, 55 Concourse Drive, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. (415) 379-8000, www.calacademy.org.

"Snakes & Lizards: The Summer of Slither" exhibit curator Chris Andrews shows corn snakes at the California Academy of Sciences last month. Corn snakes are docile, reluctant to bite, moderately sized (up to almost 6 feet long as adults), attractive and require modest care, making them popular pets.