

HOME & FAMILY

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SUNDAY MONITOR

More than just a snake in the basement

By DEBORAH STONE
For the Monitor

Snakes in our house aren't particularly newsworthy, even if they're less common than mice. The one in our cellar this summer was particularly beautiful, however, and it taught me some lessons.

We'd had a very late supper on a Saturday night. While I was doing the dishes, I noticed the water wasn't very hot, so I went downstairs to check on the furnace. There, in the middle of the dirt floor, lay a gorgeous snake,

motionless, about 2 feet long with a leopard-skin pattern on a white background. Dead, I thought.

Although it seemed dead (most snakes skedaddle at the looming presence of a person), something about it made me wonder: the lively glisten of its scales, perhaps, or the way it looked to be

fully inflated. I stopped to stare, trying to take in as much of its pattern as I could in case it disappeared before I could get to my field guide.

All the way down its back,

large, inch-around red-dish-brown spots were outlined with black.

Lower down on its sides where they touched the floor, the spots petered out into quarter-inch dots, but just as graphically sharp.

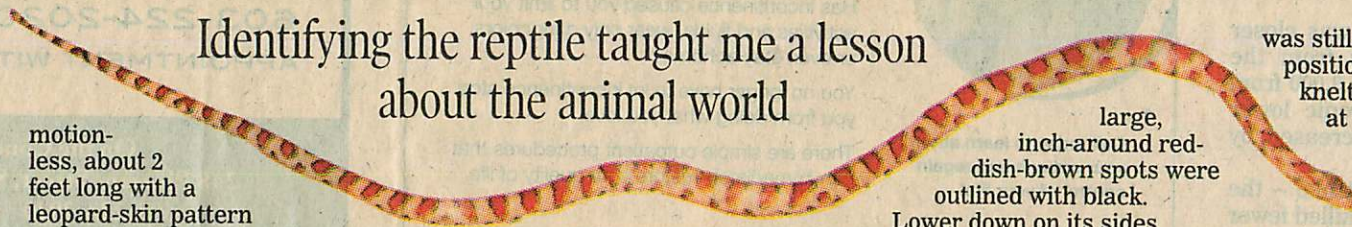
I walked over to the furnace, pressed the restart button, then went to get my camera. When I returned to the cellar, the snake

was still lying there in the same position. I photographed it, then knelt down to get a better look at its head to see whether I could tell if it was alive. Now that I think of it, I'm not sure how one tells with a snake.

Reflexively, I was doing a human thing, looking at its eyes for signs of the lights still on and inspecting for signs of breathing.

Finally I thought to do a snake thing. I tapped its tail as lightly as

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I could with my foot. The head moved suddenly to one side, but only once, as though it were recoiling. I brushed the tail again. This time the tail end swished on the floor, reversing its curve without moving the rest of its body.

Upstairs on my way to the shelf where we keep field guides, I reported to Jim. "It was still there and I got some great photos. It's sad it's not dead yet, but it's clearly dying."

Jim played the optimist to my pessimist. "You know, snakes are cold-blooded and it's gotten really cold out. Maybe it's just sluggish from the cold. The thermometer says 45."

Earlier in the evening, I had closed the windows and changed into corduroys, a turtleneck and a fleece pullover.

The thought had crossed my mind that it was high summer now and one shouldn't need winter warmies. But I hadn't thought twice about my own cold-blooded adaptations to temperature, I do them so instinctively.

I flipped through the color plates of *Peterson's Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians*. Since I don't know the first thing about snake groups and categories, I used the Beginner's Luck method: just look at pictures until you find one that looks like yours. It didn't take long to zero in on the Eastern Milk Snake. Before I read the fine print, not wanting to bias my own visual perceptions with words, I flipped through the color plates two more times to make sure I hadn't missed any similar snakes, too close to call. I hadn't. Then I read the short text under the name.

"A light Y or V at back of head." Bummer. Darned if I know. As often happens when I use field guides, I hadn't noticed the one thing that the book says is the most important distinguishing feature. I read on anyway.



I wonder: Had the snake been doing its job during the warm weather, then become disabled from the cold?

"Large dorsal blotches alternating with smaller lateral ones. Young: Blotches red." Hmmm. Could be. My snake looked uncannily like the picture, even though the picture didn't show the way the blotches were outlined in black. I looked at the Latin name: *L. Triangulum triangulum*. Quite a lot of triangulation for a snake that had nothing triangular about it, I thought, but no help in identification from that name.

Next I turned to the description in the text pages. "A rather slender, strongly blotched snake with a Y-shaped or V-shaped light patch on the nape. There are three (sometimes five) rows of brown or reddish brown, black-bordered blotches (aha!) down the body, the mid-dorsal ones quite large and alternating in position with smaller lateral ones." Check. My brain hadn't converted the spot pattern to rows exactly, but I had noticed that the side spots were distinctly smaller than the ones on top of the back, and the book's "reddish brown" color with black borders

increased my confidence in this identification.

"Ground color gray to tan." Mine seemed to have a white ground, but in the low light of a bare-light-bulb-lit cellar, I might have translated beige into white. Now I was doing my own triangulation.

"Belly checker-boarded (often very irregularly) with black on white." Obviously, this feature is more helpful if you've just found a dead snake you can turn over. I was glad not to know whether mine was checker-boarded.

"Not too much trust should be placed in the Y or V marking." Thank you for saying this, but then why did you make the Y or V mark the most prominent identifying feature on the picture page? (I find field guides are more helpful when you talk back to them.) All right then, I think I've got it.

Further on, after some discussion of how the Eastern Milk Snake is "often killed because of its superficial resemblance to the Copperhead," Peterson's had this to say: "Sometimes called 'house

snake,' but 'barn snake' would be more descriptive because it would reflect the frequency with which farm buildings are entered in search of rodents. Check.

We don't have a barn, but we do have rodents. In fact, I've trapped 95 mice in the house since last September (my Mouse Patrol Fiscal Year runs Sept. 1 to Aug. 31). And curiously, the catch rate had slowed noticeably in April and May, even during the unseasonably cold snaps. Maybe Eastern Milk Snake gets the credit.

I remembered that after a long hiatus, I had caught a mouse in the pantry two nights previous, the beginning of a cold snap following the 90-degree-plus stretch in late June. Now I wonder: Had the snake been doing its job during the warm weather, then become disabled from the cold? Jim must have had similar thoughts, for after I read this section aloud, he commented, "Good! We need a mouser in the house."

I downloaded the photos, and although I had gotten a good zoom shot of the head that showed the black graffiti clearly, I couldn't make out an obvious Y or a V. No matter, though I cared more about the snake's well-being than its identity. Hoping to make Jim's theory true, I embellished it with my own story. I bet the snake lives under our furnace. When the furnace went off, the snake slithered out to find someplace warm. Like a driver caught in a blizzard, it had slowed to a crawl and then gotten stuck.

"I'll check in the morning," I said to Jim. "If it's still there, we'll know."

The next morning it was gone.

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