

Highlight of the Summer

By Frederick Boyce

Every summer my good friend Phil Colclough brings his family to Bogue Banks from east Tennessee to vacation in Emerald Isle, and every year they come to visit us at the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores. He and his wife, Alyson, have two very bright and adventurous children, Myers and Audrey, who always enjoy their visit to the utmost, and I always enjoy showing them around. Myers couldn't make it this year, but 12-year-old Audrey certainly had a very memorable time, and so did I for that matter.

After taking them on our usual tour around the facility, I decided I would cap things off by feeding the alligators. They all situated themselves around the large alligator taxidermy mount in our Coastal Plain gallery, just in front of the alligator habitat window, while I went around back to feed. I was just lifting the first juicy, frozen-thawed rodent in my tongs to offer the gators when my radio suddenly blared with a call. I reluctantly put the delectable-looking rodent down and answered.

For several days I had been expecting delivery of a rather large shipment of *more* frozen rodents (indispensable food for our birds and reptiles), and it had chosen *this* exact moment to arrive. I had no choice but to break off the impromptu alligator feed and go attend to this untimely arrival, as it was a very large order and would quickly go bad if left sitting in the hot sun on our loading dock. I had to go back out into the gallery and tell the Colcloughs, amidst profuse apologies, what was going on. While I was sorry to see Audrey look a bit disappointed, they were, of course, extremely gracious and understanding. I told them that if they cared to wait, I would resume the alligator feed once I had unpacked the rodents and sorted them into the freezer, but they decided to head back to their beach house in Emerald Isle. A little dejected at having to cut our annual visit short, I fetched the three big boxes of frozen rodents from the loading dock and carted them to our food prep area.

Almost immediately, my cell phone began ringing. To my surprise, it was Phil, saying, "Hey, there's a big rattlesnake crossing the road down here by the stop sign." This is where I should reveal that Phillip Blake Colclough is not just any aquarium visitor—his current position is Director of Animal Care, Conservation and Education at Zoo Knoxville, one of the top zoos in the country, if not the world. Previously, he was Curator of Herpetology there, succeeding his late mentor, the legendary herpetology curator Bern Tryon, the first to successfully breed many rare species in a zoo.

Phil is a rattlesnake expert of the first order and has participated in numerous conservation efforts and field studies, including work in South Carolina on eastern diamondback rattlesnakes as well as with timber rattlesnakes in the Great Smoky Mountains and Pisgah National Forest.

I quickly enlisted an intern to handle the rodents and bolted to the scene in my truck, which is always equipped with a full complement of snake-collecting equipment. I was not a bit surprised to find Phil very happily keeping watch over a beautiful female canebrake (coastal timber) rattlesnake in his shorts and flip-flops, casually using a dead pine branch to keep her safely corralled in the grassy area at the corner of Pine Knoll and Roosevelt boulevards. The snake had actually been crossing Pine Knoll Boulevard, heading straight for the nine-acre tract that is currently being developed, which has likely been part of this snake's usual foraging range for many years. Luckily, in the steady stream of



Phil Colclough demonstrates the proper way to admire a rattlesnake.

—Photos by Fred Boyce

traffic leaving the aquarium, it just happened to be Phil who came upon the snake first, and by even further providential happenstance, sea turtle specialist Michele Lamping, who is also trained in the handling of venomous snakes, was just leaving the aquarium and was already on hand to back me up.

I used a snake hook to place the snake into a secure container so that she could be released farther back in the Roosevelt Natural Area. Audrey was overjoyed. She naturally loves snakes and had never seen one of our wild timber rattlesnakes, a rare treat indeed, and an always unforgettable experience. "We're just snake tourists," Phil cheerfully explained to an inquisitive passerby. Many

do not realize that people travel here from all across the country and around the world in hopes of seeing and photographing our native snakes, especially rattlesnakes, just as divers come here to view sand tiger sharks in our coastal waters. Such animals are economically significant and deserve our respect, understanding and protection, for we are their stewards for the rest of the world and for future generations.

Seeing and saving that incredible snake was certainly a highlight of Audrey's summer, as it was for Phil and me. In

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The author later took Phil and Audrey to his study site to view some wild cottonmouths. Their smiles say it all.