

Baby Season

By Frederick Boyce

Most reptiles hatch from eggs, and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude for this. Some 365 to 400 million years ago, their ancestors, the Amniotes, created the self-contained amniotic egg that forever emancipated the rest of us vertebrates from the need to lay eggs in the water and spend the first part of our lives as some sort of larval/tadpole form with gills.

A true marvel of nature, the amniotic egg is named for the amniotic membrane which encloses a tiny private pool of fluid, enabling the embryo to develop within the relatively safe confines of a shelled egg. This pivotal invention enabled the earliest reptiles to expand into and occupy new terrestrial habitats—even deserts—that were off limits to their amphibian ancestors, who remained



Baby rat snake hatched at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores in 2014.—Photos by Fred Boyce

even deserts—that were off limits to their amphibian ancestors, who remained tied to water by their soft, jellied eggs.

Many of the reptiles in our own area, including the freshwater turtles, the skinks and anoles, and the nonvenomous rat snakes and black racers, lay their eggs in the beginning of summer, from late May to early June. The incubation period typically varies from 60 to 70 days, depending upon

conditions. Hot, dry weather will tend to shorten incubation time whereas cooler, wetter weather will extend it. This means that a lot of these eggs will be hatching in early to mid-August, or about the time you are reading this. And since yard and garden mulch beds make ideal places for many of them to lay their eggs, there is a very good chance that you might be crossing paths with some of these delightful miniatures.

Baby lizards—tiny green anoles and skinks—typically start showing up first, and they will enjoy a brief period of carefree living (kind of a head start) to get their footing in the world before the baby snakes start showing up. For alas, nature being what it is, the arrival of these new babies is perfectly timed such that some of them—especially the baby lizards, but also the newly minted frogs that have just metamorphosed from tadpoles—will ensure the presence of a ready and abundant food supply for others, namely the baby snakes (some of which will also be eating each other).

Even the snakes that grow up to be dedicated rodent eaters, such as the rat snakes, will have a much more varied diet as hatchlings. Baby frogs and lizards are much more readily available than newborn mice, which will be guarded by their mothers' sharp teeth.

The venomous snakes in our area are born alive a bit later on, at the end of August or in September, and are unlikely to be born near human habitations. Any animated shoestrings or bootlaces you come across (long and skinny),

especially if they turn up in some improbable place—inside your house or somewhere up high—are very likely to be baby rat snakes or black racers, both of which are among the most common snakes in our area. Being newly hatched, they are easily confused as they try to find their way, and there seem to be more houses, garages and driveways for them to negotiate every year. Neither of them looks like its parents; both are gray or grayish overall with a pattern of darker blotches down the back, squarish in the case of rat snakes and smaller and more closely spaced in the racers. Racers also have enormous round eyes, while the baby rat snakes will have a heavy dark bar across the snout in front of their eyes.



Baby black racer

Hatchling turtles are burdened with an overabundance of cuteness that causes far too many of them to be picked up and taken home as pets. This is a very bad idea. While you might be able to keep a hatchling in a fish tank or other container for a time, turtles grow a lot faster than you would think and will very soon demand a lot more room than you can provide. Also, unless you are Keith Richards, they are likely to live as long as you do, or longer. I have to answer on average two calls each month from folks who have grown tired of caring for a turtle they brought home as a hatchling and want to donate it to the aquarium. Sorry, but we are full up. Please leave baby turtles where you find them. They have been surviving for over 200 million years and are very capable of looking after themselves. A certain number of them are slated to be prey for other animals, but enough will survive to carry on. That is just how nature works. Aquariums and zoos will not accept wildlife pets once they have worn out their welcome. So, let's make a deal: Please don't bring them home, and I won't have to scold you in a couple of years when you call me because your "baby" turtle has outgrown the bathtub.

Frederick Boyce is the staff herpetologist at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores.



Hatchling snapping turtle