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ABOUT SWCHR
Originally founded by Gerald Keown in 2007, SWCHR is a 501(c)(3) non-profit association, governed by a board of directors and dedicated to promoting education of the Association’s members and the general public relating to the natural history, biology, taxonomy, conservation and preservation needs, field studies, and captive propagation of the herpetofauna indigenous to the American Southwest.

THE SWCHR LOGO
There are several versions of the SWCHR logo, all featuring the Gray-Banded Kingsnake (Lampropeltis alterna), a widely-recognized reptile native to the Trans-Pecos region of Texas as well as adjacent Mexico and New Mexico.

ON THE COVER: Southwestern Speckled Rattlesnake, Crotalus mitchellii pyrrhus, Yuma County, AZ (Bill White). With this photograph, Bill won the SWCHR 2014 H. F. Koenig Award for Excellence in Herpetological Photography.

BACKGROUND IMAGE: Elephant Tusk, Big Bend National Park, TX (Chris McMartin)

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For information on becoming a member please visit the membership page of the SWCHR web site at http://www.southwesternherp.com/join.html.

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**A CALL FOR PAPERS**

Are you a field herpetologist or a herpetoculturist working with species native to the American Southwest? Do you have a paper or an article you have written for which you would like to find a permanent repository? Want to be assured you will always be able to share it with the world? Submit it to the SWCHR *Bulletin* for possible publication. Submitted manuscripts from SWCHR members, as well as non-members, will be considered. There are NO page charges to have your articles appear in the SWCHR Bulletin, as some other publications are now requiring.

To be accepted for publication, submissions must deal with herpetological species native to the American Southwest. Such topics as field notes, county checklists, range extensions, taxonomy, reproduction and breeding, diseases, snake bite and venom research, captive breeding and maintenance, conservation issues, legal issues, etc. are all acceptable. For assistance with formatting manuscripts, search ‘scientific journal article format’ on the internet and tailor the resultant guidance to suit.

Previously published articles or papers are acceptable, provided you still hold the copyright to the work and have the right to re-publish it. If we accept your paper or article for publication, you will still continue to be the copyright holder. If your submission has been previously published, please provide the name of the publication in which it appeared along with the date of publication. All submissions should be manually proofed in addition to being spell checked and should be submitted by email as either Microsoft Word or text documents.

Send submissions to swchrbulletin@swchr.org.
A Message from the President

In this issue of the SWCHR Bulletin, you may have noticed the APEX Award logo on the inside front cover—yes, the Bulletin won an Award for Publication Excellence! This is thanks in large part to the hard work and dedication of Bulletin editor, Chris McMartin, as well as the great contributions from all of our authors—thank you all, sincerely. The Bulletin is great and continues to get better with every issue!

We have some highly informative articles in this issue. We lead off with the great news of the “re-discovery” of the Mexican White-lipped Frog (Leptodactylus labialis fragilis) in south Texas, by Connor Adams. Next is an account of the envenomation of Billy Vickers by a Gila Monster (Heloderma suspectum), compiled by Robert Twombley. Warning: this article is accompanied by several photos of the wound, some of which are of a graphic nature. We have an interesting field observation of a Round-tailed Ground Squirrel (Xerospermophilus tereticaudus) preying on a Long-nosed Snake (Rhinocheilus lecontei), by Kathryn Lance. Chad Whitney gives us his review on the book, Texas Lizards: A Field Guide, by Troy and Toby Hibbits. Finally, we have a nice write-up by Bill White on the life and times of our good friend, SWCHR Life Member, and long-time Board Member at Large, Orion McElroy, who sadly passed away on May 2nd, 2015.

We are fast approaching the hottest months of the year, but with the notable exception of much of California, much of the terrible drought afflicting the southwestern U.S. for the last few years seems to be mostly at an end. Texas, especially, has recently seen record rainfall amounts across much of the state, leading to flooding and tragic loss of human life in some areas. With this rainfall, we can hope that animal populations affected by the drought will begin to recover. The part of south Texas where I live continues to get rain, and it seems to be a very good year for most local amphibians so far. I have observed several Rio Grande Leopard Frogs (Lithobates berlandieri) recently, which have been very scarce here for a long time. One species I have not noticed making a comeback in my neighborhood is the Green Treefrog (Hyla cinerea), although I am still hopeful to hear the old familiar “Quank, Quank, Quank, Quank!” soon.

Happy and friendly herping!
Rediscovering the Mexican White-lipped Frog (Leptodactylus [labialis] fragilis) in South Texas (Anura: Leptodactylidae)

by Connor Adams

The Mexican White-lipped Frog (Leptodactylus [labialis] fragilis) is a small, foam-nesting species that ranges from extreme southern Texas to northern South America. It inhabits grasslands and open savannahs, where males call from depressions under bunches of grass. In recent years, Texas populations of Leptodactylus fragilis have been poorly documented. Reports of calling males have surfaced from time to time and it has been suggested that populations within the Lower Rio Grande Valley are sparse but probably stable (Bartlett and Bartlett 2009). Others in the scientific community believed these frogs may have been extirpated from Texas due to the heavy use of organophosphates (Dixon 1987, 2000).

Two years ago, I started work as a research technician on a ranch located in the Rio Grande Valley. When I arrived, the valley was at the tail end of a heavy drought period. Finding the reptiles and amphibians I longed to see was often a frustrating endeavor. The next year, rain clouds began to appear in the sky more and more frequently. I was full of excitement, and optimistic that this would be the year that I would finally encounter the unique amphibians I had only seen on the pages of my field guide. I found myself chasing storm cells, only to be let down when they failed to develop. When it did rain, I found myself listening to choruses of Western Narrow-mouthed Toads (Gastrophryne olivacea) and Texas Toads (Anaxyrus speciosus), hoping to hear the distinctive leaky-faucet call of a Leptodactylus.

Then, in September of last year, a tropical depression in the gulf created a large band of moisture that would hold over the Valley for an entire week. It was during this rain event that I had my first encounter with the elusive Mexican White-lipped Frog. From my car I could hear an individual male, calling from the far side of a flooded roadside ditch in southern Starr County. I pulled off the road and slowly made my way through the tall grass toward the calling frog. After some time I managed to narrow down the frog’s location and started searching through the thick bunches of grass with my flashlight. The frog continued to call while I searched and searched, and I could tell the individual must have been within inches of my light. I tried gently running my fingers through the base of the grass, and apparently got too close. The frog stopped calling and I frantically felt around the roots, but left that night empty-handed.

Fortunately for me, and the amphibians of the Valley, there was more rain to come. So when six inches of rain fell in southwestern Starr County over the course of a few days in mid-May, a friend and I geared up and headed back to the spot where the secretive little frog had been calling the previous year. I had been to this particular spot many times since September 2014, but had not encountered another Leptodactylus. The frog activity on this night was abundant and deafening. Immediately after arriving we could hear large numbers of Mexican Burrowing Toads (Rhombophrynus dorsalis), Couch’s Spadefoots (Scaphiopus couchii), Sheep Frogs (Hypopachus variolosus), Western Narrow-mouthed Toads, and Rio Grande Leopard Frogs (Lithobates berlandieri). Unfortunately, we did not hear the calls of White-lipped Frogs. We decided to drive down the road, stopping every minute or so to listen carefully, and eventually turned around. When we arrived back our starting point, I thought I could hear a faint “water-drop” call amongst the loud choruses.

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We pulled off the road, walked through the ditch, and realized there were two to three Leptodactylus calling in the grass about ten yards in front of us. We took some recordings, trying not to disturb them, and I called a couple more friends who happened to be in the area also searching for frogs. The more people we had looking, the better our odds of catching one would be. When they arrived, three of us worked our way to the other side of the water-filled ditch. Battling mosquitos, sandburs and thorns, we crawled closer and closer to the frogs. We eventually isolated a male and narrowed down the grass bunches where it could be hiding. When we got too close the call would go quiet, but we found that calling back was very effective. The frogs were very responsive, which allowed us to get within inches of the male we were searching for. After twenty minutes of patience and teamwork I heard the words “I got it!” from my
friend who had been carefully poking around the mud where the frog was calling. A sigh of relief and an excitement unlike any other followed. We photographed the frog and eventually released it.

Mexican White-lipped Frog (*Leptodactylus labialis* fragilis), Starr County, Texas. Photo by the author.

The next night my good friend and mentor Dr. Toby Hibbitts and I headed back out with the ambition of finding new localities for *Leptodactylus* since they were active the night before. We were able to capture another individual at the first locality where there were now five males calling, and heard another farther south in Starr County. We then were able to catch an individual in Zapata County which was a county range extension for the species.

It's not every day you get to encounter such an interesting and secretive animal. I feel very fortunate to have had this experience, and to have shared it with great people. Hopefully, the moisture will stay and more localities will be found in the future.

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Account of a Human Envenomation by a Gila Monster, *Heloderma suspectum* (Lacertilia: Helodermatidae)

by Robert Twombly

Herein I document an illegitimate (i.e. due to intentional interaction) bite from a *Heloderma suspectum* (Gila Monster). An adult male, age 29, sustained the bite to the left forearm. I used social media to track down the victim based on a picture I found using a Google image search. The victim, Mr. Billy Vickers, provided me the following account through personal communication and is used with his permission.

On July 3, 2011, a *Heloderma suspectum* bit Mr. Vickers on the left forearm and held on for 3 minutes and 33 seconds. During the bite process, Mr. Vickers began to experience several symptoms. He started to lose his vision and felt the onset of nausea. Twenty to thirty seconds after freeing himself from the bite, he began to feel a sensation he could only describe as lava running through his veins.

By the time Mr. Vickers arrived at the hospital he was experiencing excessive dry heaves and had no control over any of his muscles or bowels. He also lost his vision completely. Mr. Vickers was experiencing such severe pain he was wishing he was dead so the pain would stop. The local edema to his forearm progressed to a point where it had doubled in size.

Due to the severity of the envenomation the hospital decided it would be best to transfer Mr. Vickers to a different hospital. During that time he drifted in and out of consciousness.

Mr. Billy Vickers' left forearm post-fasciotomy, after being envenomated by a Gila Monster (*Heloderma suspectum*). Photo courtesy Billy Vickers.
Upon Mr. Vickers’ arrival to the next hospital’s Intensive Care Unit, he was still drifting in and out of consciousness and started to go into shock. The toxicologist felt a fasciotomy was necessary to save him based on the symptoms he was experiencing at the time, including the amount of venom and the indications bacteria was present.

During the next two weeks in the ICU, Mr. Vickers completely lost control of the entire left side of his body, becoming paralyzed on his left side. The pain he was experiencing was so bad that his heart rate and blood pressure would increase to “stroke levels” just trying to sit up in bed. It took him five weeks to get back the use of his left leg, and another three months to get the use of his left hand.

As a result of the envenomation, Mr. Vickers has 20% less muscle on his left side compared to his right side and it seems to be decreasing. It also left him with a rare medical condition called reflex sympathetic dystrophy (RSD), which is currently Stage IV on the McGill pain chart (Stage V being the highest). His symptoms resulting from RSD include edema, skin color changes to red and purple, cramping and “locking up” of his left side that will last for days at a time, and aneurysm.

To help alleviate the pain he experiences on a daily basis, and to attempt to stop the progression of the symptoms he experiences on a daily basis, his doctors placed a surgical implant on his spine in hopes of not only helping with the pain, but to gain more control of his left side. The implant has mildly helped Mr. Vickers—he was able to drop his morphine dosage from 150mg or more down to 105mg, and his Neurontin (gabapentin; used to treat seizures and nerve pain) from 4,000mg down to 2,400. This has made it possible to get four hours of sleep a night, which is an increase from two hours before.

Other accounts of *H. suspectum* envenomation (Beck, 2005) discuss some of the symptoms Mr. Vickers experienced. Symptoms commonly associated with moderately severe cases are pain, local edema, nausea, vomiting, and tachycardia. More severe case seem to result from bites closer to the core of the victim’s body such as the abdomen, shoulder, calf, or forearm as has been documented here. Common symptoms in the most severe cases recorded include profuse diarrhea and lethargy (Heitschel, 1986).

The symptom relayed here of paralysis on the left side is noteworthy, because such symptoms have only been observed and documented in mammals, mainly laboratory rodents (Cooke and Loeb, 1908). Similar symptoms were noted in other mammals, but were more conspicuous in some species than others. When mice were injected subcutaneously in the thorax with lethal quantities of venom, one hind leg sometimes became paralyzed and spastic, while the other hind leg was incompletely paralyzed (Bogert and del Campo, 1956).
An Observation of Diurnal Predation by a Round-tailed Ground Squirrel, *Xerospermophilus tereticaudus* (Rodentia: Sciuridae) on a Long-Nosed Snake, *Rhinocheilus lecontei* (Serpentes: Colubridae)

by Kathryn Lance,
Docent at Tohono Chul Park

On the morning of June 8, 2015, two fellow docents and I were observing birds from a shaded ramada at Tohono Chul Park, a 49-acre desert preserve in the heart of urban Tucson, Arizona. The elevation is 2520 feet and the habitat consists of rocky, sandy hills and washes with a variety of native vegetation. Due to an unseasonable tropical storm system, the sky was overcast and it was very humid, though not particularly hot. At approximately 9:10 AM, one of my fellow docents pointed to a commotion under a Palo Verde tree (*Cercidium microphyllum*) very close to where we stood. “It looks like that ground squirrel has a snake!” he said. We turned to look and, unbelievably to us, an adult Round-tailed Ground Squirrel (*Xerospermophilus tereticaudus*) that I estimated to be around 8 inches long seemed to be attacking a banded black and cream-colored snake. The snake, which proved to be a Long-nosed Snake (*Rhinocheilus lecontei*), was itself about two to two-and-a-half feet long. All three of us were flabbergasted; we think of these little rodents as extremely cute, harmless creatures whose only encounters with snakes occur when snakes enter their burrows and eat their young.

We did not see the beginning of the incident, but the snake was still moving when we began watching (and I started photographing). The ground squirrel repeatedly jumped on the snake, pawing and biting at it. After the snake was clearly dead, the squirrel began tearing through the snake’s skin and biting off, then eating small pieces. After a while the squirrel dragged the snake away from the scene of the struggle, and, after eating more of it, eventually abandoned the snake on the edge of the patch of ground where we could see multiple entrances to the squirrel’s burrow.
It appeared to the observers that at this point the ground squirrel was checking to see if the snake was dead. Note the head is still intact. Photo by the author.

We had all seen half-grown squirrel pups playing around the burrow entrances. Perhaps, we speculated, the snake had been after the juvenile squirrels and the adult squirrel had attacked the snake to protect them. As it turns out, that scenario seems very unlikely. First, the snake, though full-grown, was quite small to have sought out such relatively large prey (the babies were already half the size of the adult). Second, a study by Rodríguez-Robles and Greene (1999) found that long-nosed snakes seldom ingest mammals, and have not been found containing the remains of anything so large as Xerospermophilus or with multiple individuals in their gut to indicate nest-raiding. Their primary prey, in fact, is whiptail lizards (Aspidoscelis sp.), which they commonly ambush in their burrows at night or dawn while the lizards are sleeping.

The ground squirrel then bit and chewed off several pieces of skin from the snake. Photo by the author.

Finally, my research showed me that round-tailed ground squirrels are not the docile seed-and-insect eaters we docents had all assumed; though there is not much scientific literature on the subject, they are apparently well-known as eaters of carrion, birds, and snakes, including, possibly, rattlesnakes. Anecdotal evidence, including an observation by my herpetologist friend and mentor Edward O. Moll, indicates that Xerospermophilus individuals have little fear of Crotalus atrox, and have even been seen harassing them by jumping over the rattlesnakes’ tails. Herpetologist Hugh McCrystal, who has closely observed round-tailed ground squirrels for twenty years, calls them “ferocious predators and meat eaters” who catch and kill baby doves and scavenge other dead animals. He has seen them chase off snakes, including Coachwhips (Coluber [= Masticophis] flagellum) and Gopher Snakes (Pituophis melanoleucus) by repeatedly charging and backing away.

It seems most likely to me that the unfortunate long-nosed snake we observed was out and about when it encountered the ground squirrel. Though it was midmorning, it was unusually overcast for early June, and I’ve occasionally seen long-nosed snakes in the park as late as 8 AM on normal sunny days. Or perhaps the squirrel dug up the snake with the specific aim of killing and eating it. I’m sure we will never know, but I can guarantee that I will never again look at those “cute” little ground squirrels in the same way again.

Covered with blood stains from the snake, the ground squirrel turns away before dragging the snake’s body from the scene. Photo by the author.

Literature Cited

Moll, Edward O. Private communication.

The remains of the snake after having been abandoned by the squirrel, away from its burrow. Note the head is now severely mutilated. Photo by the author.

Book Review: Texas Lizards: A Field Guide
by Troy D. Hibbitts and Toby J. Hibbitts
Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015
Paperback. 351pp. $24.95 Cover Price.

Reviewed by Chad Whitney

Authored by brothers Troy and Toby Hibbitts with a foreword written by Laurie J. Vitt, Texas Lizards: A Field Guide is the latest addition to the Texas Natural History Guides series. This series of guides is a necessity for any person curious about the facts related to Texas wildlife and natural history. The Hibbitts brothers are exceptional field herpetologists with an authentic expertise that belongs in book form among the historical canon of Texas natural history. Users of this field guide to Texas lizards will benefit greatly from their vast individual and combined experience in the field spanning over decades of effort and technical training. This is the first book to focus entirely on Texas lizards and it covers all fifty-one species found within the state.

The book is aesthetically pleasing both to the eye an in hand, and the binding and cover seem durable and field ready. The systematic accounts are each designed with a finely tuned attention to detail that maximizes information in a compact space. Users of this guide will enjoy an organized and classic approach to each account, complete with categories describing each animal and its various habits and behaviors. The range maps are clear and the shaded regions are detailed to specify a range even within borderline counties where a particular taxon may not be distributed countywide. This is useful for field herpers who might find themselves in a county that borders the range of a particular target species.

As a long time user of natural history field guides, I have developed a compulsion to skip ahead to the “comments” section of each species account when first reading the text. The comments are often more appealing than the dry and predictable recitation of natural history facts and reproductive information found in the opening statements of each account. These comments can provide the reader with a glimpse into what it is like to search for that particular subject. Furthermore, the comments section can summarize broader facts and details about the conservation status of an organism, and it can be used as a summary for additional information regarding taxonomy or local abundance. In Texas Lizards it is evident that the “comments and conservation” category is designed to perform all of these tasks and more. In many instances this section seems to invite the reader into the field with interesting morsels of information that stimulate curiosity.
I could list the finer points about what I have come to expect and appreciate in a field guide, but the most pleasing quality that I seek is the encouragement concealed in the context of this particular genre of non-fiction. We are encouraged to leave the comforts of domestic life and to seek out the experiences that we crave as “herpetophiliacs,” or as nature lovers in general. Texas Lizards is a field herper’s companion because it is written by such accomplished field herpers who know what must be included in a field guide, and what is extraneous and should be omitted. Each species account is a challenge to venture out in search of its subject; each range map is a challenge to fill in the gaps or expand the distribution of a favorite lizard species.

Many may indeed view a field guide merely as a resource to be referenced occasionally and then returned to a well-organized bookcase next to an over-used armchair. Nevertheless there are always those of us who are in the market for these books with an intention to do more than reference them, we will put them to work. Our copies will be frayed and dusty, often heavily marked and noted by a variety of pens each signifying a different time and place. For such users the encouragement is found in the diversity of species between the covers, each calling out to be patiently observed and listed over a lifetime of dedication to the pursuit of new and interesting forms of wildlife. For these folks, Texas Lizards will become so much more than a field guide; it will be a journal, a life-list, a map weight, and eventually it will become a sentimental artifact of a life lived in pursuit of natural beauty.
In Memoriam: SWCHR Board Member
Orion McElroy

by Bill White

On May 2nd, 2015, SWCHR Board Member and Life Member Orion McElroy passed away at his home in Wilhoit, Az.

Born March 23, 1955 in Elko, Nevada, and raised in Lake Tahoe, California and Reno, Nevada, Orion developed an eye for, and love of, all wild creatures early in life. Grasshoppers, spiders, crayfish, lizards, chipmunks, and snakes were caught or live-trapped by Orion, frequently homesteading in his pockets or lunch sack, and often startling other family members who inadvertently stumbled across his animal companions. During his boyhood and teen years, Orion went on frequent field trips with his best buddy Ira LaRivers. A short time later, Ira and Orion befriended Hans Koenig, a lifelong outdoorsman and animal lover himself. The friends were shepherded by Dr. Ira LaRivers, who used the boys as his field assistants, but also allowed them to roam freely, explore widely and develop strong relationships with the desert and mountain wildernesses around them.

After graduating from Reno High School in 1973, Orion joined the United States Coast Guard in 1975. Upon his honorable discharge in 1980, with the rank of Petty Officer Third Class, Orion returned to his home in Reno, where he was welcomed by friends and family. In 1985, Orion met the love of his life, Carmen Hunt McCrea, who became his wife and lifelong companion. They moved to Bagdad, Arizona in 1986, where he was to work for the next 29 years. Orion and Carmen settled into that little community and began to raise their family.

A true outdoorsman, Orion took enormous pleasure in the simple act of walking in the desert or high country, watching nature, observing plants, animals, the weather, and the interplay of these across the landscape. Orion was willing to venture away if the motivation was sufficient. He enjoyed fishing and was lured off to Alaska to go salmon and halibut fishing with his sisters.

Orion will be sorely missed by his wife, children, grandchildren, siblings and huge extended family, co-workers and assorted herpers worldwide. A very active member on the SWCHR Forums, sharing his observations and wealth of knowledge, Orion will be sorely missed here as well.
SWCHR CODE OF ETHICS

As a member of the Southwestern Center for Herpetological Research, I subscribe to the Association’s Code of Ethics.

Field activities should limit the impact on natural habitats, replacing all cover objects, not tearing apart rocks or logs and refraining from the use of gasoline or other toxic materials.

Catch and release coupled with photography and the limited take of non-protected species for personal study or breeding use is permitted. The commercial take and sale of wild-caught animals is not acceptable.

Collecting practices should respect landowner rights, including but not limited to securing permission for land entry and the packing out of all personal trash.

Captive-breeding efforts are recognized as a valid means of potentially reducing collection pressures on wild populations and are encouraged.

The release of captive animals including captive-bred animals into the wild is discouraged except under the supervision of trained professionals and in accordance with an accepted species preservation or restocking plan.

The disclosure of exact locality information on public internet forums is discouraged in most circumstances. Locality information posted on public internet forums usually should be restricted to providing the name of the county where the animal was found. When specific locality data is provided to one in confidence, it should be kept in confidence and should not be abused or shared with others without explicit permission.

Other members of the Association are always to be treated cordially and in a respectful manner.