



Stories by Beverly Serrell

Art by Steve Stratakos



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For Jude and Ray

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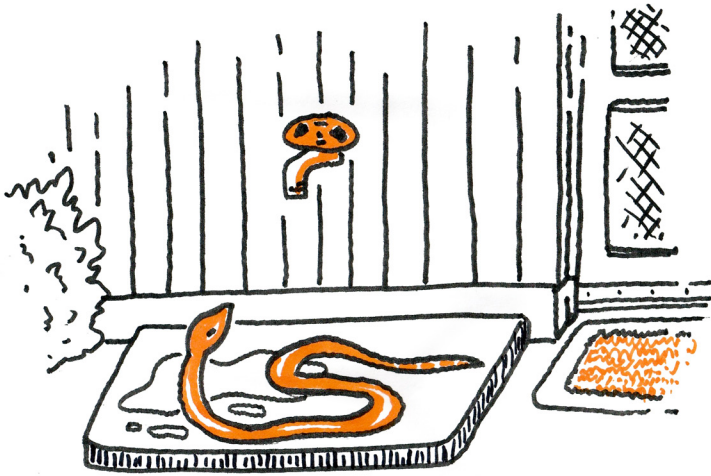
Prologue

This book is for everyone who has reacted with surprise when I have told them, “I have a snake,” and they begin to ask me questions about it. This book is also to recognize my amazement at being kept company for more than 30 years by an animal that is interesting, beautiful, and undemanding.

Foundling

I didn't mean to have a snake. It was a surprise. On a warm, dry November evening, outside my door, on the walkway, under a faucet, near a wet spot on the concrete, was a snake. A slender, 12-inch-long bright orange snake. Not moving.

It didn't look dangerous—it had a small nontriangular head and no rattles on its tail, and it didn't try to get away or act aggressive. What the heck. I picked it up and brought it in the house.



This snake was clearly not a wild one, judging from its color, pattern, and size—and it was out in the open, not hiding. All of which suggested that it had been bred in captivity.

Escaped

It was too colorful to be a local wild snake, so I assumed it must be a pet that got away, and it must be thirsty because it was lingering by the garden faucet. I got a shallow bowl of water and held the snake over it, and it quickly began drinking. Okay, a thirsty lost pet snake.

I posted notes in the neighborhood that said, “Did you lose your snake?” No one claimed it, but one person said he’d take it if I didn’t want it. I decided to keep it. It was actually a very cute snake.



Because it looked like a pet, I guessed it would be gentle and safe to pick up.

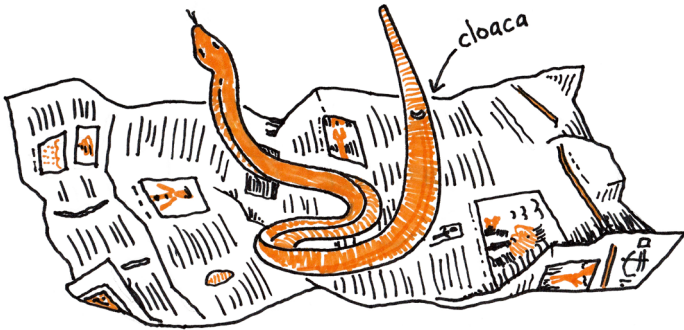
Snake Starter Kit

After looking on the internet for advice on snake keeping, I learned that this small, slim orange snake was a corn snake (scientific name *Pantherophis guttatus*), a species of common rat snake that is native to the southern United States. Corn snakes make good pets because they are gentle and don't mind being handled, and they are not fussy eaters, which makes them suitable as a starter snake for novice owners. That would be me.

A trip to the pet store got me a small plastic box and some frozen "pinkies" (baby mice). I was on my way! Little did I know then that this snake would live with me for more than the next three decades.

Gender

I learned that he was a he when I took him in his little box to a guy who was an expert in snake sex. He could tell a snake's gender by inserting a probe (gently! KY!) into the snake's cloaca, or vent—that is, the little hole on the snake's underside, several inches from the tip of the tail. If the probe goes in a little way, it's a female, and if it goes in farther, it's a male. Probing should only be done by an expert.



“Cloaca” in Latin means “sewer,” which is appropriate because both the snake’s pee and poop come out the same hole.

Name

A friend of mine, Suzi, named him Kernel. Get it? A kernel of corn. She is the only one of my friends or neighbors who was very interested in him.

One winter she drove in a snowstorm from where she lived in Michigan to feed Kernel at my house in Chicago while I was on vacation, such was her devotion. Little did we know then that snakes can go weeks without eating.



A friend fed Kernel when I was on vacation, but I needn't have worried about him being hungry. A snake can survive for 2 to 3 months without food, which is much longer than any vacation I ever took.

What Does He Eat?

At first, Kernel ate defrosted pinkies—hairless baby mice. When he grew to be about 14 inches, he graduated to larger baby mice, called “fuzzies.” Sometimes he ate as many as three at one meal. I figured that in the wild, a corn snake might not eat often, but when it found a nest of baby mice, it would eat until it was full, because who knew how long it would be until he found the next nest?

When Kernel got bigger, he started taking adult mice. I defrost two to room temperature. After he eats the first mouse, he is almost always interested in a second helping. Occasionally he refuses the second one, which is a drag because you can't keep a defrosted mouse in the fridge; it will spoil.

Note: Do not microwave a frozen mouse. Snakes like raw meat.



How Do You Know If He's Hungry?

As a full-grown adult, his home has been a 50-gallon (17x18x36 inches) glass terrarium that I keep in my home office. I know when he is hungry because he becomes very active, searching all corners of it, high and low, flicking his forked tongue to sense the smells. Another way he shows interest in food is the way he comes to the side of his tank nearest to me at my desk and stares at me.



The feeding routine begins with holding the defrosted mouse by the tail and wiggling it to catch his attention.

How Often Does He Eat?

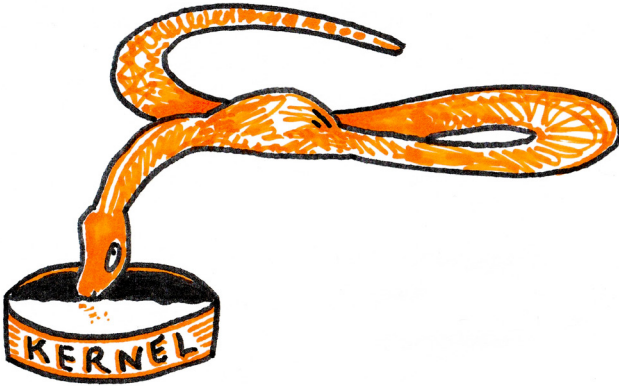
Weeks and sometimes a month apart. That infrequently? you ask. Yes, because a friend of mine had a job at the zoo in the animal hospital, where he assisted the pathologist in doing autopsies when animals died. He told me that many of the dead snakes had fatty livers, most likely from being fed too often. Feeding time is great entertainment for many snake owners' friends! I swore I wouldn't overfeed my snake.

Feeding Routine

As I wiggle the mouse, Kernel sneaks up on it slowly. Then he strikes, grabbing the mouse by the head, so that its nose and mouth are in his mouth. At the same time, he throws two loops of his body around the mouse and squeezes it. (This works in the wild to suffocate a live mouse!)

Then he releases the loops and begins slowly working his jaws around the mouse's limp body until its tail disappears. By eating it headfirst, the snake goes with the direction of the mouse's fur, not against it.

Very soon, the bulge of the mouse has moved several inches down Kernel's body. After the meal he is usually inactive for several days.



After eating a mouse, Kernel slides over to his water dish and takes a long drink. Then he slides away and wipes the sides of his mouth on the paper on the bottom of his tank.

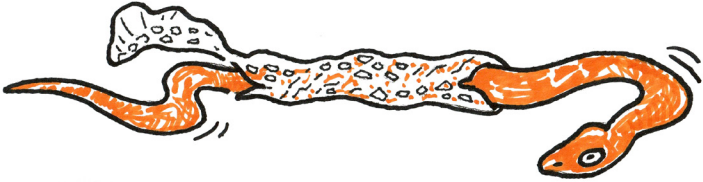
A neat eater.

Pooping and Shedding

I tried keeping a diary of how often I fed him and what happened next, but I wasn't systematic enough in my data collection to confidently tell you exactly how many days apart these activities were or how often. Suffice it to say, he pooped and he shed his skin after almost every feeding.

When he pooped, sometimes it looked like black blobs and white runny stuff: a mix of poop and pee. Sometimes it was drier and lumpy with some hair in it.

When he shed, he rubbed his face until the skin broke loose around his mouth, and then he rubbed, peeled, and wiggled his way out, like taking off a long sock inside out.



His scaly skin almost always came off in one piece during the shedding process.

How to Measure a Snake

It's difficult. Snakes don't lie in a straight line. It helps to have two people: one to hold the snake, and the other to use a flexible tape measure to run along its body from tip to tail. It usually takes a couple of tries to get the job done.



When people ask, “How long is your snake?” I say approximately 3 feet. But that’s just guessing.

Lost, Then Found

Once I forgot to securely shut the top of Kernel's tank, and he got out. Where could he be? I googled "How to find your snake," and there was lots of advice: Look everywhere. Don't let it happen in the first place. Put crumpled paper on the floor and listen for movement at night.

After he'd been missing several days, I came home from shopping in the evening after dark. I came into the apartment with the bags of food and walked into the kitchen without turning the lights on and put the bags on the counter. I'd been out hiking earlier in the day, and I was wearing Vibram-soled boots.

Standing at the counter in the dark, the nerves in my foot sent a message up to my brain that said, You are stepping on something soft. OH NO, am I stepping on my snake? I jumped off that foot and turned on the light. Did I squash him? I bent over and picked him up. He bit me. Ah, we're even. And he was okay.



Lost your snake? Discussions about snakes on the internet stress that if you lose your snake at home, you will probably find it when you are not looking.

Snake Bite

Kernel's teeth are very thin and not very long. They are sharp, but he can't bite very deep. He bit me for the second time when I was offering him a mouse, but he missed and got my finger. My fault. I waited a moment, and he let go.

Training

I thought it would be really cool if I could train Kernel to jump through a hoop.

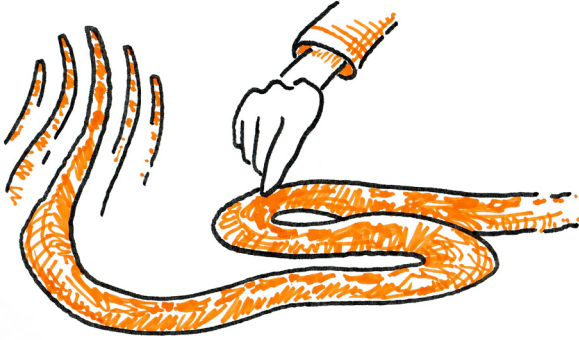
Well, not exactly jump, but slither. I tried holding the feeder mouse in front of him, and then moving the mouse away so that he'd follow it. Then I put the hoop between him and the mouse, so he'd crawl through the hoop. He never got the idea, and I gave up pretty soon.

Snake Sounds

If you think that snakes don't make any noise, you'll be surprised to know that Kernel does have a short repertoire of sounds:

- o Buzzing—Occasionally, when disturbed, he vibrates the end of his tail so fast it makes a buzzing sound.
- o Hissing—Rarely he makes a sharp exhale breathing noise if he's upset, which sounds like a spit.
- o Farting—Once in a while when he poops, I hear it.

But the most noise he makes is the rustling sounds of bunching up the newspaper that lines the bottom of his tank when he is moving around or when he's in the process of shedding.



If I touch Kernel when he doesn't want to be bothered, he vibrates the tip of his tail. Just the way rattlesnakes rattle their rattles when disturbed.

Old Age

At the time of this writing (2024), Kernel is very old, maybe even a record age for a corn snake in captivity. I don't know how old he was when I found him on my doorstep. And I didn't think of noting the date when I found him. But it's been at least 30 years. In the wild they don't live that long.

Corn snakes are solitary reptiles, but that's a long time to live alone.

He spends more time sleeping than when he was younger. And he doesn't strike at the feeder mice with the agility and speed that he once had. In fact, he seems to have lost his sense of sight and smell: It takes him a while to even find the mouse that's being offered. Sometimes I put it in the bottom of the tank, and I watch until he bumps into it and then grabs it. Sometimes I just leave it there, and by the next day it's gone. A geriatric snake.

Epilogue

I had a snake. Kernel changed my thoughts and feelings about these amazing reptiles as pets and as part of nature. For many people, snakes represent evil, original sin, or the horror of being on a plane with hundreds of them. In films, the music played when a snake enters the scene is low and ominous. This is unfair, biased, and a bad rap for the many species that live without any encounters that are harmful to people. Snakes control the populations of other animals that are a nuisance or destructive to agriculture, like mice and slugs. Yes, some snakes eat the slugs in your garden.

Some people are deathly afraid of snakes, and this is mostly a learned fear. I can't say that I learned to love all snakes, but I did become very fond of Kernel. I appreciated his beauty, his smooth cool scales, his way of moving, his gentle personality, and the way he kept me company in my office for all those years.



Beverly and Kernel in 2009



This is Kernel the corn snake



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IMG 0536 Kernel the Corn Snake