

# THE FORKED TONGUE

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE GREATER CINCINNATI HERPETOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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June 2004

## **The Editor-s Den**

**By Grady Calhoun**

The June Forked Tongue features an article on herp folklore by Neil Cornell.

## **Calendar of Events**

**8/4/04** Monthly Meeting at the Cincinnati Nature Center; Marty Rosenberg will be speaking on Amazing Amphibians and Remarkable Reptiles.

## **June Highlights**

The June meeting featured Dr. Wendy Lim, DVM. She spoke about parasites found in reptiles and what can be done to identify and eliminate them. This was a very good presentation that covered a topic we all have to deal with periodically.

## **Elections are Coming!**

It is that time again. Don Lunsford has agreed to be the nominating committee chairman. He will present a slate of officers, hopefully for each elected office, at the next meeting. Elections will take place in October and the new officers will take over in November. Please contact any of the existing officers if you would like to run.

## **GCHS forum on our Website**

We are trying to get with the times, so at the request of a member Tom Nagel has established a forum on the GCHS website ([www.cincyherps.com](http://www.cincyherps.com) in case you forgot!). You will have to sign up for a password as you do for most forums but it is not difficult. Hopefully this will provide another good means of communications among the members.

## **The Milk of Brigid**

By Neil Cornell

The latitudes of northern Europe produced cultures that survived in extremes, and utilized creativity to carry them through difficult periods. In ancient times, Scandinavian people capitalized on the cold, staying close to the heat of the forge, crafting tools and weapons for the coming spring. Art was accomplished both through jewelry making and the composition of great sagas. These stories often had reptilian

creatures that heroes had to slay. Tales of dragons and monstrous serpents of the seas were imbedded in the heads of listeners in the great halls, speaking of the courage of deities and ancestral field herping heroes of the North. Today, these ideas have been passed to us and inserted into film, as we enter the great halls of cinema complexes to view "Godzilla," "Anaconda," and the "Jurassic Park" trilogies.

Still, the need to carry an oral tradition manifests itself in a few, and they gather to remember the ancient deeds of ancestors. Around the beginning of February, people still congregate to celebrate the Irish rite of Imbolc, recognizing the first signs of spring. The word "Imbolc," spelled in more than a few ways, comes from "Oimelc," referring to the womb, the belly, or to milk itself. In the past, female sheep, or ewes, began producing milk for their offspring. These first vernal stirrings were cause for celebration, and the ancient Irish personified such changes in a goddess manifestation called Brigid, Brie, and Bride. A goddess of inspiration, she doled out creativity in the forms of smithcraft, healing and poetry. One of her many symbols included the snake, which crawled from the womb of the Earth Mother when photoperiod and climate made thermoregulation possible. The behaviors of the emerging snakes were used to divine the climate for the coming season. In Ireland, where snakes have never existed, the hedgehog substituted for the serpent, and the reptile still is held as a heraldic symbol of wisdom to this day. Immigrating Irish to America imbued the groundhog with the same power, ostracizing the snake from this honor. This mythological shift was due to the early efforts of St. Patrick, who sought to exterminate the indigenous faith from the Emerald Isle by overwhelming the serpent wisdom of the ancients with Christianity. It almost worked, but such zealots could not dissuade the Irish from their love of Brigid. The Christians conceded, and canonized her as a saint. The pagan snakes had not been driven from Ireland; they had simply gone back into the hibernacula of Mother Earth.

So, while early February is still scant for most snake activity in our region, I find it interesting how ancient

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peoples incorporate their observations of the natural world into their spiritualities. Within the metaphoric legends lie seeds of truth. If these kernels of knowledge are watered with curiosity, then perhaps the serpent wisdom of the ancestors can be renewed. Along with old traditions, enter the new belief of science, which calls for measurement of the tangible, and operates on patterns of analyzed data. Science intertwined with history, like coupling colubrids, may result in offspring that can serve as templates of how we can live sustainably in this world.

The late winter rains recharged the river and streams, flowing like milk along their banks. The earth thawed, releasing pent up scents of soil with promise, holding moisture like a gluttonous sponge. Variable displays of climate alternated themselves in daily increments, taunting species to become cautiously active in this period of transition. Warm temperatures and prolonged sun in mid-April prompted movement back into the field by herpers, myself included. An oncoming cold front quickened my desire to explore Hardin County, Kentucky, before chilly conditions enveloped the landscape. Tioga Falls cascaded with water fed from the surrounding countryside, nourishing budding trees and spring wildflowers. Clear liquid trickled from the dark opening of a cave, and I remembered the old stories of my ancestors from the British Isles. This prompted me to journey a few miles down the road to another site of snake emergence.

The variables in the snake locating equation were all known: tin, rodent burrows, precipitation, and timing. The percentage of error I ignored, but substituted faith instead. I wondered if my Celtic forebears did the same. I had learned a similar teaching from Native American cultures: when searching for game, you never think about that species, because the animals know that you are looking for them. I had seen black racers lie like rigid roots in the middle of a trail, and ring neck snakes' rippled lengths attempted to avoid my gaze in the past, so these aboriginal observations held credence in my tracking repertoire. So, I focused on the dwindling temperature on the metal, the soft caress of long grass on my ankles, and the smell of wetness on the wind. The experience was just as important as the objective. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed at piece of tin not flipped, hidden in the growth of last year's vegetation, held down by spent lengths of lifeless vine.

After ripping the dead material from around the corrugated metal, two bright, sinuous forms side by

side stood out from the umber earth, and lay still in the waning light. Integrate Red/Eastern Milks snakes rested adjacent to an earthen tunnel. One was patterned with saddles of a tarnished bronze coloration, while the other was banded in chestnut blotches with a black and white checkerboard underside. The duality of such locality animals was amazing. For a moment, I thought about the first snakes of spring that were watched in anticipation by the ancestors, yearning for a climate conducive to fertile herds and fields. Both individuals held fresh scars and scale rot, so I held them until they shed their skins for better examination.

American folklore has named *Lampropeltis triangulum* the milk snake in the common tongue, because of the absurd belief that this species enters barns to drain livestock of their milk. It has become the scapegoat of farmers looking for a reason as to why their cattle are not producing milk, and has resulted in the unnecessary mortality of these creatures. Milk snakes are mutualistic organisms, consuming rodents that eat grain and carry diseases, protecting rural human interests. Perhaps if St. Patrick's impact had not been so forceful, observations could have been made by predecessors that would have led to a more accurate account of this reptile's interaction with humanity.

Several weeks later, warmth and antibiotic ointment prompted a change of opaque eyes and dulled scales for a little over a week, and I observed with amazement how easily these serpents left behind their epidermal marrings. The infected belly plates, and raised scales were gone: the infection trapped in the spent sheds. I now realized why snakes were symbols of healing to ancient peoples.

Cultures come and go, sometimes abruptly, while often fading into another, with core beliefs refusing to be annihilated. The earth still holds her sinuous children in her womb, sheltering them from extremes so they can maintain a balance in this world sometimes not recognized by other, newer species. Milk snakes are named not because of the damage that they are alleged to cause. Rather, they are a part of the pageantry that some have come to represent in traditions rooted in the rhythm of the seasons, and lie fertile, full of hope, waiting to be received again by humanity. They are, the Milk of Brigid.

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### Classified Advertising Policy

GCHS Members may run a free classified ad of 7 lines or less at no charge for an unlimited time; however, the ad will be canceled after one month unless the editor is informed to continue it.

Please include scientific names for the animals with your ad as well as your phone number and area code. Ads of up to 7 lines for non-member are \$2 per issue; ad charges for items more than 7 lines long are as follows:

Business card size	\$3 per issue
1/4 page	\$6 per issue
2 page	\$10 per issue
Full page	\$20 per issue

**The GCHS is not liable for the quality of the merchandise advertized. The Society also reserves the right to refuse any ad considered inappropriate.**

### Requirements for Submitting Articles to the Forked Tongue

Articles can be submitted via 3.5" floppy disk or hard copy to Editor, GCHS 11470 Gatch Hill Road, Aurora, IN 47001.

Articles may be e-mailed to Grady Calhoun at [gradycalhoun@earthlink.net](mailto:gradycalhoun@earthlink.net).

Black and white photographs can be included with articles. Photo submissions should include your name, phone number, and description of photo on the back. Photos can be returned. All time dependent submissions must be in the editors possession no later than the meeting previous to the desired publication.

### Classifieds

For Sale: Captive Bred albino boa constrictors, (Peter Kahl strain). These are 2004 babies, all feeding and looking great! \$1000.00 each. Partial stripes available for \$1600.00. Call Scott Kass at 513-779-8124

For Sale: Albino (glod) axlotls. 3"-4" long. \$10 each. Call Harrison Pet Center 513-367-1115.

For Sale: Captive bred Northern Blue-tongue skinks. Born this month. \$100.00 each. Call Justin Calhoun at 513-564-6041

For Sale: Juvenile Amazon tree boas (*Corallus hortulanus*), brown phases, will be feeding when sold \$15 each. Call Al Winstel at 513-729-2563

For Sale: 7.0 '03 Tiger Rat Snakes (*Spilote pullatus*) Very well started, nice black and yellow coloration. Approximately 30 inches or more. Feeding voraciously on live hoppers. \$60 each or two or more for \$50 each. Call Marc (859) 344-9626

Discount: A 10% discount is offered to all card-carrying members of the GCHS at *All Creatures Animal Hospital*. Dr. Dan Meakin, All Creatures, 1894 Ohio Pike, Amelia, OH 45102, 513-797-7387.

Discount: A 10% discount is offered to all card carrying members of the GCHS at Dr. Dahlhausen's Veterinary Clinic, 5989 Meijer Dr., Suite 2, Milford, Ohio 513-576-0131

(Number to left of decimal indicates males; number to right of decimal indicates females; number to right of second decimal indicates number of unknown sex. For example, 3.2.1=3 males, 2 females, and 1 unsexed specimen)

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### Currently Held Positions

President (513) 564-6041	Grady Calhoun (812) 926-1206 Editor Grady Calhoun	Vice President (812) 926-1206	Dean Alessandrini (513) 347-0099
Treasurer	Peggy Fille (513) 528-4452		(513) 564-6041
Sargent-at-Arms	Bruce Fille (513) 528-4452	Education Committee Co-Chairman	
Advisor	Ray Whitson (859) 342-8842	Peggy Fille	(513) 528-4452
Secretary	Vacant	Chris Bauer	(513) 424-5818

### About the GCHS

The Greater Cincinnati Herpetological Society holds monthly meetings which typically consist of a short business section, a refreshment intermission, and a program related to herpetology. Both members and nonmembers are invited to attend. Membership is open to anyone with an interest in reptiles and amphibians. New members may sign up by mail or at the monthly meetings. Members receive monthly issues of *The Forked Tongue* and free classified advertising. Annual dues should be directed to the secretary at the society's mailing address, according to the rates below:

Student \$10.00	Corresponding \$10.00
Individual \$12.00	Sustaining \$25.00
Family \$18.00	Institutional \$30.00
Contributing \$50.00	

### Why Be a Member?

Receive monthly issues of *The Forked Tongue*  
\$Meet individuals knowledgeable about herpetoculture  
\$Have access to captive-bred herps and feeder animals  
\$Participate in society-sponsored field trips, and outings.  
\$Receive a 10 percent discount on herp-related items and services when you show a valid membership card at the following establishments:

Delhi Pet Center	(513) 451-4015
Kentucky Reptile Zoo	(606) 663-9160
Harrison Pet Center	(513) 367-1115
All Creatures Animal Hospital	(513) 797-7387
Dr. Dahlhausen's Veterinary Clinic	(513) 576-0131.

P.O. Box 14783  
Cincinnati, OH 45250

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