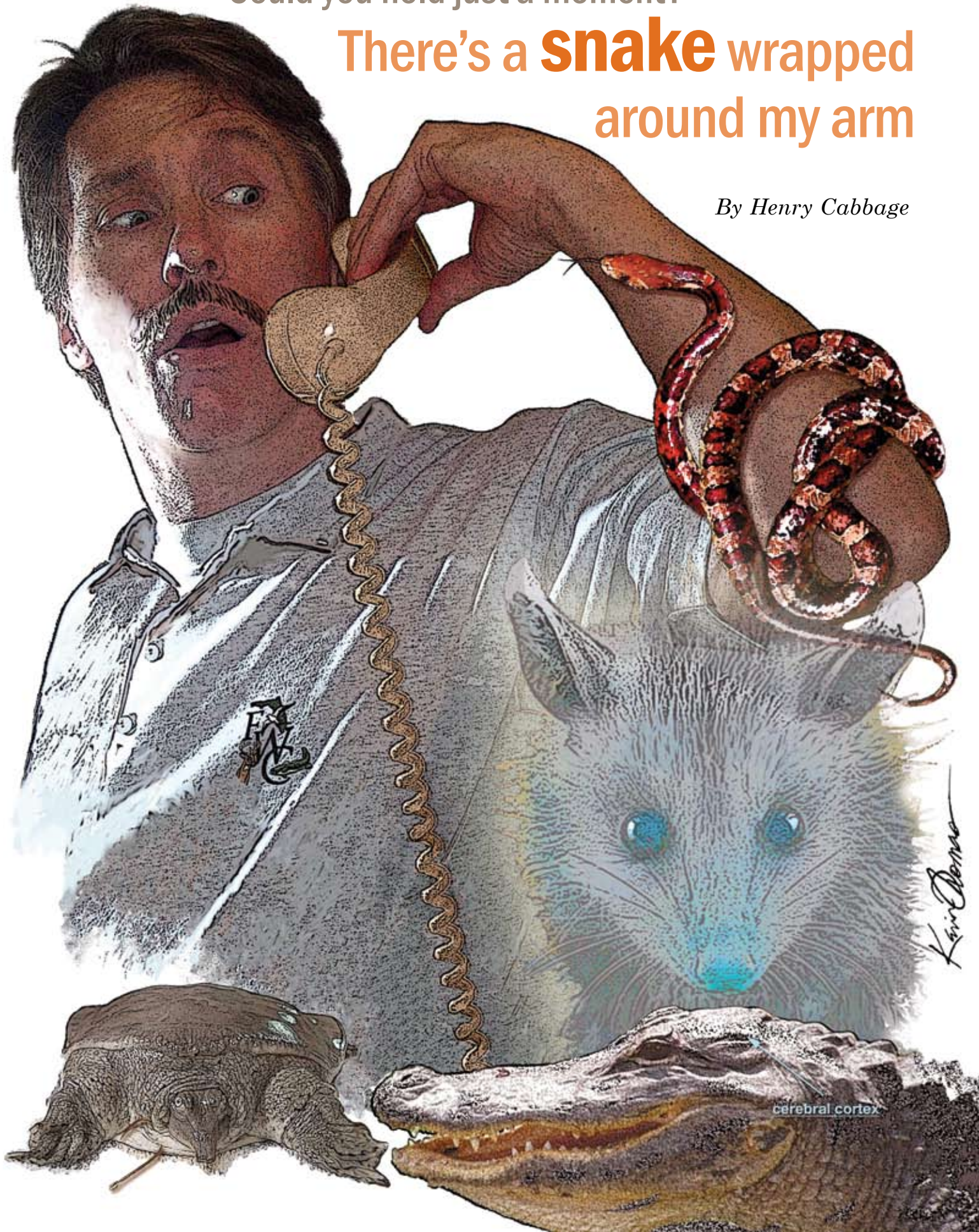


Could you hold just a moment?

There's a **snake** wrapped around my arm

By Henry Cabbage



Over the past couple of decades of daily contact with news media and the public for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), my coworkers and I have some great stories to tell.

Some of them are absolutely true; some may be only partially true, but they sure are great stories.

I enjoy public speaking about the FWC and wildlife, but it seems there's always somebody in the audience who wants to ask a question to demonstrate he knows more than I do about the subject.

A few years ago, I accepted an invitation to speak at a festival at the Tallahassee Museum of History and Natural Science about alligators. I was to deliver three presentations during the daylong event.

The first presentation went well, at first. I told the crowd whether an alligator will be male or female depends on the temperature of the eggs during incubation. I said alligators have been around since the dinosaur days, and their ability to control the gender of their young may be one of the reasons alligators survived and dinosaurs did not.

"Alligators don't eat anything at all during the winter, because their systems just shut down almost completely, and they couldn't digest food, even if they did eat," I said.

When I opened the presentation to questions, a woman's hand shot up. "Is it true that alligators are the only reptiles with a cerebral cortex?" she asked.

I didn't know the answer, and I still don't, but during my second and third presentations that day, I made it a point to say "You probably noticed the cerebral cortex on this animal." Fortunately, nobody asked me to elaborate.

The FWC is a one-of-a-kind work environment, and the nature of the work in the Community Relations Office poses unique situations on a daily basis. For instance, there was the time somebody showed up at my office with a live snake in a bag. That's the kind of thing that happens all the time around here. It probably never happens at the Department of Revenue, but it's the kind of thing nobody thinks anything about at this agency. As usual, the visitor wanted to know what kind it was and, of course, whether it was venomous. It turned out to be a harmless corn snake, and I took it out of the visitor's pillowcase and started telling him all I knew about the species.

The 3-foot reptile wrapped itself around my hand and forearm and began to squeeze while I explained that's how corn snakes kill the rats and mice they catch around corn fields.

A few minutes into the conversation, my office phone rang. I excused myself and took the call.

The caller, from somewhere up north, was excited about planning his first hunting trip to Florida and had a long list of questions.

While I chatted with the caller, the snake squeezed tighter and tighter and appeared to be sizing

up my upper arm for a good place to plant a bite.

"Could you hold just a moment?" I asked the caller. "There's a snake wrapped around my arm."

"There's a what?" the caller asked. "You're in an office, right? And you have a snake wrapped around your arm? Are snakes that thick in Florida? You can't even get away from them in an office building? They must be really bad out in the woods."

Then there was the day we received a call from a woman who also wanted help in identifying a snake species.

"We heard meowing – like a kitten – coming from under our front porch steps," the caller said. "My husband went and got some tools and took the porch apart, but there wasn't anything under there but a big old snake. Can you tell me what kind of snake meows like a kitten?"

Snakes don't have vocal chords to make sounds like that, so we were unable to identify the species over the phone.

Sometimes, callers say they are desperate for somebody to come and rescue a wild critter in trouble. Although the FWC doesn't have the manpower or resources to do that routinely, the agency employs many people who love wildlife and try to help when they can.

Stan Kirkland, public information coordinator for the FWC's Northwest Region, received a call one day, from a woman who reported a turtle with a fishing lure stuck to him.

"I've tried everywhere else," the woman pleaded. "You're my last hope. That poor little turtle needs someone to help him, and I was told if anyone could help him, you could."

It's hard to say no when it's possible to say yes under that level of pressure. Stan agreed to drop by on his way to another assignment the following day to attempt his heroic rescue.

The woman and her husband escorted Stan to their dock and began calling the turtle: "Tripod, Tripod. Come to Mommy."

The couple explained the turtle had lost one of its legs in a previous mishap, and that's why they nicknamed him Tripod. The turtle always showed up for food scraps in the mornings.

(Note: The FWC discourages feeding wild animals, and advises it is illegal to feed wild alligators, raccoons, foxes, bears or several other species.)

Tripod finally showed up and turned out to be a 12-pound soft-shelled turtle, a freshwater species, known for inflicting nasty bites to careless handlers. Sure enough, it had a large bass lure imbedded in its skin, about an inch from its mouth.

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PATRICK DELANEY

Wildlife biologist John White collects eggs from an alligator nest. The wary look on his face may be explained by the presence of the mother gator below the boat with her head sticking out and hissing the whole time, making it a challenge and test of nerves, to collect the eggs.

Stan, who had never attempted, or even witnessed, this type of operation before, scooped up the turtle in a net, put on thick gloves, pinned the critter's head down and removed the lure. He then released the turtle at the edge of the water, and made the whole thing look like he had been doing such things his whole life.

"Mr. Kirkland, you're incredible!" the woman said.

"I know," Stan said, in voice that sounded like a Wild West sheriff saying, "Just doing my duty, ma'am."

Another story will require me to take some artistic license to do it justice. It's a story that makes me laugh, but it's a true story that carries human drama that is no laughing matter. Some of the people in the story requested I keep their identities confidential, and I don't know the names of the others. I'll assume the identity of the hero in this report so I can tell the story the way it was told to me, even though I really was not there.

An elderly, obviously mentally ill, woman frequently called the FWC to complain she lived in constant fear of giant, invisible opossums that roamed around her house. When we get calls like that at the FWC, we handle them with great sensitivity, but we are not mental health professionals. Someone suggested she spread mothballs around her yard – an old, but probably ineffective, snake repellent. We figured that might work if she believed it would.

"That just made them meaner," the woman wept the next time she called.

We couldn't help her, but we wanted to try to find some way to comfort her if we could.

"I'll go," I said. "Tell her help is on the way."

The woman's face beamed with gratitude when I pulled into her driveway. She began telling me all about the invisible giant opossums, but then she froze in horror.

"There's one now!" she shrieked, pointing at the monster that was obviously very real to her.

"Please stand back, ma'am," I said. "I'm trained to handle this situation."

I waded into the battle with a powerful round-house punch that stunned the creature, but only momentarily. I picked up a limb and attacked again. I lunged, I parried, I delivered a flurry of karate chops, and with one final circle-kick, followed by one last chop to the animal's neck, the wicked beast was reduced to a lifeless, pathetic carcass.

I turned to the woman and breathlessly announced: "It's dead."

"Oh, thank you," she beamed, "and you didn't even have to use your gun!"

I don't know what mental health professionals would think about that episode, but we think that woman slept soundly that night, relieved of the evil beasts that made her live in terror. The creatures returned later, but we had done what we could to comfort her in her world that day. She eventually stopped calling. We heard her family had intervened and found her a new home where she could feel safe.

It's nice to work in an agency where the staff cares about things like that. **FW**



Elina Garrison, a University of Florida (UF) graduate student working on a cooperative bear study between UF and FWC, holds three bear cubs. Garrison has since graduated and was hired by the FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute.

ZIG LESZCZYNSKI

WALTER MCCOY