

We were **the kings**
of the **snake hunters**

By Henry Cabbage



My friend Mike and I spent a lot of time snake hunting during our boyhood days on Panama City Beach. Not on the beach itself, you understand – amid the palmettos and pines that used to grow a few hundred yards inland from the massive sand dunes that used to be there back in those days.

There really wasn't much logic to our passion for snake hunting. We didn't carry any tools. We didn't need anything but a stick to hold a snake's head down when we picked it up. Frequently, we forgot to take anything to carry captured snakes in, so we had to improvise with whatever we could find on the scene or carry the snake out by hand.

When we successfully captured a black racer, kingsnake or whatever, we took the animal into captivity, but only long enough to win attention from the girls we always tried to frighten to death with them. Some of the girls did not find that kind of behavior endearing, however. I can't imagine why not... or at least I couldn't back then.

For some reason, we never even took any photographs to document our courageous exploits with reptiles. We can't prove them, and the fact that we survived that period may cast some doubt on the credibility of this narrative, but it's all true. You can believe me... I work for state government.

We almost always released harmless snakes shortly after their capture. Maybe it was just the unsupervised interaction with nature that we found so alluring. It was adventure. We thought of ourselves as explorers as we ventured deeper into the wilderness with each excursion.

At one point, we discovered a ravine with an abundance of glass lizards that were easy to capture. We were lucky that day. We found a large glass jar with a lid and stuffed all seven of our prize captive reptiles into it.

We reached the front door of my family's house and beamed

with excitement as I called my mother to take a look. I knew better than to try to enter the house with the critters.

She rolled her eyes, the way mothers do when they are about to say "What have you gotten into this time?"

I unscrewed the lid from the jar and unfortunately dropped the lid and left the snake-like lizards unattended... just for a second.

Mom's scream pierced the air when all seven reptiles decided to make a break for freedom at the same time. I struggled to restore order by trying to stuff them back into the jar with all of them crawling back out between my fingers.

I barely noticed Mom pushing my brother out the door and yelling, "Help him. Help him."

My brother didn't share my interest in reptiles and didn't contribute much to resolving the problem I had at that moment.

You might wonder why Mike's mother and mine didn't put a stop to our snake hunting, but the fact was they didn't know about it until we brought critters home from afield. Besides, I suspect they felt the same way Mark Twain's mother did about some of the things he did when he was a boy. He had fallen into the river and been rescued by a servant several times as a youngster, and his mother just shrugged "Any boy, destined to be hanged someday, is safe enough around water."

As time went on, Mike and I considered ourselves to be royalty among reptile hunters, but then one day, something unthinkable happened... No, not what you think was bound to happen. To us it was much worse than snakebite. A snakebite would have elevated our status among masters of the wild kingdom around us. What really happened diverted attention from our grand accomplishments. Two boys who lived a couple of streets over, encountered and killed a venomous, 3-foot cottonmouth, and they had the dead snake to prove it.

The kings of reptile hunting of the neighborhood had been overthrown – fair and square.

"Phew, that snake stinks," Mike said in a futile attempt to salvage some measure of dignity, but it didn't dispel our humiliation.

It was only a few weeks later, on a sunny summer day, when Mike and I found ourselves lazing around on a grassy field in the shadow of a water tower. We thought about climbing it but figured somebody would make a fuss about that, and it was too hot anyway. We also thought about shooting some minnows (also know as minners) with a BB gun. I know... Kids can't carry a BB gun without adult supervision anymore, and shooting minnows does not demonstrate a conservation ethic, but it seemed OK at the time 50 years ago.

We decided to give the minnows a break and try a little snake hunting in an area we hadn't tried previously. It was near an old, small, lime-colored building with lots of mysterious pipes and meters and no windows.

We looked around the area and spotted something moving in the grass. A snake!

I heard a faint buzzing sound as we approached the coiled reptile. It struck at me.

The 12-inch dusky pigmy rattlesnake lost its life that day, but Mike and I felt this was a specimen worth preserving. We found a bottle of rubbing alcohol at my house and figured that would do as a preservative. For some reason, the alcohol was green, but it was clear enough to enable us to see and display the rattler. It was much better than a stinky old cottonmouth.

Thus Mike and I recaptured our status as reptile hunting legends in our own minds. **FW**

Henry Cabbage cut way back on snake hunting in the years that followed. He also has discontinued climbing water towers and shooting minners with a BB gun.