

I retreated back to my former place. Watching the weasel again, I noticed it was sniffing the ground strangely, probably tracking the gopher. In the end the weasel most likely did get to feast on his delayed dinner.

## BIRD OBSERVATIONS

by **Bill Fleming**, Regina, Sask.

We were scanning the trees around the marsh in Regina for hawks and owls and had observed nothing. Upon closer observation of a certain huge ash tree we saw on a branch sawed off close to the tree, a Great Horned Owl sitting perfectly still. The bird was perfectly camouflaged by the motley color of his feathers. The bird was asleep which allowed us to walk right up under it and look for pellets, of which we found two or three. We were able to steal quietly away without disturbing him.

While counting the nests of the Common Tern this summer we came across some strange nests (which later were found to be avocets).

While counting the number of eggs the angry terns wheeling overhead slowly came lower and lower, until they finally started attacking us. We found that the only protection from this was to wave a handkerchief in the air. The terns seeing the handkerchief checked their dive and veered off to the side. Soon we found that they became used to this and we beat a hasty retreat for dry land. This incident proved that a bird will often do fantastic things to protect its nest and eggs.

## A TOAD

by **Rachel Niniowski**, age 6,  
Calder

One hot day last July we went to the garden to pick carrots. The soil was hot and dry. Mother called us to see something she had found. We saw some brown skin level with the soil. It looked much like the soil only it moved. Mother dug it out and there was a large toad. It hopped away.

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# The Garter Snake - A Nature Lesson

by **Pearl Guest**, Regina

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** We are including the following story by Pearl Guest, one of our adult members, in the Junior Naturalists section because of its appeal to our younger members. Stories like this will help overcome the unreasoning fear and disgust which many people feel for such harmless and fascinating creatures as the Garter Snake.

Exploring a dry creek bed, I came to a pool of water. The pond was so still that its surface mirrored back the flaming tree on the farther side, a splash of crimson against a backdrop of white clouds and blue sky. Bordering the near shore, willows crowded to the water's brink to bend over their own reflections, and in that autumn air the only sound and movement was the faint breaking of painted leaves that slipped away from their parent branches to drift waywardly down upon the quiet waters.

In reality, I stood in a golden arbour, with the newly minted gold of the aspens above shading to the massed old-gold leaves that carpeted the ground. What can one do at such an hour except stand silent before the

manifestation of perfect though evanescent beauty, and sense underneath and through it all the oneness and interdependence of living things.

Gradually a new sound was borne upon the air, the chatter of children's voices. Soon two little girls appeared and as they came towards me, I saw that they were guarding a captive—one of Nature's little children. Noting my look of interest, they approached me with the frank friendship of childhood. "We caught a gartersnake. And we're going to have his picture tooked."

At my offer to tell them a story, they released the little fellow into my hands. Slowly he "smelled" his way through my fingers and curled around my wrist while I explained that his sensitive velvety forked

tongue carried particles of things he touched, along with bits of airdust, into two tiny nose cavities that were located inside his mouth. It was in this way that he was informed of what lies round about him.

To a question, I replied that his ears were also on the inside of his head but reptiles appear to feel vibrations through their bodies. I related the fact of a former snake hill near Moose Jaw that had housed migrations of reptiles until road building machines rumbled around the area. It may have been that the vibrations of the earth drove them away to some unknown place, or perhaps with the strange instinct of the wild, they sensed that their ancient haunt was to be no more.

The skin of a snake appears like tiny overlapping shells arranged in both beautifully patterned designs, as well as serving his practical needs. We turned the reptile over to examine the crosswise, overlapping plates on his underside. In a fascinating manner, the creature moves a section of plates forward at one time till the edges dig into the roughness of the ground. Then the next portion of his belly comes into motion and so the snake glides onwards in a rippling movement. Furthermore, snakes take to the water for when I was a little girl living on the farm, several times I have seen snakes swimming across the creek.

"Now examine his eyes," I invited. "Below the platelike brows is a transparent eyelid that protects his eyes and underneath that window his eyeballs move just like your own. He, too, can focus on objects at various distances and especially he can see nearby small objects."

I anticipated the next question, "What does he eat?" I listed some of the things he fed upon such as flies, spiders, crickets, bugs, mosquitoes, worms and mice. In fact, there is no more reason to kill a gartersnake than a robin. I have a friend who protects the snakes in his garden and they in turn repay for this wise consideration by keeping harmful insects under control.

Mother Nature provides her children with the means of securing food and she has endowed a snake with a unique mouth. It is divided

into four sections which in turn are joined by elastic-like ligaments, thus enabling a snake to seize and hold on to quite large quarry. Furthermore, since a snake's back contains three hundred vertebrae, they can whip their mobile bodies around and gradually suffocate their prey.

After a winter's sleep, spring courtship is a happy time as the couples lightheartedly chase each other through the grasses and around stones. Late in the summer, young are born and though the majority of snakes lay eggs, gartersnakes give birth to hatchlings.

"Now then, you two little girls, what happens when you grow out of your clothes?"

"Our mother gives us new ones," they chorused.

"And Mother Nature provides for this little snake in just the same way," I explained. "First, he climbs out of his cellophane birthday suit and as he grows, he bursts the seams of his coat again and emerges from that, now wearing a bright and shiny new one that has been forming underneath—a sort of undercoat affair. I don't know how often he sloughs off his old skin but probably several times during his lifetime."

Their hands traced the black and yellow lines of his coat while the reptile remained motionless, apparently enjoying having the back of his head and neck stroked by gentle fingers.

It was then I remembered the Caduceus, a wand entwisted by two serpents surmounted by two wings, the insignia of the medical profession. In ancient days, the serpent was a symbol of health because it could shed its skin and appear young again.

I returned the harmless and friendly snake to them and they hurried away, intent on getting his picture "took" before turning him loose again in his habitat.

I looked again into the pool and then on impulse, tossed a pebble into the still waters. As radiating lines swelled outwards, I had the hope that the pebbles of knowledge that I had dropped into the pool of their childish interest would in turn create ripples of widening knowledge in the wondrous world of nature.