

A BLACK RAT SNAKE STOPS IN FOR SUPPER. **(di Gregory C. Greer, Chattahoochee Nature Center - Roswell, Georgia)**

Late last summer, I had an unexpected visitor drop by for dinner- a young Black Rat Snake (*Ela*
phe obsoleta obsoleta

). The serpent was a cordial guest, even though the animal did eat and run and showed no inclination to stay and visit.

I had arrived home late that particular afternoon with a shipment of rodents-food items for captive reptiles. This feeding session I brought home two trays of mice and one tray of rats, of assorted colours and sizes. The plastic rodent trays are fitted with wooden-framed Hardware screen tops, and are adequately ventilated to prevent the prey from over heating. Therefore, the unmistakable odors of rodents permeate the air wherever the trays are placed.

Because I arrived home late, instead of taking the rodents to the reptiles building, I placed them in the garage.

I left the rodents there for about an hour, while I went inside to eat supper.

Upon returning to the garage, I was pleasantly surprised at what I found: a tree-foot Black Rat Snake was on top of one of the mouse trays trying very hard to get to the rodents inside.

The snake had apparently been outside when it detected the prey items. The smell was a little more than the snake could resist and he entered the garage to find the source of the wonderful aroma!

I quickly got my camera, hoping to record whatever was going to the place in this interesting situation. For 10 minutes the snake continually tried to gets its head down through the small open squares of the screen. On one occasion, it struck at a mouse that had jumped up and was walking upside down on the screen top.

The snake's teeth hung up briefly on the screen, and at that time I determined that I did not want this hungry visitor to hurt itself.

As I approached, the animal pulled back its head, vibrated tail on the screen top, and carefully watched me.

I gently lifted the front edge of a tray, removed a mouse, and offered it to the snake. Even though in a defensive posture, the hungry serpent immediately grabbed the mouse from my hand. A few coils of its body were used to constrict the mouse, but the snake used most of its body to avoid falling off the tray.

By then, I was quite amused, and any one who has ever had difficulty in getting wild-caught snakes to feed knows how special it is to witness a non-captive herp feed so freely.

I watched the snake consume the first mouse. Then I opened up the tray, removed another

mouse, and once again-with no hesitation at all-the snake grabbed the mouse. This time I did not stay to observe the feeding; I picked up the other rodent trays and took them down to the reptile building.

I returned to the garage four more times over the next hour. Each time, I followed the same procedure of feeding the snake as previously mentioned. After the sixth mouse, the snake disappeared. I gave the visitor the sixth mouse, even though he looked full.

When I returned later, the snake was gone. I did not search the garage, but about a week later I did find evidence of defecation in a corner of the garage, so I am convinced that the snake stayed in the garage to digest its incredibly large meal.

This incidence was probably not that unusual. A hungry Black Rat Snake smelled food and investigated the source. It was quite fortunate for the snake that it happened to find a food source in a place where the human occupants were thrilled to have a legless visitor. As most readers are aware, most people destroy things they do not understand or are afraid of. To me, the most fascinating thing about this encounter is the incredible ability that snakes have in sensing prey. This snake detected the mice from a great distance. It was a wild animal and it did not hesitate to take food from my hands. This is opportunistic feeding at its best!

I hope the snake returns in the future, and now I intentionally leave a tray of rodents in the garage once in a while in anticipation of more visitors.