

Snakes Do All the Charming

Phil Barnes

Dave Sagan glides his pudgy pointer finger 15 feet from Tigger's shoveled head down to her coiled tail. He pauses for a few seconds to admire her black and yellow leopard spots before continuing to caress her slippery skin. Tigger is beautiful, yet she is here – in the house of reptilian rejects. Her scaly pattern is no longer desirable. The market moved on years ago. But Sagan doesn't concern himself with the latest trends. For him, personality is priceless.

And that's why Tigger is here, at the Hocking Woods Nature Center, a humble shack of wooden boards nestled in the boondocks of Nelsonville, Ohio.

The temperature inside is always a toasty 80 degrees, and Tigger feels right at home even though her real home is Indonesia – more than 10,000 miles away. The heat comes from dozens of halogen lamps that line the hexagonal hut. But it's Sagan's heart that keeps Tigger in high spirits.

Tigger is a juvenile Burmese reticulated python, and under Sagan's watchful eye, she will grow to be 25 feet long and 300 pounds. Her 5-foot cage is already too small to support her rapid growth spurts. In November, she's getting an upgrade – a new cage the size of three parking spaces. Sagan knows the golden rule of cage space as well as anyone: perimeter of the enclosure should be greater than or equal to the length of the snake.

Even in her adolescence, Tigger could easily squeeze a man to death. Sagan knows this as he leans in to kiss Tigger's head.

"That's a good girl."

Sagan has been handling snakes for more than 20 years, but it was a hawk named Andy that sparked his interest in animal education. Weeks after racking up a Hocking College forestry degree, he got a call from a raptor rehab facility in Morgantown, W.Va. It needed a volunteer, and one of Sagan's biology professors had recommended him to fill the spot. Sagan had already packed his chainsaw with sights set on moving south to Georgia, but he decided to lend a hand.

He arrived at the facility days later, clutching his trusty chainsaw.

"What do you want me to do," he asked.

"Well first of all, get rid of that saw."

Confused, Sagan dropped the blade and four years of college experience along with it. He was led around back to the raptor cages, where a red-tailed hawk was dauntingly puffing out his pearly chest feathers.

The facility had only three animal educators who were comfortable handling the birds and Sagan had unknowingly signed up to be the fourth. Still, he recognized a niche in the exotic and unpredictable world of animal education.

The South would never get to see his chain saw.

After a few weeks, Sagan became comfortable with Andy -- who remained calm on his gloved hand even during demonstrations and field trips, when he was constantly barraged by eager throngs of grade school kids.

But volunteering obviously wasn't going to fill Sagan's empty pockets. Seeking some sort of income, he bid farewell to his feathered friend and headed west to a YMCA camp in Cincinnati. It was there his fascination flipped from "birds of prey" to "prey of birds." After exhibiting countless black rats, racers, ball pythons, and garter snakes, Sagan started his own pet collection with Taz, his first Burmese python.

That was 15 years ago. Sagan has since been drawn back to his roots, and thanks to his new animal handling expertise, he was hired as the director of the Hocking Woods Nature Center.

Taz is still very much alive. He currently shares a home with 12 other snakes (mostly giant Burmese pythons) in Sagan's living room.

Dave Sagan is a single man but claims his marital status has nothing to do with snakes -- although he admits that it will be quite the challenge to find a woman who isn't utterly horrified after walking through his house. For Sagan, marriage truly means "till death do us part." He's just waiting for someone to come around who's as serious as he is about a relationship. Until that day comes, he is content tending to his daily duties at the nature center.

It's 11 o'clock, and Sagan heaves Tiger into a blue cooler. It's damp and dark in there, just the way she likes it. She bunches up like a yarn rug of solid muscle. The plastic top shuts above her. It's time for the other snakes to get their daily dose of attention.

He takes one step left and peers into a pad-locked cage. It's the home of Thing 1 and Thing 2, a pair of timber rattlers from southern Ohio. They're young, measuring only about two feet in length, but timber rattlesnake venom is potent enough to hospitalize an adult human. Thing 1 is sprawled across a plastic log; his jet black skin shimmers from the auburn rays of the overhanging heat lamp. Thing 2 is much more rambunctious. He snaps at the glass and lets off a rattle. The room fills with the sound of a maraca-waving Mariachi band.

Thing 1 and Thing 2 were confiscated by Kentucky police when a man stumbled into a bar with both rattlers curled around his neck. Sagan was the only one willing to adopt them.

That's the case for all the non-native snakes that come through the doors of the nature center -- they're all either unwanted or neglected by their owners.

"People go out and buy venomous snakes for the 'cool factor' without doing any homework first," says Sagan.

"It's not the people that are scared of these animals that I'm worried about. It's the people that aren't scared."

Sagan rarely shows fear when handling his snakes, but he always makes a point to show them respect. He has no problem touching the rattlesnakes during demonstrations, but not today.

Thing 2 is being too feisty.

Spam is next. He's a garter snake and even though he's relatively harmless, he's known as the resident jerk. Sagan quickly grabs him behind the head, pulling him out of his cage to examine a golf ball-sized bulge two inches above his tail. It's a musk abscess: a pus-filled swell caused by a build-up of moldy smelling gas – one of Spam's defense mechanisms. Next week, Spam will join Sagan on a car ride to a snake specialist in Columbus, who can extract the puss by dipping Spam in warm water and squeezing. After picking up and discarding the feces in the cage, Sagan moves on, slightly disgusted.

He shuffles past Aldo the black racer, Piggy the eastern hognose, a milk snake named Brussel Sprouts, and Chaungo, the other reticulated python.

Chaungo was discovered during a drug raid in Logan County, and his battle scars suggest a painful past. His tail resembles the end of a cooked hotdog, a stumpy nub that appears permanently singed. Sagan suspects that it was bit off by ferrets, which also happened to be present at the crime scene.

Piggy and Chaungo are both shedding their skins, so handling them is out of the question. Snakes go partially blind when they shed and most aren't too keen on being touched when they can't see. Piggy's eyes are gray and milky -- signs that her shedding period could begin as early as tomorrow.

Sagan's gaze drifts past Piggy to Spot's locked cage against the hexagon's back wall. His water bowl is full and his cage is clean, yet Sagan comes to a standstill in front of this snake's enclosure for a minute. Spot is a copperhead, one of the three venomous snakes found in Ohio and the only one without a rattle. While copperheads lack the noise-making defense systems of the other two (the eastern massauga and the timber rattler), their aggression makes up for it. Sagan found out the hard way.

Several years ago, he was bit by a copperhead. In an effort to get the snake to retreat so he could get close enough to put food in its cage, Sagan "bonked" it on the head with a crescent wrench. It began a one-sided battle that Sagan lost in seconds. He'll never forget the pain.

"My knuckles became indentations. The swelling ran from my hand to my elbow; it became a giant purple blob. I couldn't close my hand for two weeks," he said, shivering.

Sagan teaches animal handling classes to help people avoid such agonizing situations. They're always heavily attended by Hocking College students, who pile into the cramped nature center every Monday and Wednesday.

In order to pass the class, Sagan requires that every student log 50 hours of handling experience. Tigger is the most popular candidate because she responds so well to being touched. But her docile personality is nothing compared to Sable's.

Sable died seven years ago. She was an albino Burmese reticulated python, with pale white diamonds stitched into her skin instead of the usual black. There's an old framed picture of Sable above the computer in Sagan's office. His desktop background flashes a slide show of her exhibitions, pictures of jaw-dropped children sliding their fingers down Sable's trunk neck. She has always been Sagan's favorite.

They had shared a special bond – one that, according to Sagan, goes far beyond “pooping, eating, sleeping, and repeating.” She lived in his living room, back when the number of residents was half of what it is now. Whenever Sable’s cage was left open, she would slither out and find Sagan before curling up in rolls at his feet. She never lashed or showed him any signs of hostility and always loved attention.

Sagan is one of the lucky ones who found personality and likability in his animals. Sable, Chaungo, Tigger, and even Spam have an emotional connection with him. Contrary to what Hocking residents will say, Sagan isn’t a snake charmer. It’s his snakes that do the charming.

The Hocking Woods Nature Center is at 3301 Hocking Parkway in Nelsonville, Ohio. It is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and Sagan can be reached at 740-753-6326.