



Massachusetts to New Jersey in the

Snake Taxi

An interview with a Reptile Man

Michael and Joaney with black throated monitor

SNAKES SCARE MOST PEOPLE. PERSON SEES A SNAKE. PERSON RUNS AWAY. Michael Ralbovsky of Rainforest Reptile Shows does the opposite. He drives for six to seven hours to rescue them. I have little appreciation for manatees or reptiles. If I see a snake or manatee, I'll hang around just long enough to make sure that it and I are moving in opposite directions.

Some years ago, I first met Michael Ralbovsky and his wife, Joaney Gallagher, during a training event provided to me and my co-workers (Massachusetts Environmental Police Officers) regarding the handling of exotic animals. In 2009, while investigating news of a manatee touring the waters of Cape Cod Bay, I suffered a patellar tendon rupture. It took me out of the field for six months. "Idle hands being the devil's workshop," I limped at the opportunity to get back on the road, when Mike asked me to join him on a one-day trip into central New Jersey. New Jersey Conservation Officers had seized a snake and asked him to take it.

Six hours of driving time afforded us a great opportunity to bond, discussing our jobs and their interconnectedness. It was during our time together that we formulated the basis for this interview.

KLC So, Mike . . . Who are you and what do you do?

MR I'm a reptile man! I'm the herpetologist/general curator of Rainforest Reptile Shows, a Massachusetts-based educational company.

KLC When did you first realize that you were a "reptile man?"

MR When I was about seven years old, living in Burns Flat, Oklahoma, I captured a couple of Texas horned lizards and was playing with them on my mom's bed. She had one of those white beaded bedspreads and I was kinda pushing the lizards at each other and they sprayed blood all over the bedspread (this is a defense mechanism). The lizards apparently felt threatened. Needless to say, the lizards and I were kicked outside.

KLC My mom would have run pretty far down the road and then made me do the laundry. Moms often fail to see the humor of such things, especially when they occur on their beds. What then prompted you to start Rainforest Reptile Shows in Beverly, Massachusetts?

MR I met Joaney, my partner in all things, while I was working at the St. Augustine Alligator Farm and Zoological Park in Florida. At St. Augustine's, I learned to handle and care for all twenty-three species of crocodylians.

During that time, I met Joaney. She and I had a long-distance relationship for over a year and it was decided that I would move to

Beverly with my boys. We wanted to continue with the hands-on environmental education work I did at St.

Augustine Alligator Farm.

Joaney wanted to continue with her efforts in the industrial environmentally-conscious field.

That's when Rainforest Reptile Shows was born.

KLC Generally, people say that playing with poisonous snakes is 'crazy.' You do it purposefully. Heck, we're driving six hours to get one.

MR "Crazy?" Well, I have to say, I think that you game wardens are crazy doing the work you do. It's all relative. It's just part of the job.

First, let me tell you, snakes are venomous, not poisonous. Poison is something like bleach – a single toxin. Venom is more like chicken soup. It consists of various inhibitors, enzymes, amino acids, and hormones. These chemicals may cause bleeding and prevention of clotting. Others may promote the

KLC Have any officers been seriously injured during your training sessions or in the field? What do you think happened?

MR We did have one officer receive a good bite on his thumb during one of our officer trainings. It was a miscalculation on hand placement while handling a small crocodylian. It's better to learn while handling a little animal than to make that same mistake out in the field with a larger animal.



Western Diamondback rattlesnake

active digestion and destruction of vital tissues. Individually, these components may be used as medicines and such. But when combined, they are deadly.

KLC We are driving to New Jersey to pick up a red diamond rattlesnake (*Crotalus ruber*). What was the nature of the call which first began your professional relationship with law enforcement officers and the dangerous reptiles we see or confiscate?

MR Our first involvement with law enforcement was back in 1996. A gentleman set "Tut," his banded-Egyptian cobra, to sunbathe in his backyard. And surprise! It took off. Unfortunately, he lived next to a school. We received a call for assistance from Massachusetts Environmental Police (EPO) Sergeant Linda Thomas. EPOs and school officials searched for three months. Finally, we were able to capture it inside the Robin Hood Elementary School in Stoneham, Massachusetts.

KLC Are there any differences in the ways you interact with local police officers versus game wardens?

MR I don't see any differences really. Laws are laws. I think game wardens have a more difficult time because the laws they enforce contain more shades of gray than those of local enforcement. Conservation officers seem to operate in a less defined environment and often don't receive the hard support they need.

KLC I've often heard you say "I need to run to Maine or Connecticut" to pick up some snake or alligator. You seem to be all over the place. How many law enforcement agencies have you assisted?

MR We train agents with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Massachusetts Department of Fish & Wildlife, Massachusetts Environmental Police and your counterparts in New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, New Jersey,

Rhode Island, and New York. We also have assisted the Suffolk County SPCA (Long Island, NY) and over three hundred animal control officers, representing many jurisdictions, but mostly in the northeast.

KLC Of all those jurisdictions, do you visit any one of them more than another?

MR I think we spend a lot of time with the Connecticut Environmental Conservation Police. I think since the Travis-the-chimp incident, they are very aware of possible issues to the public. We also assisted them with an amnesty day.

We do get the most venomous snakes out of New Jersey. I believe it's because of the "hot" shows they have in Pennsylvania.

KLC "Hot" shows? Is that a reference to the sales of rattlesnakes held in PA?

MR Yes.

KLC When you drive to these other states, what species of reptiles are you retrieving?

MR We receive a great number of crocodylians (alligators and caiman, mostly). Large snakes like Burmese pythons, boa constrictors. Monitor lizards and venomous snakes like the red diamond rattlesnake we got today.

KLC This snake is very attractive, as snakes go. Why did we need to come down here to pick it up? What's special about its situation?

MR An emergency arose, requiring that we get down here to take possession of this snake. New Jersey Fish and Wildlife Headquarters doesn't have the ability to hold this type of animal, especially long-term.

We are one of, if not the only site in New England that can properly and legally house these animals.

KLC Come on, Mike. The only site? Really?

MR Rainforest Reptile Shows is the only private entity, to my knowledge, licensed and properly trained to handle and keep these particularly dangerous reptiles.

KLC Anything about this red diamond rattlesnake I need to know? Kidding. It ought to be fine locked in the back of the truck away from me. What about funny stories? Snakes and other crawling beasts tend to bring out some interesting reactions. Surely you have heard a few from law enforcement.

MR "Shoot it!" I hear that a lot. Officers need to know that in most instances, shooting the animal with a firearm will not kill it. And you will not want to miss, because if you do not kill the animal you'll have a seriously cranky animal on your hands.

KLC If an animal must be euthanized, is there a preferred method for most of these animals? Realize that if that decision comes, there may not be a lot of time to make a more reasoned decision. So, are we back to "shoot it?"

MR Yes, in a manner of speaking. The public must be protected and it is law enforcement's job to do so. Sometimes the safety of the animal in question, just like in the Ohio incident during which all those big cats and bears were killed, must become secondary to human and public safety. You all must do your jobs.

KLC If killing the snake or alligator is a misconception among people, are there any other misperceptions commonly held by the public about what you do?

MR People think that we're crazy. I think they envision people who deal with reptiles as a bunch of big guys with tattoos and long hair. Then they see us, and what we can offer them. It's not until after their training or our conversations with them that they really see how our interaction with them will affect their ability to perform more confidently in the field or around the reptiles about which we are trying to educate them. Those scenarios

may include drug situations, family disputes, or encounters in public areas like parks, ponds, or trains.

They think that we only do presentations at schools and birthday parties. What they don't understand is that we are professionals



Gaboon viper

and consult for many types of venues. We train you guys (game wardens), work with zoos, and do on-camera educational pieces for local television stations and other media venues as well.

KLC In the past, I've arranged delivery of an alligator to you. I've heard of others on my job meeting you to make deliveries of other reptiles as well. Do those calls typically happen like this: "Mike, will you come pick up a ___?" I imagine that there is a procedure. What is the typical procedure that you follow when an agency calls requesting that you pickup an illegally held animal?

MR First, we clarify that the animal is unlawful to possess within that jurisdiction. We also verify the need for removal of the animal and possible dispositions of the animal.

Then we notify the enforcement authority, e.g., the Connecticut Environmental Conservation Police or Massachusetts Environmental Police, etcetera, to arrange for the safe and humane transportation or delivery of the animal. Proper equipment is brought to the scene to handle every situation we visit. Afterward, the animal is

contained and the investigating officer/agent will complete a chain-of-custody form. This form releases the animal to our care until its future is determined. Once we return to Massachusetts, we notify the state wildlife authority that we are in possession of animal 'X.'



Michael and alligator snapping turtle

KLC Do you ever keep the animals you receive? What happens to the others you do not maintain?

MR Yes, we sometimes do keep animals we receive. Generally, however, the animals are held temporarily pending placement with local or out-of-state zoos or other locations capable of dealing with the specific animal.

Most crocodylians are placed quickly to licensed alligator farms in the southern United States.

KLC Inevitably, an inexperienced and more junior officer will respond to a reptile-related call along with a senior officer or sergeant. What should the junior officer tell the senior officer when he receives the command to "wrangle that reptile?"

MR They should say, "This isn't in my job description. What's Mike's number?"

KLC Well, I've gotta say, Mike. I'm a junior officer and I'm well prepared to say just that. I think the first rule of law enforcement is "know your limitations."

I've seen many common snakes at the pet shops on Cape Cod, where I patrol. Surely, you must have a sense of which dangerous reptiles

may be most commonly retained as pets across the northeastern United States.

MR Crocodylians, venomous snakes, and some of the very large monitors, anacondas, and pythons are often kept as a sign of prestige and for bragging rights. Sometimes people just don't know any better. For example, one of your officers in Massachusetts confiscated a gaboon viper (*Bitis gabonica*) from a lady who would sleep in bed with the snake beside her. The gaboon viper is a seemingly lethargic and very muscular snake. It's known for its fangs, which may individually exceed two inches in length. What could she have been thinking?

KLC Whatever became of that snake, Mike? Haven't I seen it in your collection?

MR Yes, Kevin, that gaboon viper is in our collection. We keep it behind heavy glass when it is on public display. Its primary use is for educating the public about the safe handling such animals. We also discuss the appropriateness of keeping certain snakes. Public education is our primary purpose with all of the reptiles and other animals we maintain.

KLC Mike, let's say that there is an officer in British Columbia or Nebraska who has an interest in learning how to handle dangerous reptiles. Do you have any suggestions as to ways in which they could develop their skills?

MR We do provide training for many states already. We'd be interested in helping with that. Rainforest Reptile Shows (www.rainforestreptileshows.com) may be contacted via our website or on Facebook. We are more than happy to assist in facilitating training opportunities.

KLC Are you aware of any trends within the reptile trade that may impact conservation law enforcement?

MR Both state and federal govern-

ments are increasing laws regarding exotic animals. I think they are proposing extremely harsh penalties. This is just punishing the trade and forcing it to go underground, thereby opening a larger black market. At one point, Massachusetts was considered to have some of the strictest laws. I think Massachusetts is considered a bit more lenient. We now seem to have less of a problem than the states that are enacting bans or extremely harsh laws. It is extremely hard to enforce the laws currently in place.

KLC You think some states are very restrictive in their reptile legislation. Why do you think that?

MR I believe that restrictive reptile legislation stagnates the multi-billion-dollar reptile trade industry. Restrictions squeeze the legal businesses and deny them the ability to fully maintain their businesses. It further hinders their ability to introduce the excitement of reptile ownership and stewardship to future generations of hobbyists and reptile enthusiasts.

KLC What do you know about regional reptile trading? How does the trade differ regionally?

MR The trade is not regional anymore. It is global, from Germany to Japan to Argentina to the smallest of islands.

The problem is that the laws of those individual countries are not followed. Sometimes violators are caught, and sometimes they are not. With the internet revolution, nothing is just regional anymore.

KLC Once in a while, I think I hear that snake rattling and I think, "If that thing bit me, I'd need to know where to find the best source of anti-venin." As you handle and oversee many venomous snakes, you must know the answer to this next question. Where are the most important anti-venin locations for Canada and for the United States? How do we contact them?

MR The Venom Response Program operated by the Miami-Dade County Fire Rescue Department

may be the best resource. Because so many animals enter Florida as imports, they maintain a cache of anti-venin for national and international snake species and spiders.

KLC If an officer is bitten by a venomous reptile, what procedure do you think works best?

MR The first thing is to call 911 and have the officer transported to the hospital immediately. The animal should be secured and identified. If no one is able to identify the animal, bring it with you to the hospital or arrange for it to be available. The hospital can maintain the officer until anti-venin protocol is put in place. It's a good idea for you game wardens to know about the Venom Response program at Miami-Dade, just in case.

KLC How do most people get possession of illegal reptiles?

MR The internet, reptile shows, and unscrupulous pet shops may be the main sources. But animals are often transferred through street sales. Someone they know sells them an animal or gives it away for some easy money or because an animal is getting too big or its novelty has worn off.

When animals are transferred informally like this, the animals



Michael and gaboon viper

may suffer because they may not receive the correct care or diet they require. I've got an alligator that is underweight and malformed due to a diet of hotdogs at the hands of its previous owner. Hot dogs do not provide the correct nutritional balance for any animal.

KLC In what ways may lawmakers and law enforcement become more proactive in preventing those sorts of sales?

MR A push for better enforcement legislation may be the answer. There should be no more "just a slap on the hand" legislation. It doesn't work. I feel that everything should be seized, just as you would with a drug situation. Also, increase the fines for violations.

KLC What can law enforcement do to improve its efforts?

MR I think officers should visit reptile expos and the like in plain-clothes to get to know the trade. Education is always important. There is a lot of misinformation out there.

KLC Often these same types of people can no longer care for their reptiles when they move or the animals get too big for the family or owner to handle safely, etc. Would a program through the department, like an amnesty program (reptile owner voluntarily surrenders the exotic

pet without fear of prosecution), be effective? We know that Florida sometimes offers such a program. Lots of people get stuck with these sorts of critters but are afraid that law enforcement will prosecute them at turn-in. What are your thoughts about this?

MR I think as long as it is for unlawful animals only, it would be great. But the situations should be looked at case-by-case. If an animal is quite clearly abused, then the owner should be held criminally responsible and charged. Often these same people can no longer care for their reptiles when owners move or the animals get too big.

KLC What about that amnesty program? You mentioned one earlier which occurred in Connecticut. I presume that the public was able to voluntarily surrender their illegal exotic pets without fear of prosecution. Florida runs a similar program from time to time. From the perspective of a professional herpetologist, what suggestions would you offer to a jurisdiction which may be planning to schedule a similar event?

MR As I see amnesty programs, the best idea I have to offer right now is that the agency sponsoring the event must work harder to prevent the public from bringing legal animals to the event by mistake.

I've seen well-meaning organizers using images of legal exotic pets or reptiles in their promotional materials. This confuses innocent pet-reptile owners into bringing their legal pets to the drop-off site.

It negatively affects the event and the image of the organizers. And of course, it adds unnecessary stress to the animals being moved.

Venom Response Program

Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Department

9300 N.W. 41st Street

Miami, Florida 33178-2414

mdfrd@miamidade.gov

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Monday through Friday, 8 am – 5 pm

Administrative headquarters

(non-emergency) main phone number:

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Joaney and Michael travel extensively representing Rainforest Reptile Shows at regional reptile shows and expos. Rainforest Reptile Shows has recently educated the public and law enforcement professionals in Michigan, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. They welcome inquiries from law enforcement officers at any time.

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