

## Lions and Tigers and...SNAKES?! A Summer Spent at the Wildlife Discovery Center, the Middlefork Savanna, and the Importance of these Institutions to the Study of Conservation Biology

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Smooth green snake found on a Wildlife Discovery Center sponsored educational trip to Central Michigan University's Biological Station on Beaver Island, Michigan.

During the summer of 2008, I had the privilege of working as an intern at the Wildlife Discovery Center in Lake Forest, IL. The center serves as an educational facility to people from all over the country, providing exploration and interactive programs for children in the Lake Forest area as well as keeping an extensive collection of rare and endangered reptiles and amphibians—commonly referred to as “herptiles”—on the premises.

The enormous scope of the animals kept at the WDC is extraordinary. Not only can you find American Alligators and a Saltwater Crocodile, you might be lucky enough to be greeted by an Alligator Snapping Turtle leaving its hiding spot and coming up for air. Meet the extremely sociable Rhinoceros Iguana and set your sights on the venomous Gila Monster and the Beaded Lizard, of which only 200 remain in the wild. Head outside and you will find yourself gazing up at a Red-tailed Hawk, a Harris’ Hawk, and a Great Horned Owl.

The pride and joy of the Center, however, is its huge collection of venomous snakes. The WDC has one of the largest public collections of rattlesnakes and other venomous reptiles in the United States: Vipers, Rattlesnakes, Mambas, Cobras, Boas, Pythons, and many more! A unique program called “The Grass Is Rattling” allows visitors to get up close and personal with these animals in calm, safe, and controlled surroundings. The main goal of the program is to dispel many misconceptions and rumors that are associated with snakes in general, and to illustrate the important role that these animals play in our environment.

Even more amazing is the Center’s backyard. The WDC is located at Elawa Farm, which sits on the Middlefork Savanna, 25 acres of which has been proclaimed the highest quality black soil tallgrass savanna of its kind in the nation. It is recognized as a globally threatened ecosystem, giving home to species such as the Blanding’s Turtle, which

holds “near threatened” conservation status, and the eastern prairie fringed orchid. This summer the WDC hosted a “BioBlitz”, in which scientists have 24 hours to identify and record as many living organisms as possible in a given area. The results for the 2008 Middlefork Savanna BioBlitz included a total of 1,105 separate species.

One might ask why this piece of land is so important. The best explanation is that this area containing high biological diversity is crucial to our understanding of our planet. The chemistry of our atmosphere, the pollination of crops, the production of water supply and fertile soil, and the recycling of nutrients are directly linked to biodiversity. Not only does it provide suitable habitat for many state and federally listed endangered species, but the Middlefork Savanna helps us understand what the natural state of our area would be without human interference. Originally a gentleman’s farm, the land wasn’t worked for crops, and therefore retains many natural characteristics that are hard to find in other places with a higher density of human population.

It is difficult to understand the exact degree of our current situation. Human acts over the past 10,000 years, including deforestation, reef destruction, and wetlands filling, have been affecting the planet faster than we can assess the number of species lost, not to mention how many species remain in total. Who knows just how many species have already been lost, and what those species might have been able to do. At the Wildlife Discovery Center, it is made clear that snakes are an important part of our ecosystem, because they eat mice and rats that would otherwise cause large problems. Also, many studies have recently been performed on snake venom, which has been linked with potential medicines to slow tumor growth and to break up blood clots in stroke victims.

Free to visitors, I highly suggest visiting the Center and the savanna to everyone. Being allowed to work there was one of the most rewarding events I’ve experienced, and it is important to take the chance to see places like this as they become more and more difficult to find.

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