

Overcoming fears, slithering to new heights, and having a blast!

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What comes to mind when you think of snakes? Slimy, dangerous, weird, amazing, gross may just be a few of them. I won't lie, I too used to think that snakes were gross, and sent shivers up my spine every time I encountered one. Nonetheless, something about them also intrigued me, which only strengthened my desire to learn more about these animals that have a tendency to strike fear and fascination in people's hearts. My love for animals didn't come suddenly though – it has been building in me for the past 13 years. When I was in the third grade I had the opportunity to hold a young grizzly bear cub. You may be asking yourself what does a bear cub have to do with snakes? You would be correct in thinking that there isn't much in common with the two, but had I not held that bear, I may never have cultivated my love for animals through high school and college.

I had some experience in high school working with animals as a ZooTeen at the Oregon Zoo. This opportunity gave me a fair amount of small mammal, and some small reptile experience. Yet what I was lacking was a comfort with snakes and birds. This is one of my major goals since starting at the Wildlife Discovery Center. Yes, the girl who was afraid of snakes was going to be interning at a place where she would be required to work with them day in and day out. The funny thing is that you learn to love them, trust them and read them. I can now tell you when one of our snakes is acting in a weird way, it is hungry, or just doesn't like something. I have also expanded my comfort level working with a bobcat, larger reptiles, and birds of prey. Even after all of those interactions, one of my favorite things about being an intern at the Wildlife Discovery Center is learning to appreciate all of the species, no matter what they are. I have gained a new appreciation for many of the venomous snakes that I previously knew very little about.



Nicole Vachter '13 carrying Sid, a Black Throated Monitor.

Did you know that there used to be venomous rattle snakes found as far north as Lake Forest? Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately for some of you, for the eastern massasauga, *Sistrurus catenatus*, habitat destruction has caused it to disappear from the Northern part of its range.

Not many students can say that one of their classes calls for them to help five others carry in a full grown alligator into a recreation center or to feed a bobcat, but I am proud to say that my internship not only has had me complete both of those tasks, but has also made me more comfortable around snakes and other animals that I wouldn't have normally been comfortable around before. Eventually I hope that the skills I am gaining at the Wildlife Discovery Center will assist me in finding a job as a zookeeper.

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