

Snakes up close

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Herpetologist kicks off accelerated reading.

David Nieves never wanted to be anything else but a herpetologist—a scientist who studies reptiles and amphibians.

At age 8, the Bellevue native became fascinated with reptiles while caring for a garter snake brought home by his brother.

The 44-year-old visited Dudley Elementary youngsters Thursday where he shared some of his scaly pets, his enthusiasm for writing and books he's written.

Nieves' visit was prompted by the school's kickoff of its accelerated reading program.

"Wild About Books" is the theme this year of the school-wide program which encourages students to read and take tests for comprehension based on individual reading levels.

"I like to write," said the author and photographer of three books about reptiles and amphibians, "because my books can go around the world easier and faster than I can."

Nieves kept his audience laughing with his antics and stories about reptile and amphibian behavior.

"I'm a silly scientist," he declared, telling youngsters that he likes to write in silly or interesting

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ways that don't bore the reader.

Through a multimedia slide presentation, Nieves showed that the first trait of writing—ideas—is a trait that can be used to hook the reader.

“I don't like boring, I like fun,” he said.

While showing a Jackson's chameleon, Nieves explained that it had a long tongue for catching bugs.

Nieves then displayed his creativity by comparing a person to the lizard.

“With a tongue like that you can eat a bowl of popcorn three feet away.”

He noted that reptiles and amphibians are afraid of humans and don't bite unless they're threatened.

“If you leave them alone, they'll leave you alone,” Nieves said, noting that he's been in water with snapping turtles who swam away from him. “How would you like it if they poked you with a stick?”



Holding up Snowcone—a white rat snake—Nieves said everything is blurry to a snake, so the serpent relies on its tongue to smell.

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“A snake’s sense of smell is better than a dog’s and it does a better job of catching a mouse than a cat,” he said. “When the mouse goes down a hole, the cat stares at the hole while a snake goes down and catches it.”

Cats sometimes get sick from eating mice, Nieves said, while snakes don’t and help keep down mouse and rat populations.

While showing a milk snake, Nieves told a myth many people believe about the snake hypnotizing a cow and then drinking all of its milk.

Before his presentation, the herpetologist said snakes have gotten a bad rap in U.S. society because it’s been culturally ingrained.

“How many times do you hear that a person is as mean as a snake?” Nieves asked. “People in other parts of the world think of the snake differently.”

During his talk, Nieves said snakes can open their jaws much wider than humans because of their bone structure that allows their jaws to swivel and stretch.

“Snakes could eat a whole birthday cake in one bite,” he declared.

The study of reptiles and amphibians has taken Nieves to different parts of the world—from the rain forest to an island in Indonesia where he’s studied and photographed the world’s largest lizard—the Komodo Dragon.

“Twice I almost got eaten,” he said about when he got too close to one of the massive creatures. “I found out I’m faster than the Komodo Dragon.”

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Nieves said scientists are studying the dragon's drool which causes severe infection that eventually kills its prey.

However when a Komodo dragon is bit by one of its own, the injured lizard doesn't get sick.

"Could you imagine taking one bite out of a sandwich and then waiting for two days before eating the rest?" he asks in his book *More Reptiles Up Close*.

For the grand finale, Nieves brought out "Maggie," a 155-pound python and told how he hatched the golden snake from an egg.

"Maggie is more than 15 feet long and is still growing," he said. "She will grow to about 200 pounds."



As the snake draped herself around the herpetologist, first grader Page Wright leaned over and whispered, "She's beautiful."

Nieves gives presentations to all age groups. For more information, contact him at reptilesupclose@cox.net.

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