

# **Blackie-Animal Educator**

by Cindy Eusey



It is with great sadness that the staff of the Crawford Park District announces the passing of “Blackie”, our Black Rat Snake (*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*). Blackie lived a long and purposeful life of approximately 16 years educating both children and adults about her species. Since she was raised in captivity, she was very easy to handle. School children could touch her scaly skin and would frequently hold her, overcoming their “fear” of snakes. Blackie was approximately six feet long, very typical of Ohio’s largest snake. Every summer Blackie would lay a clutch of unfertilized eggs. That process told us she was a female. The eggs were white, leathery and about the size and shape of a human thumb.

Rat snakes are primarily forest-dwelling snakes and are found in most of Ohio. They are accomplished tree climbers and have been found taking shelter in woodpecker holes and other cavities.

Rat snakes are also known as the “farmer’s friend”. Most farmers welcome the snakes into their barns as a natural way to rid the barn of mice and rats that carry diseases and eat the farmers’ grains.

Rat snakes are constrictors. Thanks to the many teachers, students and individuals who participate in the “Adopt-An-Animal” program, Blackie was frequently fed a mouse during her program so spectators could see how a constrictor kills its prey. After wrapping her body around the rodent and squeezing it until it could no longer breathe, she would open her mouth and swallow a whole mouse or rat many times larger than her mouth opening. The killing process was usually less than a minute and no rodents suffered unnecessarily. Snakes have exceptionally powerful digestive juices which allow them to digest bones, fur, feathers, and even teeth. Children will not forget the live experience and excitement of watching a snake swallow a whole mouse, head first.

Blackie would frequently flick out her forked tongue. Children learned that she was not about to bite but was just using her tongue to smell. Snakes have two cavities in the roof of their mouth call Jacobson’s organs. The tongue gathers small particles from the air and deposits them on the sensory cells of these cavities which enable the snake to detect odors.

Thanks to Clay Cooper and Hocking College, the Nature Center has acquired a baby Black Rat Snake. At present, the naturalists are nurturing it to fill a tall order. Blackie was a great educator. She will be missed, but the story of the Black Rat Snake will still be told.