

# Herpetologists in hog heaven over rare hognose

*Eastern hognose snake thought to be extinct on LI found at Brookhaven lab*



Photo courtesy of Brookhaven National Laboratory

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service herpetologist Jeremy Feinberg holding an eastern hognose snake

BY JOSHUA COHEN

A year ago Tim Green, the cultural and natural resource manager at the Brookhaven National Laboratory (BNL), was doing field work on site and stumbled upon an eastern hognose snake. Green didn't think much of the discovery until he consulted with colleagues back at the lab who said that the rare and harmless snakes were thought to be extinct on Long Island. "Having come from Texas, I didn't think they'd make such a stir," Green said.

Over time, several more of the hognose snakes were sighted, prompting BNL and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to send herpetologist Jeremy Feinberg to conduct a study of these snakes. Feinberg, along with intern Kristine Hoffmann, began a telemetry study in June, tracking the movements and behavior of the snakes they found on the grounds of the lab.

The telemetry study included capturing several hognoses and, with the help of specialists from the Bronx Zoo, surgically implanting tiny radio transmitters into the captured snakes. The snakes with the radio transmitters were then released where they were found and traced daily by the team.

Hoffmann, a junior at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who is interning with BNL, goes into the field every day with equipment to track the implanted snakes. "I go out and use a receiver to locate the snakes implanted with the radio transmitters, take data like weather readings, temperature and mark the locations on a map using a G.P.S. locator," described Hoffmann. She explained that these readings tell about the snakes' habitat selection and behavior by determining how and when they move to what type of habitats.

Feinberg, who has been with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for 10 months, says that the hognose

snakes are quite harmless but intolerant of environmental changes. "They're a midsize snake but larger than most that are found on Long Island. The hognose usually grows to only about two feet long, but are also thicker than other snakes as well," said Feinberg.

The hognoses are common across the eastern seaboard of the United States, and until a few years ago were also just as common on Long Island. "You could find them as far west on the Island as Brooklyn," stated Feinberg. However, the last record of an eastern hognose in that area dates back to the 1970s. Over the past 15

years, there have been only 14 sightings on Long Island reported, and due to increased development and pollution on Long Island, it was assumed the hognoses were extinct here.

Finding these snakes on Long Island indicates that the quality of the air and conditions of the local environment might not be as bad as originally thought. "The hognoses are very sensitive to their environment and can be adversely affected by over-development and pollution. Finding them

in this area would indicate that the quality of the environment is better than we had believed," Feinberg said. "This also shows us, among other things, that the toad population on the Island is sustained because the hognoses feed on many of the toads which are found on Long Island," Feinberg said.

The results of the telemetry study have yielded interesting findings. "Before the study, we believed that these snakes only lived in sandy, muddy areas," Feinberg remarked. Many of the findings indicate that the hognoses also live in wooded areas, which was not known before they were sighted at BNL. Says Feinberg, "We're learning new things all the time, which is what's so great about this study."

---

***'Finding them in this area would indicate that the quality of the environment is better than we had believed.'***

— FEINBERG

---