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Lizard Catching, A New Olympic Sport?

By

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It's hard to catch a lizard. It requires the stalking skills of a hunter, the patients of a mime, and the possession of a unique skill—noosing. The skill of noosing a lizard can be acquired through apprenticeship and lots of practice.

When I was a kid of about eight, my noosing instructor, Chris, was a year older, and had been instructed in the art by his father. Chris and I would comb the mountainsides where we lived. Armed with ten-foot bamboo poles, carefully crafted into lizard nooses (see sidebar), we would have contests to see who could catch the most scaly creatures in an outing. If they were available

and green enough, four-foot long reeds that tapered to fine tips could also be modified into a noose. These worked well for close work, with smaller lizards.

Our major adversary was the Western Fence Lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis*). These Blue-Bellies, as we called them, were the most common lizards in the Hollywood Hills where we grew up in Southern California. It was understood that just about any other species was worth more prestige points than a Blue-Belly. Horny-Toads (Coast Horned Lizard, *Phrynosoma coronatum*) were easy to catch, but rare and hard to spot. Western Whiptails (*Cnemidophorus tigris multiscutatus*) were everywhere but just about impossible to catch. I remember spending hours, trailing behind whiptails as they hunted for bugs. Their stop and go foraging technique resembles a cab in New York traffic. They never seem to be still long enough to slip the noose around them. They're so quick, that if you do manage to get the loop of the noose around their neck, they more often than not run completely through the loop before it tightens. The narrow shape of their heads allows them to easily slip out of the noose even after it tightens around their neck.

In the riparian areas of our hills, the prize was the Southern Alligator Lizard (*Gerrhonotus multicarinatus*). These slow lizards are easy to catch. So the challenge was

finding them. Not getting bitten by their powerful jaws was a rarely achieved goal.

By the time I was ten, I had a group of friends that shared my enthusiasm for reptiles. It was a small group, as most of the kids in the neighborhood were into more traditional pursuits. If anyone in our cadre caught a snake, they were king for the day. Snakes, with their stealthy and frequently subterranean behavior, were rarely encountered. Only later in life did I discover the magic of turning things over.

Occasionally my family would travel to Palm Springs, about one hundred miles east of Los Angeles. I was never quite sure what my parents saw in the place, but to me it was lizard paradise. The coolest lizards around could be found munching on flowers outside the apartment building we stayed in. The Desert Iguanas (*Dipsosaurus dorsalis*) grew to over a foot long, and were calm and docile. Its light gray ground color and brownish spots made it almost disappear against the sand and creosote bush desert. Hours could be spent stalking. You'd get the loop of your noose within inches of the iguana's neck, just to have it take off with a blinding dash to a bush thirty yard away. With the ambient temperature usually around a hundred degrees,

it's not surprising that the lizards frequently prevailed in this contest.

As a kid, I'd more often than not keep the lizards I caught, at least for a time. Now if I go into the field with my noose, it is usually with my son, instructing him in the art. I also teach him about ecology and conservation—we almost never keep what we catch. The lizards are examined, thanked for the thrill of the chase and returned to the spot where they were caught. I don't ever remember injuring a lizard by noosing it. Their weight is what closes the noose. They just don't weigh enough to tighten it too much (See Box).

Catching lizards is a lot like fishing. You can do it alone. You can do it with friends. You can even have the equivalent of a fishing tournament. When I encounter hikers in the field, they stare at my bamboo pole and frequently ask me where the fishing is. In most states, like fishing, you need a license to capture reptiles. Whether this is a hunting or fishing license varies with the state. Kids under sixteen rarely need a license, but they do need to comply with bag limits and other regulations.

Will lizard catching ever be an Olympic sport? Unlikely. For even though it may be more popular than

curling, and more fun than running, the scoring can only be understood by those with a passion for reptiles.

Sidebar 1

How To Make a Noose

A basic lizard noose can be made in many ways. Here are two basic types.

Obtain a piece of bamboo about ten feet long. A fishing pole also works well. Use monofilament fishing line of four to ten pound test, lighter line for smaller lizards. If the line is too heavy it won't close properly. Tie the line to the end of the pole. Leave around six inches of line. Tie a slipknot at the end of the line. If you don't know how to tie a slipknot, ask a friend (one out of three Americans know how to tie a slipknot). Another option is to make a loop at the end of the line of about one quarter of an inch with a square knot or a bowline. (The bowline is a knot known to boy scouts, sailors, and fisherman. If you don't know one of these types, and don't want to join the boy scouts—ah, I mean person scouts—stick with the square knot). Then slip the shank (see figure 1) through the small loop to make a free sliding larger loop. I prefer to have a one and one half inch loop with a one to two inch shank. Any longer and the noose is difficult to manage in and around plants.

I also like to use a piece of copper wire to stabilize the shank. This helps keep the loop the proper diameter and keeps the wind from making the noose difficult to manage. Use sixteen gauge copper wire. Wrap four or five turns of wire around the pole where the line is tied on. Extend the wire down to the knot forming the loop. Make a small 'V' in the wire to pinch the shank and hold it in place. Run the wire back up to the pole, and give it a few turns around the pole (figure 1). Carry extra line and wire in the field.

Another type of noose can be made with nothing but a long reed. Suitable reeds can be found in many herping environments. Any reed at least three feet long the tapers to a thin tip may be suitable. Strip off all leaves, (usually fox-tail like appendages) and tie a slipknot in the end of the reed. This requires a delicate touch so as not to break the tip. If you can tie the knot then the reed will probably be strong enough to be useful. Although this sounds like a rather flimsy utensil, it can be an excellent noose for small lizards. Since it's made of material natural to the lizard's surroundings, it is less intrusive and less likely to scare the animal. It also closes easily and stays closed, due to microscopic spines angled upward along the length of the reed.

Sidebar 2 How To Noose A Lizard

Lizards tend to bask in the sun when necessary to increase their body temperature. This increase in temperature is required for activity. In the morning, when the ambient temperature is cooler, it takes longer for the lizard to warm up. Morning is also the time when most lizards do much of their hunting. Pursuing them in the morning when they are easy to spot while basking on rocks, or other perches, also catches them when they are more sluggish and less inclined to flee.

When disturbed, a lizard will retreat to a safer location such as in a rock crevice, hole or bush. The closer you approach a lizard, the more likely it will flee. The larger a lizard is, the larger the buffer zone it will maintain around itself. The noose allows the lizard hunter to stay outside the lizard's buffer zone, while the less obtrusive noose enters the zone and is used to catch the lizard.

Once a lizard is spotted, approach slowly and make as little noise as possible. Avoid eye contact; watch it with your peripheral vision. Move towards the lizard at an angle so it doesn't appear as if you're heading directly at it. Hold the noose out in front of you, but not pointed at the lizard; this allows you to know when you're in range. Having the noose already extended in the general direction of the lizard also saves having to make large motions with it when you are close to the prey.

Once you are in range, slowly move the loop of the noose to the vicinity of the lizard's head. Various lizards will react differently to the presence of the noose. Some will ignore it; others will try to bite it as if it were food; and some will flee. Once the noose is about six inches in front of the lizard, sweep it over the lizard's head in a fluid motion and pull up and back. This uses the lizard's weight to close the loop and lifts it into the air. To avoid injury to the lizard and reduce the chance of escape, quickly bring the tip of the noose (with the attached lizard) in close and grasp the lizard. With your other hand loosen the loop. If you have a partner have him loosen the noose while you maintain control of the lizard.