

Conservation Efforts for the Armenian Viper, *Montivipera raddei* in Armenia

By Jeff Ettling, Ph.D., Director, Center for Conservation in Western Asia, Curator of Herpetology & Aquatics, Saint Louis Zoo

Armenian Viper, photo by Mark Wanner



mountain vipers, other reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals native to the Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus regions.

For the past nine years the Center for Conservation in Western Asia has focused its efforts on the conservation of the Armenian Viper, *Montivipera raddei*, which has a fragmented distribution in the mountainous regions of Armenia, Azerbaijan, eastern Turkey, and northwestern Iran. Armenian Viper populations have decreased by 88% over the past 40 years as a result of habitat alteration/destruction, human persecution, and over-collection for the pet trade (Darevsky 1966; Mallow et al. 2003; Nilson et al. 2008). While aspects of the reproductive behavior of the Armenian Viper have been documented (Darevsky 1966; Bozhanskii and Kudryavcev 1986), nothing has been published on the spatial ecology, genetic diversity, or population structure of the species. Together with my colleagues Aram Aghasyan, Ph.D., and his son, Levon Aghasyan, Ph.D., of the Scientific Center of Zoology and Hydroecology of the National Academy of Sciences, Yerevan, Armenia, we studied Armenian Viper populations inhabiting two

The Saint Louis Zoo has been actively involved in wildlife conservation for decades, but following a strategic planning process in 2003, which included Zoo curators, veterinarians and researchers, we made the decision to focus our conservation efforts where we could have the greatest impact and keep the programs closely connected to the Zoo and its mission. The outcome of this process was the establishment of the Saint Louis Zoo's WildCare Institute in 2004, with 12 conservation centers. The Center for Conservation in Western Asia (formerly the Center for the Conservation of Near East Mountain Vipers) is one of the 12 centers and is working to conserve

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Our base camp in southern Armenia.
Photo by Mark Wanner.



Get Your September Photo Contest Calendar



Don't be afraid—unless you're a frog! This month's winning photo by Alfred Dosantos Santillan introduces the Northern Cat-eyed Snake, an amphibian predator you're unlikely to encounter unless you travel in central or South America. However, our runner-up is from the southern US. Download your free September calendar to take them both home at <http://parcplace.org/images/stories/YOS/YearoftheSnakeCalendarSeptember.pdf>.

It's not over yet!

Call for Photos for the 2013 Year of the Snake Calendar Photo Contest

Yes! We are *still* seeking close-up, digital photos of snakes, preferably in their natural habitats or within an educational or conservation context. One winner will be selected each month to be the featured photo as part of the Year of the Snake online calendar. Runner-up photos will also be included in the calendar. Additionally, all submitted images will be considered for use in the Year of the Snake monthly newsletter and website as well as other Year of the Snake-related conservation, outreach, and educational efforts. Give us your best shot! For more information and for entry details, please visit http://parcplace.org/images/stories/YOS/YOS_Photo_Contest.pdf.

Have a Question? Ask the Experts!

Submit your snake questions via email (parcyearofthesnake@gmail.com) to our panel of snake experts, and we will select questions to answer in upcoming newsletters. Please include your name and location in your email message.

Upcoming Meetings & Events

Giant Reptile Day, September 1, 1-3:30 pm, Catoctin Wildlife Preserve & Zoo, Thurmont, MD.

Snakes of Connecticut, September 11, 7:30 pm, Blackstone Library, Branford, CT. Sponsored by the Menunkatuck Audubon Society. See **CT DEEP Year of the Snake webpage for details** <link>.

Sabino Canyon Lizard Walk, September 14, Sabino Canyon Rec. Area, Tucson, AZ. Meet at 8 am at the visitors' center.

Connecticut Hunting & Fishing Day (with live snake programs), September 28, 10 am - 4 pm, Sessions Woods Conservation Education Center, Burlington, CT. See **CT DEEP Year of the Snake webpage for details** <link>.

Year of the Snake outreach posters:
Available at www.yearofthesnake.org!

facebook

Follow all of the Year of the Snake news and happenings on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/YearOfTheSnake2013>) and Twitter (@yearofsnake2013).



Year of the Snake Collaborating Partners



The Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust www.arc-trust.org

The Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust is the leading UK charity committed to conserving amphibians and reptiles and saving the disappearing habitats on which they depend. Our vision sees amphibians and reptiles thriving in their natural habitats, and a society inspired and committed to their conservation.

The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Herpetologie und Terrarienkunde e.V. (DGHT)

www.dght.de

DGHT (meaning German Society for Herpetology and Herpetoculture) was founded in 1964 as a successor of the group called "Salamander" which originates from the year 1918. As the name implies, the DGHT covers non-professionals and professionals in herpetology and herpetoculture within a single organization, thus giving our society its particular strength. Our members work with amphibians and reptiles as it concerns research and husbandry, as well as conservation of species and their habitats. The society's mission is to contribute to both research on amphibians and reptiles and captive keeping and breeding. DGHT is strongly engaged in herpetological conservation and is accredited by the German Federal Nature Conservation Act. The society runs three funds: the Wilhelm Peters Fund dedicated to herpetological research, the Hans Schiemenz Fund attributed to assessing and protecting natural populations of amphibians and reptiles, and, in collaboration with the Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations (www.zgap.de), a fund supporting conservation activities to protect threatened amphibian and reptile species.



Hong Kong Society of Herpetology www.hkherp.org (Chinese); www.hkherp.org.hk/en/ (English)

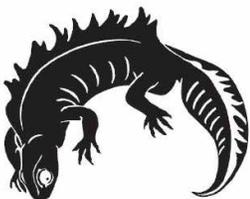
The Hong Kong Society of Herpetology Foundation was established in 2007. It is the first and only registered charitable organization in Hong Kong related to Amphibians and Reptiles. Our mission is to prevent cruelty to reptiles and amphibians through education, to increase the public's knowledge of amphibians and



reptiles through our website and various activities, such as exhibitions and seminars, to promote the conservation of local species of reptiles and amphibians and their natural habitats so that the public can appreciate the ecological value of the local species, to promote public awareness of the crisis of endangered species; to carry out research and study on local amphibians and reptiles whilst emphasizing the importance of preservation of these animals and the environment, and to do all such other lawful things as are incidental or conducive to the attainment of the above objectives.

Societas Herpetologica Slovenica www.herpetolosko-drustvo.si

The Societas Herpetologica Slovenica is a non-profit organization with the general aims of study and protection of amphibians and reptiles in Slovenia as well as education and popularization of these animal groups in the professional and general public. Regarding snakes, our research activities include field reptile surveys to determine species distributional ranges for the future Atlas of reptiles of Slovenia. Our members also give support to students involved in individual studies on the ecology of snakes. We organize and give lectures for general public, carry out workshops for school children of different age and participate as mentors on school or student field camps.



If you are interested in contributing to the Year of the Snake efforts, please send an email to parcyearofthesnake@gmail.com with a brief description of your organization and its efforts. Our full list of partners can be found at: <http://www.parcplace.org/news-a-events/2013-year-of-the-snake/271.html>.

Armenian Viper Conservation, *continued from p. 1*

Center Director Jeff Ettl (left) and Levon Aghasyan recording data on the geographical location and habitat of the Armenian Viper. Photo by Vicki Brown.

different landscapes: one a human-modified landscape with a combination of overgrazing and interspersed agricultural fields, and the other a recovered natural landscape formerly grazed by livestock, but allowed to revert to its wild state over the past seven years. The two study sites were separated by 200 kilometers. We compared home range size, movements, genetic diversity, and population structure between the viper populations inhabiting these landscapes. In particular, we were interested in what impact human modifications to the landscape may be having on the vipers and their prey. Our goal was to use the data from our studies to develop conservation management recommendations for the Armenian Viper.

Our data revealed that vipers inhabiting the human-modified landscape made larger movements and had larger home ranges (five times larger) compared to

vipers inhabiting the recovered natural landscape. Small mammal abundance was also lower in the human-modified landscape where there was overgrazing of remaining steppe habitat. Surprisingly, the body condition of vipers in the two landscapes was equivalent, which suggests that vipers have larger home ranges, in the human-modified landscape, in order to find enough food (Ettl 2013; Ettl et al. 2013). Despite the mosaic of overgrazed steppe and agricultural fields our genetic analyses indicate that gene flow is occurring between two den sites in the human-modified landscape that are separated by 3.2 kilometers. Additionally, the two geographically separated populations are genetically distinct from one another (Ettl 2013). While conservation of intact parcels of undisturbed habitat should be the first priority, management plans for areas with agriculture should include the maintenance of corridors with high-quality habitat that provides foraging and shelter for the vipers and the small mammals they prey upon. These corridors also allow for seasonal movements and gene flow. Due to the genetic distinctiveness of the two geographically separated populations, we recommended that they be managed as independent conservation units (Ettl 2013).



Jeff Ettl radio-tracking vipers. Photo by Vicki Brown.



Dr. Erika Travis implanting a transmitter into an Armenian Viper. Photo by Vicki Brown.

Developing conservation management recommendations for a species is one thing, having them put into place is something else. In our case, the impact of our spatial ecology and genetic analyses for the Armenian Viper was larger than any of us could have predicted. On 7 September 2006, the Ministry of Nature Protection, Republic of Armenia, enlarged the boundaries of both Khosrov State Reserve and Shikahogh State Reserve based on the results of our research. In addition, our data were used in part to help



Armenian Viper. Photo by Aram Aghasyan.

establish Arevik National Park and Zangezur Sanctuary. Both of these new protected areas were declared on 15 October 2009 by the Government of the Republic of Armenia. I was in Armenia at the time of the declaration and it was at that very moment that I realized that it doesn't matter how small a project may seem. In the end, when combined with other wildlife research projects from the region, a significant impact can be made for the conservation of wildlife and wild places. Our work in this biologically unique region is ongoing and we

are continuing our long-term mark-recapture study of Armenian Viper populations as well as initiating projects with other Armenian reptiles and amphibians. Our studies of the Armenian Viper are living proof that we can all make a difference for the conservation of species and their habitat.

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Snake Myths

by Carrie Elvey, *The Wilderness Center*

Because of their unique lifestyle, snakes are prone to being the subject of myth and legend. Some of these myths have a kernel of truth, others have no discernible origin. Read on to learn the truth about these myths.

Myth: You Can Make a Venomous Snake Harmless by Pulling Out Its Fangs

Facts: A venomous snake has several spare sets of fangs hidden in the roof of its mouth which will replace those that the snake loses. So whether the fangs are pulled, shed, or lost during a meal, there will be a new set waiting to take their place.



Artwork courtesy of *The Wilderness Center*

Are You an Educator or Interpretive Naturalist?

We are working to create resources for teachers and naturalists! If you are willing to share, please send your unit materials, educational program information, or PowerPoint presentations to parcyearofthesnake@gmail.com. Please include your name, the name of your school/nature center or organization, and location. If you did not create the materials, please be sure to tell us where you found the materials.

Consumption of Snakes in Hong Kong

By Anthony Yeung and Yorkie Wong, Hong Kong Society of Herpetology Foundation



This Ball Python (*Python regius*) was provided by AFCD for educational purposes. Children are always interested in snakes. Photo by Anthony Yeung.

The Hong Kong Society of Herpetology Foundation (HKHerp) was established in 2007. It is the first and only registered charitable organization in Hong Kong established for the welfare of amphibians and reptiles. Through education and the promotion of proper husbandry, our aim is to prevent cruelty among herpetofauna and increase public awareness over diverse platforms to achieve conservation goals at a local level. HKHerp is a partner with PARC for the Year of the Snake campaign and, as such, has written the following article about the consumption of snake meat and organs and the associated cruelty of this common practice in Hong Kong.

Snake flesh is readily consumed in China, even though this isn't a popular practice in western cultures. China consumes the largest quantities of snake meat in the world, reaching over 6000 tons per year. This staggering amount of consumption has resulted in many snake populations declining and now being close to extinction. Most of the snakes are caught from the wild, either

locally in China or from overseas in places such as Indonesia or Malaysia. Live snakes are cramped in poor conditions without water or food and then smuggled by boat, often times via Hong Kong, and distributed across China.

In Hong Kong, the HKHerp still finds shops selling



This Chinese Cobra (*Naja atra*), found in a Hong Kong country park, was killed intentionally by a hiker who didn't like snakes. Photo by Anthony Yeung.

snakes for their meat. Furthermore, horrible practices such as removing the gallbladder while the snake is still alive remain common. Handlers restrain the snake in their hands or sometimes by stepping on its head. An unsanitized blade is used to cut open the snake's body and push the gallbladder toward the opening at which point the gallbladder is removed from the body. Snakes can still survive and suffer for a few more days after their gallbladders are removed this way, but each eventually dies a torturous death. This practice is unnecessary and inhumane, and it violates the "PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS ORDINANCE" of Hong Kong. Sadly, there



This photo of a Bamboo Snake (*Cryptelytrops albolabris*), taken in a Hong Kong country park, demonstrates the value of a dead snake for the ecosystem. Photo by Mew Chu.



isn't much concern for snakes, and their welfare is largely overlooked by the authorities in Hong Kong.

Recently, the HKHerp has made use of snakes donated by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department of Hong Kong Government. HKHerp uses these snakes for educational purposes, to inform the public and provide opportunities for citizens to interact with live non-venomous snakes and understand the crisis of endangered snakes. We hope that in celebration of the Year of the Snake, citizens of Hong Kong can appreciate the ecological importance of snakes and treat these animals humanely and use them sustainably.

This Red-tailed Boa (*Boa constrictor*) was provided by AFCD for educational purposes. These children appear to be fascinated. Photo by Anthony Yeung.

Team Snake Panama



Team Snake Panama (TSP; www.lamica.org/teamsnakepanama)

was founded in 2011 by Dr. Julie M. Ray. The team's main objectives are to communicate and initiate the need for protection of all species of snakes while working to reduce the

number of human snakebites per year, especially in Panama, but also in other Central American countries and around the world. TSP is not a formal group in terms of having members; anyone interested in the conservation or study of snakes is encouraged to become part of the "team".

TSP is based at La MICA Biological Station (www.lamica.org), a research and ecotourism facility located in El Copé, Coclé Province, Panama, which also was founded by Dr. Ray. The facilities provide lodging, transportation, meals, guides, and other basic services for researchers from around the world, especially those interested in herpetology.

Several research projects are being conducted by TSP in Coclé Province and around Panama. Many of these projects involve Panamanians, and have transformed their fear and dislike of snakes to understanding and respect. In



conjunction with the Tropical Amphibians in Streams project, a long-term (17-year) capture-mark-recapture study of snakes is underway in Omar Torrijos National Park, and has been expanded recently to La MICA Biological Station and other local areas. Snakes that are captured live are measured and marked and promptly released in hopes that they will be found again and further data can be collected. This study is helping to understand the Neotropical snake community in both the cloud forest in the park and in areas at lower elevation. To date, nearly 2000 captures have been recorded.

This Speckled Racer (*Drymobius margartiferus*) was found outside the TSP snake lab in El Copé, Panama. Photo by Julie Ray.



A Nichol's Snailsucker (*Dipsas nicholsi*) is Nichol's Snailsucker found by Julie Ray and her field assistant in 2006—the only previous records of this species were from the other side (south) of the Panama Canal. Photo by Julie Ray.



An Eyelash Viper, *Bothriechis schlegelii*, photographed by Julie Ray in Omar Torrijos National Park.

species have not been well-documented in remote areas and these data are helping to form plans on how to better stock anti-venom throughout the country.

In addition to research, TSP provides educational opportunities whenever possible. Each year several talks about the importance of snakes are delivered in local schools and at community meetings. Tourists often join researchers for a tour to learn about snakes and local people's questions are addressed whenever and wherever the opportunity occurs. TSP also maintains an active Facebook Page (www.facebook.com/pages/Team-Snake-Panama/202999563070774) where updates and pictures are posted nearly every day. The page also serves as a way for people to upload pictures for identification and information on different species.

TSP has over 25 publications (www.lamica.org/publications.html) on Panamanian snakes, with several more on the way. Furthermore, they are finishing an important bilingual guide *The Venomous Snakes and their Mimics of Panama and Costa Rica / Las Culebras Venenosas y sus Mímicas de Panamá y Costa Rica*. The book includes 56 species, each with a range map, and over 150 color photographs. Simple keys and species accounts allow anyone to quickly identify whether a snake is venomous or a mimic, and the book provides instruction on how to avoid unwanted encounters and seek medical attention in the case of an emergency. The book promises to reduce the number of intentional kills of nonvenomous snakes and prevent snakebite and associated deaths. The book will be available on Amazon.com in September 2013.

TSP also runs an extensive road survey where all dead snakes are collected. These individuals are measured, when possible, and tissue samples are taken in an effort to better understand taxonomic relationships among the species and populations in Panama. Any snakes in decent condition are preserved for further study and to provide a collection for students. To date, over 700 snakes have been salvaged off the roadways of Panama. Including live captures, TSP has documented 83 species of snake near their home base; Panama has 153 confirmed species.

TSP has several people around Panama, including Panamanians, ex-pat residents, and tourists, who submit digital photographs of snakes found during their travels. These photographs are identified and location data are noted. Much is being learned on the geographic distribution of species of snakes. Even the most common



Julie Ray delivering a talk about snakes to local high school students in Omar Torrijos National Park.

Submit Your Citizen Science Projects

A compilation of snake citizen science (volunteer) inventory and monitoring projects has begun. These will be featured in our monthly newsletters. Send any information on these types of projects to parcyearofthesnake@gmail.com.

Submit Your Snake Art, Stories, and Poetry

Submit photos of your snake art (jpg, tiff, or pdf files) and copies of your stories and poems via email to parcyearofthesnake@gmail.com. Please include your name, location, and any comments about the submission in your email message. We will select submissions to include in upcoming newsletters.

A Global Voice for Viper Conservation

The IUCN Viper Specialist Group: An Interview with Dr. Chris Jenkins

What is the Viper Specialist Group (VSG)?

The Viper Specialist Group (VSG) is part of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which is a large nonprofit that works around the world. The VSG is specifically part of the Species Survival Commission, the part of the IUCN that is focused on the conservation of species. Within the Species Survival Commission, there are a number of Species Specialist Groups, such as a Rhinoceros Specialist Group and an Antelope Specialist Group, but the Viper Specialist Group is one of those groups, and essentially it is a network of ecologists, conservation biologists, and all other people interested in conserving this particular group of animals.

What is your role in the VSG?

I founded the group, and I currently chair the group. I founded the VSG with a number of partners after discussions about how there needed to be more reptile Specialist Groups, snake Specialist Groups in particular. We had a series of discussions and decided that vipers were the best group of animals to start with, and I have a strong passion for viper conservation. As Chairman, my primary role is to coordinate this network of individuals and make sure that I provide a framework within which everyone else can fulfill their role in the group.

How is the VSG structured?

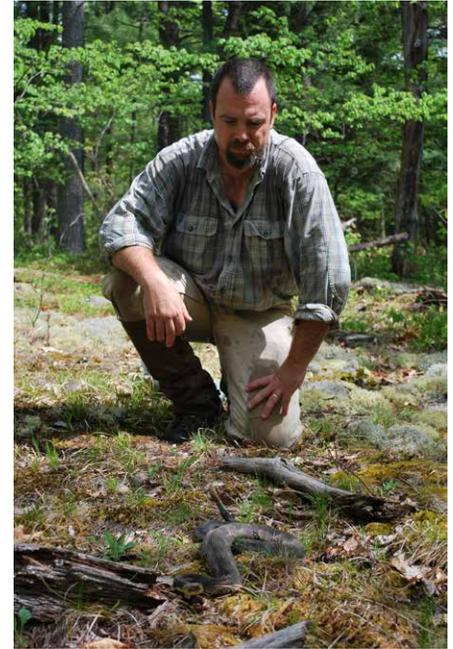
There is myself as the Chairman, and I interact directly with a number of people at IUCN. There is a group of officers, Steve Spear is the Deputy Chair, Heidi Hall is the Program Officer, and Johannes Penner is the Red List Authority Coordinator. In addition, it is set up so that there is a Regional Coordinator for each region around the world. We have seven Regional Coordinators for the European, Mesoamerican, South American, North Africa and West Asia, North America, Asia, and Africa regions. Underneath these Regional Coordinators there are a number of general members from each region. Also, under the Red List Authoring Coordinator we are developing the Red List Authority, which includes a number of individuals who focus on assessments that update the IUCN Red List, which is the leading global database for the conservation status of animals and plants around the world.

What significance will this group have for viper conservation?

This is the only group in the world that has a focused mission of conserving the world's vipers. Bringing together this network of people, having a global voice for the conservation of these animals, bringing together all of the projects that everyone is working on individually, for one bigger, collective voice and effort is very powerful and should really move the dial for viper conservation.

What are some current VSG projects?

I would say the main priority for us right now is assessments. Our goal in the next few years is to get all of the world's known viper species assessed so they are in the Red List database and we know their conservation status. Then we need to develop a system to maintain and update that database on a regular schedule so that the assessments are accurate, and declining or rare species get the conservation attention they need. We are also very interested in developing Conservation Action Plans for some viper species and would like to do this around the world by region or by groups of species. We are currently



Dr. Chris Jenkins with a Timber Rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*). Photo by Heidi Hall.



working on the Conservation Action Plan for Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnakes (*Crotalus adamanteus*) here in the southeastern United States. We are 80% finished with this Conservation Action Plan and should have a finished product within the next 6 months to a year.

How does one become involved in the VSG?

I would say that if you have a strong passion for viper conservation and are willing to participate regularly in VSG meetings and contribute to the mission, you should contact your Regional Coordinator and request the opportunity to become a member. Don't misunderstand me, being part of the VSG is not a thankless job—you get the satisfaction of knowing you are contributing to the conservation of viper species around the world and you get a chance to meet and network with some of the greatest viper experts in the world—but that is it. You are not paid to be in the group, whether you are an officer or a general member

—you are expected to put in your time and contribute. That shouldn't be a daunting task for anyone truly interested in saving these species and those are the members we want and having those types of members is what is going to make VSG successful in our mission to conserve the world's vipers.

Dr. Chris Jenkins is the Chairman of the International Union for Conservation of Nature Viper Specialist Group. Chris has also worked with the Wildlife Conservation Society, US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, University of Massachusetts, University of British Columbia, and National Geographic. He has worked on the conservation of reptiles and amphibians throughout North America and is currently expanding his work internationally. Chris' primary interests are in the ecology and conservation of snakes and managing nonprofit conservation organizations, but he has strong interests in the conservation biology of all reptiles and amphibians. He received a B.S. and M.S. from the University of Massachusetts in Wildlife Biology and Conservation and a Ph.D. in Biological Sciences from Idaho State University. His dissertation focused on the effect of livestock grazing, invasive plants, and altered fire regimes on the reproductive ecology of Great Basin rattlesnakes.

Year of the Salamander Logo Contest

In 2014, Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (PARC) will launch the Year of the Salamander campaign to raise awareness about the conservation status of salamanders and their conservation needs. We are now seeking submissions for the logo for the 2014 Year of the Salamander campaign!

The logo selected will be high profile and will be used in various places, including the *State of the Salamander* document, newsletters, website, posters, and may be used on Year of the Salamander merchandise.

Logo Requirements: We ask that submitted logos bear the text “2014 Year of the Salamander” and that the text be legible when reduced to a 1” height. Also, the chosen logo will need to work equally well in color and in black and white formats.

Submission: Please send your proposed logos to yearofthesalamander@gmail.com with the subject line “YOSal LOGO.” Although we will eventually require a high resolution file of the winning logo, please send only lower resolution JPG, GIF, or TIF files for the initial submission.

Deadline: The deadline for logo submissions is **October 1st, 2013**. The winning logo will be announced by November 1st. The winning logo designer will be featured in the January 2014 *Year of the Salamander News* that will be distributed to PARC list-serve members and posted on the PARC website.

Please distribute this logo contest announcement far and wide. We look forward to seeing your artistic submissions!

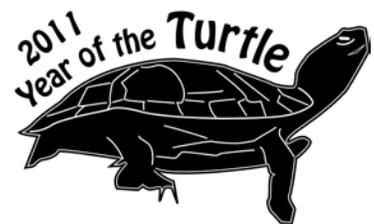
Previous years' winning logos:



Designer: Ann Hirschfeld



Designer: Todd Long



Designer: Kelly Christiansen



Green Salamander, *Aneides aeneus*. Photo: Mark Tegges.