

Reptile Times

An LLLReptile Venture...

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10 Questions with

Phil Goss



10 Questions with Phil Goss - New President of USARK

Phil has taken on the difficult task as the new president of USARK (United States Association of Reptile Keepers). He has been in and around the hobby for years and has a passion for reptiles as we will find out in this interview!

1. Let's start with an easy and obvious question. What first got you into reptiles, and what was your first pet reptile?

Thank you, Reptile Times and LLLReptile, for the opportunity to answer some questions. I have always been intrigued by all animals, especially herps. I grew up in a very rural area filled with herps. Nature surrounded me and I was more than happy to enjoy it. I constantly found American toads, Northern cricket frogs, painted turtles, musk turtles, banded water snakes and other herps found in southern Indiana. I would investigate them and let them be on their way. These field herping experiences sparked much reading and research concerning reptiles and amphibians. My first purchased snakes were a normal corn snake and a black and white banded kingsnake.

2. What was your first job in the reptile industry, and how did you make that

transition into your job at Zoo Med?

My first pet industry job was working at a retail pet shop in Bloomington, IN. The owner of the shop provided me with an amazing amount of knowledge concerning the industry and she was a very positive influence. After graduating college, I stumbled upon a job as a sales representative for a small dry goods distributor. We sold all pet-related products except dog/cat foods and carried all major reptile brands. I spent the first few weeks in the warehouse pulling orders and learning about the products. Even though I was out of school, I still had plenty of homework. This greatly helped when I hit the road as a sales rep and visited pet shops in Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky.

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In 2005, I heard Zoo Med had a sales position available. I delayed sending a resume as the Backer trade show was coming to Chicago soon and I knew I could personally introduce myself to Zoo Med there.

I certainly should not have delayed as the position was almost filled before Backer. A very important lesson was learned not to delay when opportunities arise but I was thrilled to have a job with Zoo Med.

3. A more serious question... It seemed to me that a larger focus of USARK was on big snakes in the past. Understandable, as they have made the headlines over the last few years. However, the reptile industry is so much more than just snakes. How are you planning to incorporate all herps into the conversation and unite breeders, stores and hobbyists alike so we can all get on the same page?

Breeders, stores, hobbyists and keepers need to unite and unite now. Recently, big constrictors were an easy target due to their perception by the general public. History is forgotten quickly and laws such as the 4" turtle ban from 1975 are not discussed often. Everyone in the reptile industry should be proactive and act now rather than waiting for their species of choice to be attacked. Large boid and venomous keepers are not the only potential victims. Thinking, "I will not be affected because I breed leopard geckos." is simply not acceptable. Wilson

County, Texas just fought a ball python ban and proposed legislation using blanket terminology such as “reptiles” is being introduced. If little, cute, baby turtles can be banned, any herp can be banned.

As mentioned, large constrictors have been the focus of national legislation recently. USARK fought these battles as those were the rights being threatened. However, it has been USARK’s mission statement from the beginning that we protect the right to keep any reptile, amphibian and invertebrate.

It is crucial that everyone in the herp community follows legislation, owns reptiles responsibly and educates the general public concerning reptiles. If we lose our right to keep large snakes, we will continue to lose rights to keep smaller snakes. If we lose the right to keep large lizards, small lizards will come next. Large constrictors have been the focus due to being sensationalized by the media.

They were an easy target but any reptile could be the next target.

Breeders, hobbyists, store owners and everyone in the reptile industry must join forces. Our community is too small to be divided and expect to win battles over much larger and well-funded anti-herp groups. Though we battle larger anti-pet groups, if united we are stronger and more devoted than anyone else and we will not back down.

4. At LLLReptile - we firmly believe that education is key (which is a big part of why we put out this magazine). Do you have any thoughts or suggestions as to how our industry can educate the "masses" versus just the reptile keepers themselves?

Education is certainly a key component. It is very easy to change the attitudes of people who have never interacted with reptiles but they must be presented with the opportunity to learn. People who are afraid of snakes due to lack of education or interactions with reptiles will not go seeking knowledge to learn about snakes. We must present our industry in a positive light and spread proper education.

It is much easier to spread knowledge today than many years ago. More people are attending reptile shows and more educational reptile shows are popping up. When you attend a reptile show, take your friends, even if they are not herpers. Everyone attending a reptile show may not buy a reptile but if he has a good experience and learns about reptiles then we have a future hobbyist.

The internet makes it easy to post educational videos and articles. There are education-oriented herp groups arising and I hope to see great happenings from these organizations. Herp societies are still educating and if you are not a member of a herp society, you should join one. If there is not one in your area,

get some herper friends together and start one.

The key is to show positive aspects of reptiles and share constructive information. I am amazed at how many local television and radio stations are allowing herpers to speak. Do not sit around and wait for opportunities. Pick up the phone and send emails to local affiliates and offer to present a show concerning reptiles. Remember to be prepared and professional. Highlight responsible pet ownership, why reptiles are good pets and educate the audience. If we make enough ripples, a wave will follow.

5. I have heard you currently work with Prehensile Tailed Skinks (aka Monkey Tailed Skinks). Have you had any luck breeding them, and do you have any husbandry suggestions for our readers?

Proper caging is a big concern. I utilize custom plastic cages measuring 4'Wx4'Hx2'D, though even larger is better. This could house a pair or even 1.2 or 1.3 skinks and should be filled with large cork rounds, suitable branches and plenty of hiding areas. However, be sure to watch closely for aggression as these skinks must be compatible to be housed together. My caging has a partial heavy gauge screen top, shelves, removable median divider and automatic misting system. A proper basking area and UVB should be provided. I have had success breeding monkey tails in this style cage. I do separate males and females for a few weeks before introduction. Again, be sure to watch for aggression. It is normal for the male to bite the female but if the female squares off for battle, separate them and introduce again a day or two later.

Prehensile-tailed skinks are very interesting reptiles. If you are prepared, they are great lizards to keep. I have seen many cage aggressive animals that are perfectly fine when removed from the cage. Gloves may be used by some keepers as they do have sharp toenails and strong legs but toenails can be trimmed. They are certainly one of the most interesting reptiles in the herp world.



6. Boas are also a passion of yours. Can you tell us some morphs you are working with, anything really different on the horizon, and why boas specifically got your attention?

Boas always fascinated me more than other snakes. Their colors, body shape

and demeanor just amazed me from the beginning. I have several *Boa constrictor longicauda* and these are a very interesting *Boa constrictor* subspecies. I had some very aberrant babies in a 2011 litter and also have anerythristic babies occasionally. Longicauda are highly variable, even among wild-type animals. The strong head markings and bold body pattern contrast sets them apart from other boa constrictors. They are born looking very similarly to common boa constrictors, but their markings darken with every shed to make them easily distinguishable from others boas as adults. The various localities and subspecies appeal to me most, especially as many of these have nearly disappeared from the hobby. True red-tailed boas, *Boa constrictor constrictor*, are rarely seen today and are the snakes that first made me a boaphile (enthusiast or lover of boas).

Concerning Colombian morphs, I do not have any crazy, high-end animals. I keep a few morphs but my collection is heavier with various subspecies and *Boa constrictor imperator* localities. A female albino arabesque is the favorite morph in my menagerie.

7. Can you give us a short argument as to why the average hobbyist should be allowed to own such snakes as Reticulated Pythons and Green Anacondas?

Every person should have the right to own any reptile. If someone researches and prepares for a reticulated python, understanding lifespan, adult size, cage requirements, etc., then he should be able to own a reticulated python. This applies to all reptiles and not just the large species. Be prepared and willing to accept the responsibilities of any reptile you buy for his entire life.

Simply stated, every person should have the right to own a reticulated python or green anaconda but not every person should own one. America is about having rights, not losing them.

8. We got our start at LLLReptile breeding Leopard and African Fat Tailed Geckos. I have heard you started in a similar fashion breeding those along with some day geckos. Do you still work with any geckos today? Ever produce any unique Leopard Gecko morphs back in the day?

Due to heavy travel schedule, I no longer keep any geckos. I do miss keeping them but know I cannot care for them properly. As far as unique, I did have a small group of leopard geckos that stayed small, had blocky heads and produced extremely orange babies with occasional melanistic spots. These “blockheads” were very hard for me to rehome as I was amazed every time I looked at them

and they had great personalities.

Someday I will again have a large vivarium with live plants and day geckos. I definitely miss keeping geckos but I know they will be available when I can again care for them properly as long as the entire herp community stands up, unites and supports our fight.

9. Working for a company like Zoo Med in sales has to have given you some quality experience interacting with people face-to-face. Do you think this experience will help you in conveying the herp industry's message to people outside of our circle?

That sales job certainly provided much experience working with people and dealing with difficult situations. Dealing with so many people means different approaches are needed to suit different personalities and you must always be quick on your feet. The job as Central U.S. Sales Manager for Zoo Med was not a “used car salesman” role, which will greatly aid me. The job was about building relationships and keeping lines of communication open. Professionalism at all times is a must if you do not want to tarnish earned respect.

The herp industry is comprised of amazing people and they need to be seen in a better light. USARK will always act in the best interests of the entire herp community and will certainly not hinder our progress with those outside the industry. A suitable spokesperson will certainly advance our efforts in an efficient manner. When I was employed by Zoo Med, I knew my role was just a small part of a larger, successful company. I was representing Zoo Med but I alone did not make Zoo Med successful. That applies much more now. USARK and the herp community are much more than just me.

10. Why do you think USARK chose you to be the face of this industry? Why did YOU accept this rather daunting task? And what are you looking forward to most in 2013?

Perhaps most importantly, this role requires someone who is approachable, professional and unabrasive. The herp community cannot be united by a dictator. Having a standoffish public figure will continue to alienate us and make it harder to be understood by the general public and to gain allies for our cause. Also, understanding that USARK is larger than any one person is critical. Level-headedness and ability to accept criticism are other characteristics needed. Rising above and not participating in petty drama is also key. Having backgrounds in education and sales prepared me for many aspects of this position, including those discussed above. You will see a much more appreciative USARK and

anyone supporting the community will receive proper accolade.

Seeing a divided community was not acceptable to me and being uncertain of who would represent us gave me doubts concerning our future. It is very daunting, especially in the beginning, but the USARK Board is taking an active role. The USARK Board of Directors is comprised of experienced industry leaders with only the best interests of the entire community in mind. They have no hidden agendas to harm our hobby or benefit themselves as individuals.

For 2013, seeing a united herp community would be at the top of the list. USARK's paramount legal team in Washington will support our legislative concerns but our community needs to be active and strong. The entire reptile world needs to realize that anyone may be affected by outside legislation. If anyone has concerns with USARK, please discuss them with me at shows and hopefully keep negative energy off the internet and forums.

Having attended reptile shows for well over 15 years, I recall actually talking about reptiles and building friendships at shows. I enjoy few things more than listening to respected industry leaders tell stories about "the good old days." Herps are what bring us together and we need to remember this.

Final thought for 2013... I want to see what we can do as a whole and not just what I can do as an individual.

Thanks again, Reptile Times, for doing your part to educate and support the herp community!