

Snake food: dead mouse walking

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Mothers of boys learn early that the rhyme about frogs, snails and puppy-dog tails is not hyperbole. My sons made pets of all those critters and also threw snakes, mice, rats and turtles into the mix. Given a choice, most moms would choose turtles as pets for their kids. They're quiet, clean (give or take a little salmonella) and they can usually be relied on to stay put in their little plastic oasis with the fake palm tree.

Snakes, on the other hand, are scaly escape artists. I'd be a wealthy woman if I had a dollar for every time Ray, Jr. (aka Butch) or Greg asked, "Hey, Mom, have you seen my snake?"

As for mice and rats, Butch treasured the former as pets while Greg utilized the latter as snake food. Butch's first pet mouse was a gift from a school chum, whose Mom shrewdly allowed him to bring his pet mouse's litter to school and dispense them free of charge to willing adoptive classmates. I'm pretty sure every mother of a new mouse owner was as surprised as I to discover a small rodent in her son's backpack.

The real surprise came a few weeks later, however, when Butch's mouse -- guaranteed to be male -- gave birth himself, or rather, herself, to a litter of what appeared to be hairless, eyeless, wiggling pink grubs. Trust me on this: newborn mice are cute ... NOT!

Butch also is the kid who, at age 12, got a summer job feeding 600 mice housed in cages on the top floor of Snow Hall. Shortly after securing the job, he broke his ankle playing football with his dad and brother in our front yard. At the time, Snow Hall had an archaic freight elevator which was out-of-order more often than not. A kid in a cast using crutches cannot reasonably be expected to climb multiple flights of stairs, so can you guess who filled in as mouse feeder? BINGO!

Greg, on the other hand, brought huge white rats into our house, and later into our freezer, to feed Asklepius, his 14-foot pet Burmese python. Husband Ray and I were not only dumb enough to allow him to do that, we were actually dumb enough to BUY the snake for him as a Christmas gift.

Greg's attempt to feed live rats to Asklepius halted when one would-be-snake-sustenance escaped from his cage in the basement and chewed all 30 noses off my late Grandpa Marsh's red fox pelts, remnants of his days as a fur trader. Still, I think Greg might have continued to try live food had he not read that the victim rat could harm the predator snake by scratching it. No such risk, however, with the frozen white rats which resembled gigantic snowballs. In fact, a visiting cousin -- one of very few who would

actually sojourn in a house with a large snake -- checked the freezer for ice cubes, saw the white balls and asked, "Why are you saving these snowballs?"

Told they weren't snowballs, but the big lab rats that Greg fed Asklepius, she FREAKED! Who knew that someone not the least fearful of snakes would have a world-class rat phobia?

While I was admired by some -- and thought an idiot by others -- for sharing our home and fridge with snakes and rats, I never actually TOUCHED the latter. The closest I came to snake food outside the freezer was to walk by the rats as they were thawing out on the Ping-Pong table in the basement while I was doing the laundry.

Daughter-in-law Val should be so lucky. Grandson Gabe possesses two snakes, granddaughter Zoe, one, and Greg, still a self-proclaimed "snake geek," also has one. All four are differently-colored corn snakes, not large enough to require rats. Val's first mistake, I warned her, was taking on the job of feeding pinkie mice to the snakes when they were young. As the reptiles grew, pinkie mice no longer assuaged their hunger, so she began feeding them larger frozen mice.

Then came the day when the supply of frozen mice ran out, the snakes were hungry and she had to resort to buying live white mice. "They were so CUTE in the pet store!" Val lamented. "The clerk boxed them up and all the way home I could hear their little feet skittering around inside the box. I took the box upstairs to Gabe's room and, as I was placing them in Cornelius and Grommit's terrarium, I noticed a sign on the box that warned 'Do not keep your pet in this box for too long.'"

Not to worry. She didn't.