

Teachable Moments

in Gator Country

CAS students on a herpetology mission in Florida

IN THE MIDDLE OF AN INTERVIEW about their spring break trip, biology students Rose Zandvliet and Chris Addis paused in Florida's Bird Rookery Swamp, peering warily at the reflective eyes of an 11-foot-long adult American alligator swimming a few feet away.

They remembered what they had learned in herpetology class: alligators can outrun most of their meals, like turtles and raccoons, and their powerful tails enable them to leap five feet above the water's surface. Still, Zandvliet (CAS'15) and Addis (CAS'14) remained calm, and as the gator lumbered slowly up a bank, they silently motioned to the rest of their class.

Christopher Schneider, a College of Arts & Sciences associate professor of biology, was the first to arrive. Beside him, Karen Warkentin, also a CAS associate professor of biology, urged the 14 students to take care not to approach the animal in a clump, so that if they needed to move quickly, they wouldn't be blocked by other people.

Before this year, herpetology was the one component of vertebrate organismal biology that was missing from the biology department's curriculum. Amphibian expert Warkentin and Schneider, who studies reptiles, worked together to design the course and included a

field component with a high likelihood of spotting animals.

Florida was their first choice. Only a three-hour plane ride away, the state has an impressive diversity of such animals as American crocodiles, chameleons, Florida sand skinks, and oak toads, as well as many unusual birds and insects.

"If you want to understand ecology and animals, it should happen in a natural environment," Warkentin said. "Outside, it's a whole sensory experience—seeing, hearing, smelling, getting bitten by insects, getting wet and muddy. Nothing can compare to seeing an animal in its actual environment."

Home base for the week was Archbold Biological Station, a 5,193-acre nature sanctuary two hours south-east of Tampa with 50 species of reptiles and 23 types of amphibians, as well as a com-

munity of dorms, research labs, and libraries. On the weeklong trip, the class was met by biologists at several sites in the mid-to-south Florida area—all the way down to the Everglades.

The group visited Bird Rookery Swamp, a nature preserve outside Naples. They spotted and measured a cottonmouth—a type of venomous pit viper—lying quietly under a fern, and spent much of the day with eyes peeled for green anole lizards.

By the week's end, the students had seen adult and baby alligators, American crocodiles, Southern black racer snakes, green anoles, banded water snakes, green tree frogs, a gopher tortoise, several species of birds, and manatees.

They also had learned many lessons, chief among them how to see an animal that nature has tried to make invisible—and how to avoid the ones in plain sight. **AL**

WINNIE HSIEH (COM'14) (2)



Southern black racers, which hunt by eyesight during the day, eat insects, lizards, snakes, birds, and rodents.



WEB EXTRA
Watch a video of BU herpetology students spending their spring break in Florida tracking frogs, lizards, alligators, and snakes at bu.edu/bostonia.