

**By Katie Scarvey
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WILMINGTON -- Dean Ripa is standing in front of the green mamba exhibit at his Cape Fear Serpentarium, and I'm trying to picture him as a 4-year-old chasing snakes through the grass and as a 14-year-old hiding snakes from his mom and dad the way some teens hide drug paraphernalia.



At 49, he's got a restless Jim Carrey boyishness about him, but in profile he looks more like the third Stallone brother. He surely melted hearts when he toured with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, crooning such classics as "Strangers in the Night" and "My Way." (A quick visit to the Web site that markets his music, dean.ripa.com, confirms that the guy can sing.)

There's a coiled-up energy about him that seems appropriate, given the creatures that live in his serpentarium. Ripa is pacing a bit and talking about stupid things he's overheard from visitors. There was the guy peering at a snake skeleton on display who asked, "If they're invertebrates, why do they have so many bones?" Then there are the liars, he says, like the man who told his girlfriend as they were looking at the Komodo Dragon -- a monitor lizard that comes from Indonesia -- that he saw lots of them while he was stationed in the Philippines.

Created by Wilmington film set designers, the serpentarium's exhibits provide perfect showcases for such stars as Sheena, the 23-foot 250-pound python.

Posted placards provide fascinating nuggets of information. You may learn, for example, that no other animal kills as many human beings as snakes do, and that the spectacled cobra kills more humans than any other snake -- thousands per year (most of them when they are walking around barefoot at night). And you'll learn that the bite of the king cobra is strong enough to bring down an elephant.

We find ourselves in front of the Gaboon vipers, perhaps the strangest-looking snakes in the place. They're mating, Ripa says, although it's not apparent to me that these particular vipers are any cozier than other snakes that look entwined.

With a velvety brown pattern resembling a moth's wing, the Gaboon viper is notable for being the species of snake that in 1928 sank its fangs into Marlin Perkins (host of "Wild Kingdom") when he was a young man working at the St. Louis Zoo. These vipers are as thick as a man's arm and not much longer, with rostral horns that make them look lizard-like. Looking at them, you get the sense that with another few thousand years of evolution, they might just sprout legs.

A sign at the green mamba exhibit indicates that this is a five-skull snake.

The snakes here are rated by death's heads to explain their degree of lethality to humans. The copperhead, for example, rates only one skull, because full recovery from a copperhead bite is likely.

If you're bitten by a five-skull snake, however, you'd better have your affairs in order. If you're lucky enough to survive, there is a high probability of disfigurement and lasting debilitation.

So imagine my surprise when Ripa takes a key and slides up the glass window of the exhibit so there's nothing but a short expanse of air between him and the five-skull green mamba, and maybe six feet between the snake and my own skin. Trying to be nonchalant, I extend that distance as Ripa sprays a blast of water into the snake's face.

I'm aware that Ripa interacts with these reptiles every day, that he has an intimate knowledge of the habits of many different species of snakes and can reliably predict their behavior. But it's still unnerving to have nothing between you and a green mamba but a self-described risk-taker who's been attacked 11 times by venomous snakes.

Ripa assures me this particular snake is "old and rickety," captured 23 years ago. The spray of water, he says, helps the snake shed her skin. I remind myself that Ripa has done this before and knows how she'll react. I convince myself there is no danger. Still, I'm relieved when the glass goes back in place.

World class

Open since 2002, Ripa's 6,300-foot serpentarium, at 20 Orange Street in downtown Wilmington, is a world class indoor reptile park. Here, nestled among the old homes, shops and restaurants, you'll discover 15 species of vipers, 13 species of cobras, a giant monitor lizard and a Nile crocodile. Ripa spent years traveling the world building his collection, most of which he has either captured himself or bred.

He's recognized as the world authority on the bushmaster, a deadly snake that lives in South and Central America. They're rare, and until they captured Ripa's imagination, scientists didn't know much about them. Ripa has devoted himself to unlocking the mysteries of the bushmaster and was the first to successfully breed them in captivity. He continues to breed them for zoos and research institutions in a back room of the serpentarium.