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## Scaly, slimy creatures do the 'herp walk' on Sarasota County's sensitive lands

They're creepy and they're kooky, mysterious and spooky, and if you want to see the ooky creatures in Sarasota County, sometimes you've just got to set a trap. So says Environmental Specialist Brian Pavlina, who recently planned and conducted the first "herp array" at the Rohlwing parcel in Venice's Sleeping Turtles Preserve.

"Herpetology is the study of reptiles, including snakes, lizards and turtles, as well as their amphibian 'cousins,' like frogs and salamanders," says Pavlina. "A herp array is a scientific method for trapping and identifying reptiles and amphibians so we can gather information about the species living in these habitats."

Pavlina knows that kids love the play area at Red Bug Slough Preserve, and that the trail to Myakka river ends in a perfect picnic spot at the Jelks Preserve. But he acknowledges that another reason for protecting these parcels is to preserve habitat for species that use these sites not for recreation — but for procreation, food and shelter.

"Many of these herps are nocturnal and lead secretive lives under decaying logs and vegetation on the forest floor," said Pavlina. To illustrate just how elusive some of these herps can be, Pavlina pointed to one volunteer biologist who assisted in the first array." This person studied herpetology, and he had never before encountered the pinewoods snake."

Determining which species exist in an area requires digging two 100-foot-long shallow trenches and burying black plastic silt fencing and a funnel made of flexible mesh screen. It all leads to a central box with eight entry portals that is constructed to keep captured herps from injury and provide a rapid and safe method of release.

The traps, which also sometimes nab small rodents and insects, are sheltered and camouflaged with palmetto fronds and supplied with moist sponges to keep captured herps shaded and hydrated.

"As a small, crawling animal makes its way over land at night, it runs into the buried silt fencing, becoming trapped in either the central wooden box or the funnel traps at the ends," Pavlina explains.

Over the course of 11 nights in June, the traps snagged a Florida scarlet snake, a southern ringneck snake, a pine woods snake, southern black racer, a ground skink, a southeastern five-lined skink, one Cuban brown anole, an eastern narrowmouth toad, a southern toad, a greenhouse frog and a Cuban treefrog. Volunteers from Sarasota County Utilities, Resource Protection, Parks and Recreation and Resource Management checked the traps daily, recorded the species and then safely released them.

"The surveys provide us with a basic presence/absence census of the critters in a particular habitat type," says Pavlina. "Half of Florida's snakes live in gopher tortoise burrows. Rain forces them out of the burrows and into our traps, so it's a rare opportunity to see them. The surveys also show when our sites include any exotic species, like the Cuban treefrog, which feed on a vast number of critters, including native frogs. They basically eat anything they can fit into their big mouths."

Although Sarasota County has protected almost 15,000 acres of sensitive lands with voter-approved funding, Pavlina insists there is still so much more to discover. "The information collected by this herp array provides a few more insights into the biodiversity and beauty of these protected lands," he says.

For more information about Sarasota County's natural areas, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000.