Let's join a conversation between *Outdoor*Illinois writer Joe McFarland and herpetologist Scott Ballard regarding the illegal reptile trade.

The Underside of Reptiles

Photos By Scott Ballard

Sale of a turtle with a shell length less than 4 inches for a pet is illegal under a Food and Drug Administration law. In a few instances, children have contracted salmonella after handling small water turtles. Additionally, this species, a river cooter (*Pseudemys concinna*), is state endangered, making it illegal to possess.

In Illinois there are herpetological collectors who'd go to absolutely any length to get their hands on a really neat reptile or amphibian. In their quest for the rare, unusual or venomous critter, some have landed in court, standing against Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Conservation Police working to stem the illegal reptile trade.

Enter Scott Ballard, a herpetologist who has been involved in many of those cases and helps law enforcement by identifying and placing certain reptiles and amphibians, many of which have been confiscated from the illegal trade.

Ballard, a DNR restoration ecologist with expertise in herps, is truly dedicated to protecting the reptiles and amphibians of Illinois. When he's not presenting seminars to educate the public about snakes, turtles, lizards and such, Ballard might be taking care of forbidden reptiles law enforcement agents seized out of someone's trunk or basement—or even a business.

Ballard explains that one of the unfortunate side effects of the popularity of pet reptiles is the fact some folks become rather competitive about claiming ownership of a new species. A few zealous collectors are willing to break the law to obtain a particularly unique species, even grabbing creatures from the wild or trading on the black market.

In an effort to shed a bit of light on this little-known threat to herpetological populations, *Outdoor*Illinois interviewed Ballard on this issue and how interested "herp" fanatics in Illinois might legally pursue their hobby.

OI: Just what is it about reptiles and amphibians people find attractive?

BALLARD: One of the reasons is the fact these creatures can be relatively easy to care for and don't need the constant attention that most dogs and cats do. You don't need to hurry home from

work to prevent an accident on the carpet when you own a pet snake. With proper preparation, you can even leave for a short vacation and not worry about most herps.

OI: How popular is the hobby of herpetology in Illinois?

BALLARD: The popularity has increased during the past several years. It's become so popular, in fact, there are local herpetological societies in Chicago, Peoria, Champaign and St. Louis. These local herp societies provide a good place for people who share this common interest to attend monthly meetings and exchange information about their hobby. Most of these societies also provide a service to the general public by holding annual shows to give people a chance to see these magnificent creatures up close, and—hopefully—get over their fears of amphibians and reptiles. And for those people who change their mind, some of the societies even have adoption services to help place unwanted herp pets into good homes.

Before the federally threatened American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) can be possessed in Illinois, an endangered and threatened species permit must be obtained from the Department of Natural Resources.

OI: So where does one legally acquire a reptile or amphibian? Which ones are illegal to own without a special permit?

BALLARD: There are several laws that govern amphibians and reptiles in Illinois. Currently, it is illegal for a private individual to keep venomous species of reptiles in captivity, regardless of whether "venomoid" surgery has been performed or not. It is illegal to buy, sell, trade or barter any wild-caught Illinois herpetofauna, their offspring, or any of their parts for commercial purposes. The daily catch limit for native Illinois amphibians and reptiles is eight per species, and the total possession limit is 16 per species. It is illegal to collect amphibians and reptiles from public land such as a state park, nature preserve, natural area or national forest without a permit from the appropriate agency. Those species listed as federally or state endangered or threatened may not

Possession of a venomous pet, such as the deadly black mamba (*Dendroaspispolylepis*), is a violation of the Illinois Dangerous Animals Act. No private individual is allowed to keep a venomous pet in Illinois, even if its venom ducts and glands have been surgically removed.

Occurring naturally in Africa, the Gaboon viper (*Bitis gabonica*), is known to possess fangs up to 2 inches in length. Possession of this snake in Illinois is a violation of the Illinois Dangerous Animals Act.

be collected or kept in captivity without a permit from DNR.

OI: What about those exotic reptiles we read about in sensational news stories, where police discover a huge python in someone's apartment?

BALLARD: Although there currently is no specific list as to what is included under the term "life-threatening" reptiles, Illinois courts have considered a two-pronged test be used to make such a determination. First, is there a reasonable possibility that the reptile will attack a human and, second, is that reptile capable of killing a human. If the answer to both is yes, it would fall under the Illinois Dangerous Animals Act and possession would be prohibited. As an example, in Illinois, a 15-foot Burmese python has been declared by the court to be a life-threatening reptile and therefore illegal to possess.

OI: How do I know which species I can legally own? And which ones can legally be bought or sold?

BALLARD: Be careful where you buy. Just because it's for sale on the open market doesn't mean it can be bought or sold legally. There have been cases where even pet stores offered for sale certain reptiles and amphibians which were illegal to sell. Basically, licensees of the Illinois Department of Agriculture (usually pet shops) may not offer for sale or possess any species of crocodilian, any venomous species, or any boa or python 6 feet or larger.

OI: Pets are one matter. But why do people breed and raise their own reptiles and amphibians? And does that affect wild populations?

BALLARD: Herpetoculture is the breeding and raising of amphibians and reptiles. Many species of herps are naturally very colorful and the art of selective breeding by herpetoculturists has produced several color forms and albino morphs that are simply spectacular to view. Along with some of the more colorful and rare forms comes a high price tag in order to acquire them. Many herpetoculturists work hard at producing these creatures, thus taking some pressure off of the desire to collect them in the wild for the pet trade. Captively produced amphibians and reptiles usually do very well in captivity, are better feeders, and lack the parasite load carried by wild-caught stock.

OI: Why, then, do poachers steal herps from the wild?

BALLARD: Because of the sometimes very lucrative business of herpetoculture, there are always those individuals that do not want to spend the time raising captive-bred herps to adults, then take the time to cycle them properly so that they will breed in captivity and produce offspring. There is less overhead to just go out into the wild and collect as many amphibians and reptiles as you can, then sell or trade them to make

A creature of northern Illinois marsh and wetland habitats, Blanding's turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*) has been designated a state-threatened species because of habitat loss and collection of individuals for the pet trade.

This Gila monster (*Heloderma suspectum*) was smuggled from Arizona, where it is a state-protected species, to Illinois in a car door. In addition to violation of the Illinois Dangerous Animals Act, the transporting party violated the federal Lacy Act by moving an illegally obtained species across state lines.

some quick money. Additionally, because of their rarity, seldom-seen specimens that are endangered or threatened bring more money than do common species. Some keepers of snakes, bored from maintaining most of the non-venomous species that are available, look for the excitement of keeping something venomous.

OI: How many law-breakers are out there?

BALLARD: Most people who keep amphibians and reptiles as pets are law-abiding citizens and maintain species that are legal. It needs to be pointed out that those who are arrested in illegal herp cases are a small percentage of the whole herpetoculturist hobby. Private citizens can help DNR by reporting illegal activity to their local Conservation Police Officers. It is important to protect Illinois' amphibian and reptile resources. Many of these species are important links in the food chain, and some are good environmental indicators. Currently, 24 of the state's 102 species of amphibians and reptiles are considered endangered or threatened.

OI: What else is being done to protect this resource?

BALLARD: DNR has created a Reptile Task Force and is looking into changes that can be made to further conserve these resources. The task force is also working with the Illinois Department of Agriculture to revise the Dangerous Animals Act as it pertains to reptiles. These proposed changes will be discussed with the local herpetological societies as the process proceeds, and input will be taken to create a mutually beneficial situation in protecting Illinois' herpetofaunal resources and creating legislation the herp community can live with.

Possession of a black Pakistan cobra (top, *Naja naja*) or a monocled cobra (*Naja kaouthia*) is a violation of the Illinois Dangerous Animals Act. This monocled cobra is an albino, a trait highly sought after in the pet trade. Both species are native to India and surrounding areas.