

## GRWA Returns with Herpetology Class

Sadly for the fans of “Bittersweet” the orange female cornsnake that has been visiting the students at EGMS and youth groups for the past 2 years, Bittersweet managed to up and move out a few months ago, leaving Marcia snakeless until another order came in. Thus on the EGMS’s third Watershed Wednesday for October, the 7<sup>th</sup>-grade Science flex for Mr. Bennett and 6<sup>th</sup>-grade science flex for Mr. Dick welcomed the newcomer, “Persimmon.”

Persimmon is only a few months old, and for now, we’re just accepting the fact that she is female at face value. Her coloration is typical of the native cornsnakes (Red Ratsnake) of the Greenbrier River watershed, and this is useful in demonstrating the differences between the non-venomous cornsnake, and the venomous copperhead. The two are often confused for each other, with the first reaction being to kill first, examine later.



Cornsnakes were so named for their belly scales, or *scutes*, that look exactly like the kernels of an ear of Indian corn. They have large, round eyes, as opposed to the slit-pupiled, catlike eyes of a venomous snake. They are also nocturnal, preferring to come out at night, and have narrow, slim bodies designed for climbing instead of the squatter, thicker bodies of the copperhead; cornsnakes are *aerial constrictors*. Their internal organs are aligned along an anti-gravity system, with the heart positioned closer to the brain to keep it from passing out whenever it climbs a tree!

It is Marcia’s opinion that if one wants a snake for a pet, the logical choice is to get one suited for the climate of your area, which makes it less expensive to take care of. It doesn’t make much sense to purchase an exotic, imported species of boa constrictor when there are native constrictors, the cornsnake and the blacksnake, within one’s area. Cornsnakes are available in stores; they are small, and when fully grown eat 1-2 mice a week. They do not require year-long heat rocks and other treatments of tropical species, nor do they completely hibernate in the winter; they merely stop eating. It also makes sense to ‘buy local’ as the nearest pet store should be well educated and willing to speak to customers about the special needs of pets. A pet in “the big city” in a franchise may seem cheaper, but there’s less time to choose carefully, and harder to maintain a good relationship with the store. Persimmon was purchased from Susan’s World of Pets in Fairlea, which has an excellent reputation in both educating the community, and in working with youth volunteers in service-learning.

Cornsnakes fulfill an important role in the watershed’s ecology. As rodent control they are excellent; the young snakes also devour insects such as grasshoppers that could harm crops. Many are so meek in captivity that they need a *refugium*, or a place to hide, and prefer to eat pre-killed prey. These factors make a cornsnake hard to see, and a sight worth mentioning while on the Greenbrier River Trail!