SPRING HERP COUNTS:
A KANSAS TRADITION

by John Rakestraw

Worldwide declines in the populations of many species of amphibians ... the continued destruction of habitat ... increasing pressures from the commercial pet trade. In response to such common headlines today, many naturalists are concerned about the status of reptiles and amphibians in the wild. But despite the front-page publicity, there is relatively little hard data on herp population trends. Interestingly, it is the amateur hobbyist, rather than the professional herpetologist, who is in the best position to remedy this situation.

Since 1989, members of the Kansas Herpetological Society have gone into the field during April and May to conduct censuses of the state’s herpetofauna. An individual or group surveys an area, spending anywhere from one hour to an entire weekend, and records all the reptiles and amphibians seen or heard. In 1989, four counts yielded 448 specimens of 36 species. By 1994, the numbers had climbed to 2,572 specimens of 68 species, and in 1995 they logged 2,119 specimens of 49 species.

The Kansas Herp Counts are the brainchild of Joseph T. Collins, co-author of A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians/Eastern and Central North America in the Peterson Field Guide Series. Collins began the program for two reasons, the first of which was simply to collect data on Kansas reptiles and amphibians. The Kansas Herp Counts are modeled after the Audubon Society’s an-
nual Christmas Bird Count; the information collected over the many years by Audubon counts has proven invaluable for detecting trends in bird populations and distribution patterns. It was Collins’ hope that similar benefits could be gained from annual herp counts.

The second reason for conducting the survey was to increase public awareness of the state’s herpetofauna. Collins says the counts “get people involved without forcing a great deal of science on them.” Members of the general public—especially young people—are encouraged to take part in the fun. Collins believes that when people get some hands-on experience with herps, it helps to alleviate the prejudices that many still have against these creatures.

“An herp count teaches a different kind of conservation ethic to younger herpers.” Participants find the animals, may handle them, and then release them, rather than taking them home as pets. Collins adds, “Who wants 700 Ringneck Snakes as pets?”

The process of compiling the data is relatively simple. Eric Rundquist, the editor of the Kansas Herpetological Society Newsletter, is currently in charge of compiling the Kansas Herp Counts. Totals are sent to Rundquist and published in the society’s newsletter. Raw data is not saved since it is promptly published, but if the growing number of counts exceeds the capacity of the newsletter, it may become necessary to establish a separate archive. In the published accounts, to protect certain species from commercial pet dealers and rattlesnake hunters, Rundquist occasionally withholds the exact location of some counts.

To facilitate the process, the Kansas Herpetological Society published a checklist of the state’s reptiles and amphibians. The checklist (reproduced on pages 78–78) provides a convenient form for reporting individual count results and promotes the consistent use of common and scientific names of each species.

Besides field studies, road counts are also encouraged, especially for those who do not have the time or ability to spend the day wading through marshes or overturning rocks. “Night cruising” on country roads...

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is probably the most efficient way to locate and count chorusing frogs and toads. Road-killed specimens are included in the totals, but are usually designated as DOR (Dead On Road). The organizers hope that count participants will establish specific areas that will be monitored on a yearly basis. It is through the repeated surveying of the same areas that population trends become apparent. State parks, national wildlife refuges, and other public access areas are logical areas in which to establish annual counts.

STARTING A HERP COUNT

Any individual or group can conduct a herp count—it does not require a graduate degree in herpetology to look under a rock! You need one person within the group who can verify the identification of specimens found. The observations of the beginner are as valuable as those of the veteran herper.

Larry Miller, a Topeka science teacher takes his classes on extended field trips every year to participate in the herp counts. In fact, one of these school field trips in 1994 established a new maximum length record for the Southern Prairie Skink (Euneces
Please carefully record the total number of each species observed or collected.

### SALAMANDERS
- Smallmouth Salamander
- Tiger Salamander
- Eastern Newt
- Longtail Salamander
- Cave Salamander
- Many-ribbed Salamander
- Grotto Salamander
- Red River Mudpuppy
- Mudpuppy

### FROGS & TOADS
- Plains Spadefoot
- American Toad
- Great Plains Toad
- Green Toad
- Red-spotted Toad
- Woodhouse's Toad
- Northern Cricket Frog
- Spotted Chorus Frog
- Spring Peeper
- Strecker's Chorus Frog
- Boreal Chorus Frog
- Western Chorus Frog
- Eastern Gray Treefrog
- Cope's Gray Treefrog
- Crawfish Frog
- Plains Leopard Frog
- Bullfrog
- Green Frog
- Pickerel Frog
- Southern Leopard Frog
- Eastern Narrowmouth Toad
- Plains Narrowmouth Toad

### TURTLES
- Common Snapping Turtle
- Alligator Snapping Turtle
- Common Musk Turtle
- Yellow Mud Turtle
- Eastern Box Turtle
- Ornate Box Turtle
- Common Map Turtle
- Ouachita Map Turtle
- False Map Turtle
- River Cooter
- Painted Turtle
- Smooth Softshell
- Spiny Softshell

### LIZARDS
- Collared Lizard
- Lesser Earless Lizard

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KANSAS HERPETOLOGICAL SOCIETY AP

Locality: ________________________ 
Date: ____________ Time: From _____ To ___ _
Observers: ________________________ _

Please carefully record the total number of each species observed or collected.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal Name</th>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prairie Lizard</td>
<td>Sceloporus undulatus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Texas Horned Lizard</td>
<td>Phrynosoma cornutum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground Skink</td>
<td>Scincella lateralis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coal Skink</td>
<td>Eumeces anthracinus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Five-lined Skink</td>
<td>Eumeces fasciatus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Broadhead Skink</td>
<td>Eumeces laticeps</td>
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<td>Great Plains Skink</td>
<td>Eumeces obsoletus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Prairie Skink</td>
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<td>Eumeces septentrionalis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Six-lined Racerunner</td>
<td>Cnemidophorus sexlineatus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Slender Glass Lizard</td>
<td>Ophisaurus attenuatus</td>
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**Snakes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal Name</th>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Texas Blind Snake</td>
<td>Leptotyphlops dulcis</td>
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<td>Western Hognose Snake</td>
<td>Heterodon nasicus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern Hognose Snake</td>
<td>Heterodon platirhinos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Worm Snake</td>
<td>Carphophis vermis</td>
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<td>Ringneck Snake</td>
<td>Diadophis punctatus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flathead Snake</td>
<td>Tantilla gracilis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plains Blackhead Snake</td>
<td>Tantilla nigriceps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Night Snake</td>
<td>Hypsiglena torquata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rough Green Snake</td>
<td>Ophedrys aestivus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racer</td>
<td>Coluber constrictor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coachwhip</td>
<td>Masticophis flagellus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Great Plains Rat Snake</td>
<td>Elaphe emoryi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Rat Snake</td>
<td>Elaphe obsoleta</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glossy Snake</td>
<td>Arizona elegans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gopher Snake</td>
<td>Pituophis catenifer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prairie Kingsnake</td>
<td>Lampropeltis calligator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common Kingsnake</td>
<td>Lampropeltis getula</td>
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<td>Milk Snake</td>
<td>Lampropeltis triangulum</td>
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<td>Longnose Snake</td>
<td>Rhinechelus lecontei</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ground Snake</td>
<td>Sonora semiannulata</td>
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<td>Checkered Garter Snake</td>
<td>Thamnophis marcius</td>
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<td>Western Ribbon Snake</td>
<td>Thamnophis proximus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plains Garter Snake</td>
<td>Thamnophis radix</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common Garter Snake</td>
<td>Thamnophis sirtalis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lined Snake</td>
<td>Tropidoclonion lineatum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rough Earth Snake</td>
<td>Virginia striatula</td>
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<td>Redbelly Snake</td>
<td>Storeria occipitomaculata</td>
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<td>Regina grahamii</td>
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<td>Nerodia rhombifer</td>
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<td>Agkistrodon piscivorus</td>
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<td>Sistrurus catenatus</td>
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<td>Crotalus horridus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Rattlesnake</td>
<td>Crotalus viridis</td>
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</table>

This list is based on the common and scientific names that appear in the third edition of Amphibians and Reptiles in Kansas (Collins, 1993), with modifications from information published since that date. Compiled for the Kansas Herpetological Society by Joseph T. Collins. December, 1995. At the completion of your count, please have this list verified and send it to: Kansas Herpetological Society, Museum of Natural History, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045

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obtusirostris).

In addition to school groups, any outdoor-oriented organization can be recruited to help with a census. The local Audubon chapter, wildflower enthusiasts, garden clubs, and sportsmen’s clubs all can be tapped for volunteers. This also provides an excellent opportunity to educate the members of these groups about local herps. Organized counts should be covered by the local media, which further increases the opportunities to educate the public.

Collins offers four bits of advice to those who are interested in establishing a herp count. First, there must be a place to publish the results. The information is of little use if it is not readily available.

Second, determine a time frame. Kansas surveys are conducted between April 1 and May 31. This period allows the counting of chorusing amphibians and precedes the hot weather that drives many reptiles into hiding. The most productive time for herp counts varies with different geographic areas.

Third, Collins emphasizes it is important to publish the name of everyone who takes part in the program. One of the main goals of the counts is to nurture public interest in reptiles and amphibians. Publishing a list of participants is an easy way to recognize and encourage those individuals who take an interest in herps.

The last recommendation Collins offers is to keep the counts from getting too scientific. The more technical it gets, the less the public will be interested. It doesn’t really matter what direction the wind is blowing. If the species, number, and general location are recorded, that is sufficient information for the census.

Collins hopes that annual herp counts will eventually be conducted across the country, with a national herpetological or conservation organization compiling the data. This would greatly improve our knowledge of species distribution patterns, and would enable us to detect fluctuations in herp numbers. It also provides an excellent excuse to spend the day herping!

This is John Rakestraw’s first article for Reptile & Amphibian Magazine.