

When Dr. Allison Sacerdote-Velat goes to work, she has some unusual office mates: baby snakes! Dr. S is a scientist at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum in Chicago. She is raising the little snakes, called smooth green snakes, until they are a year old. Then she will release them back into the wild.



Dr. Allison Sacerdote-Velat

Saving Smooth

by Maria Hlohowskyj



Adult smooth green snakes are bright emerald green. Babies like this one are greenish-brown.

Smooth green snakes need help because their homes are disappearing, especially in Illinois, where Dr. S lives. Long ago, Illinois was mostly prairie grassland. Over the years, people dug up prairies to make room for houses and farms. Today, there are not many prairies left in Illinois. Smooth green snakes and other animals that depend on prairies to live and find food are becoming more rare.

So Dr. S and others are working to keep Illinois prairies safe and healthy. The smooth green snakes help too. They eat bugs that damage and eat the prairie plants. They're also food for hawks and falcons and other prairie birds. "If you want a beautiful prairie," says Dr. S, "you need snakes."



Dr. S sometimes keeps adult smooth green snakes in her office to study them. She named this one Harriet.

Green Snakes



The baby snakes in Dr. S's office like to pile up on one another or try to climb the sides of their tank. "They're very silly," says Dr. S.

But Dr. S doesn't just love smooth green snakes because they're an important part of the prairie. "They're really cute!" she says. She loves their bright green color, big eyes, and the way they waggle their heads back and forth when they hunt.

Smooth green snakes don't bite or hurt people. As you probably guessed, their skin feels nice and smooth.



Scientists don't know how many smooth green snakes are left in Illinois. Dr. S wants to find out. So she and her team count snakes in the prairie in summer. Adult smooth green snakes are not easy to spot. They're skinny and fast and blend in with the prairie plants.

But Dr. S has a good way of finding them. She puts a board on the ground and checks it every few days. Snakes love to lie on top of the board to bask in the warm sun, or hide underneath it when they get hot. Sometimes they even lay their eggs under the board!



Dr. S checks 60 different sites in Illinois for smooth green snakes. So far, she's found them in only 15 places.



Smooth green snakes share nests. One nest might have 40 eggs from three or four different moms.

Dr. S loves watching the smooth green snake babies hatch. At first, they're only a few inches long and as light as a cotton ball. As they grow, Dr. S weighs and measures them. She also works hard to make sure the snakes are ready for grown-up life in the wild. She feeds them crickets, caterpillars, and worms, the same food they'd eat in the prairie. She trains them for prairie winters by lowering the temperature in her office and giving them dirt and moss to rest and burrow in, just like wild snakes need to do to stay warm.

In the wild, many snake eggs never hatch. They get eaten or damaged by bad weather. So when Dr. S and her team find a nest, they count the soft, leathery, oval-shaped eggs. They leave half the eggs alone, but they carefully take the rest to hatch in safe places like Dr. S's office.



Baby snakes do not live with their parents. They have to take care of themselves.

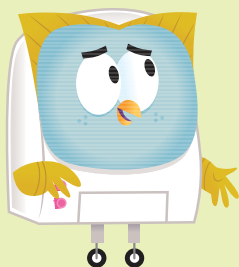


When the baby snakes are a year old, Dr. S and her team move them to a pen in the middle of the prairie so they can get used to being outside. After two weeks, the snakes are ready to leave the pen and live on their own.



Dr. S measures and marks each snake before she lets it go. She hopes she'll find one she marked again next year.

Dr. S started raising smooth green snakes in 2010. The first few years, she did not find many eggs to hatch. But last year she raised nearly 80 baby snakes.





It's hard to say goodbye to her office mates, but Dr. S doesn't get too sad. Returning the snakes to the prairie helps the number of wild snakes grow, which helps Illinois prairies stay healthy. Both make Dr. S very happy. But what would make her happiest of all? "When the snakes no longer need our help."



Why work so hard to help snakes? Dr. S says the plants and animals in a prairie are like blocks in a tower. "You can maybe take some blocks away and it will still stand. But maybe the green snake block is the one that you take away and it crumbles."

