Focus Wild Arizona

Key Words:

Abscess: an injury or infection that fills with pus

Lethargic: inactive, without energy

Mundane: something that is normal, routine or ordinary

Native: an animal or plant that always has been in an area

Do you like animals and hope to work with them in the future as a veterinarian? If so, you may consider becoming a wildlife veterinarian. The veterinarians with whom you may be familiar tend to deal with pets, such as dogs and cats. Wildlife veterinarians, on the other hand, focus on wild animals.

As a wildlife veterinarian, you have to be prepared for everything. Some problems, such as broken legs or wings, will be common. But every now and then, you get a surprise. Our veterinarians in Arizona deal with eagles, mountain lions, pelicans and alligators. Yes, alligators! Even though they are not **native** to Arizona, people brought them in. No matter what it is, a wildlife veterinarian is expected to know how to treat it.

Sometimes, however, even the **mundane** animals can present an exciting challenge. Recently, we had an interesting case. It was a common animal with a not-so-common problem. Our vets had to use creativity and problem-solving skills to help the animal.

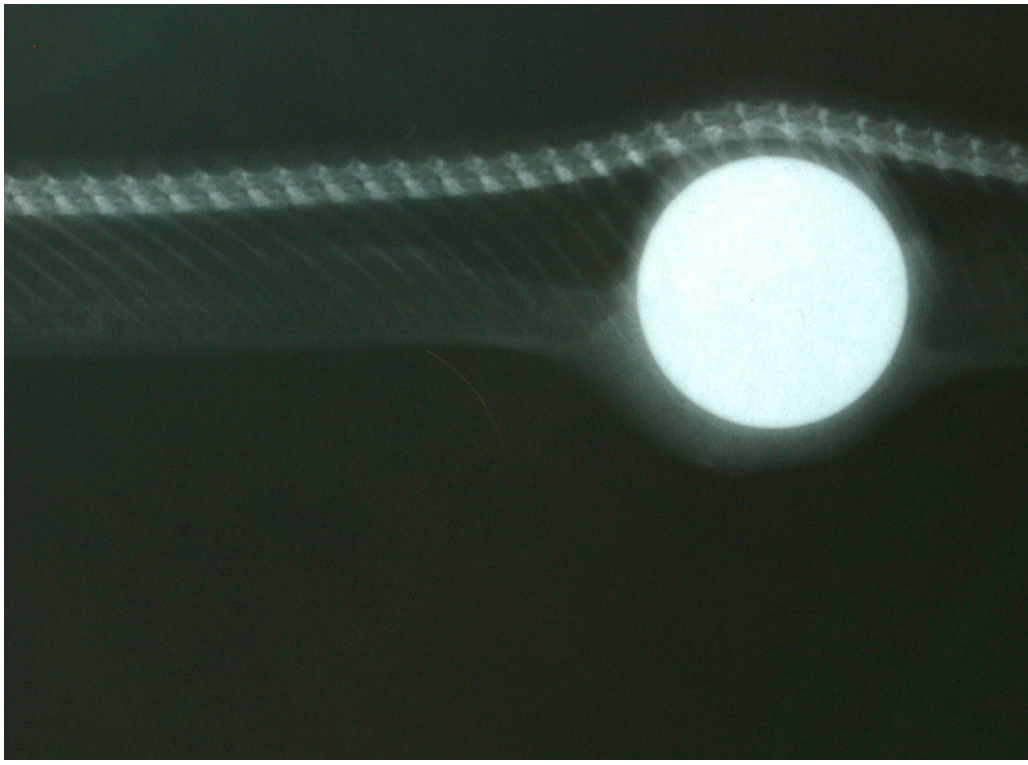
Do the Science:

Let's see if you have what it takes to be a wildlife veterinarian. Read the scenario below and try to figure out what is wrong with the animal. Please note: This scenario has been modified slightly but is based on real events.

The groundskeeper at a local sports and recreation center was trimming the trees one summer morning when he discovered something unusual. At his feet was a gopher snake, but that's not what was unusual. The snake didn't look quite look right: It had a large, round lump halfway down its body.

He called authorities, who picked up the snake and brought it to the animal hospital. Let's say you are the veterinarian on duty. Upon closer inspection of the snake, you observe an **abscess** along its belly, right next to the large lump. You also notice that the snake appears weak and **lethargic**, and has no interest in eating food. However, it is aggressive and extremely difficult to handle. It tries to bite you when you put your hand near it.

Eventually, you get the snake restrained and do an X-ray to figure out what might be causing the lump. The X-ray reveals the following:



By Eric Proctor

What do you think is wrong with the gopher snake? What evidence led to that conclusion?

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Did you guess the snake had swallowed a golf ball? That's right. The snake could not digest the golf ball. The veterinarian had to surgically remove the ball. The snake is still alive today! It is likely this snake would not have survived if it had remained in the wild.

So why do you think a gopher snake would eat a golf ball?

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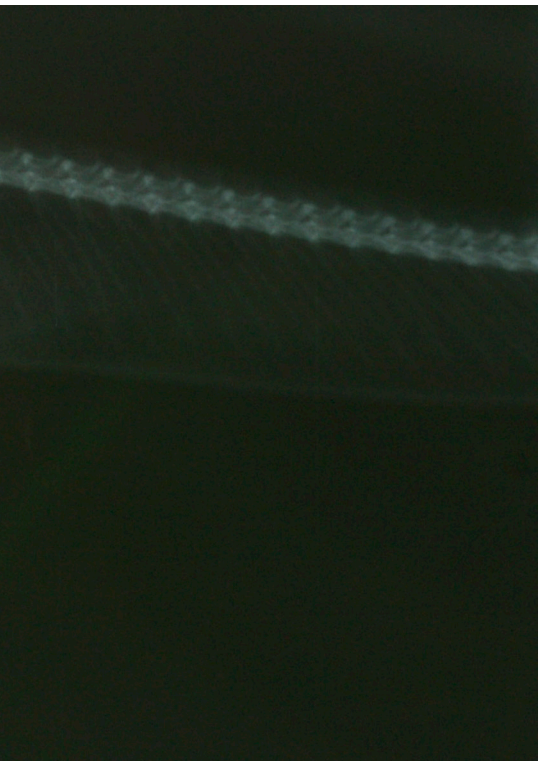

Courtesy of Eric Proctor

There are many possible answers. Our biologists have two ideas.

First, the snake might have thought the golf ball was an egg. In the wild, gopher snakes often eat small mammals, rabbits and lizards, but they also will eat the eggs of quail and other ground-nesting birds.

Second, the snake might have thought the ball was a mouse or other small rodent. Gopher snakes don't always use their eyes to hunt: They often rely on their tongues. You've probably seen the forked tongue of a snake flick quickly in and out of its mouth. When it does this, the snake is trying to "smell" the air. Snakes (along with cats and some other animals) have a special organ inside their mouth called the "Jacobson's organ." When the snake sticks out its tongue, it picks up tiny particles floating in the air. Then, the snake touches its tongue to this organ, and "smells" what the tongue caught. If the ball had rolled into or near a mouse hole, it may have picked up the scent of the mouse. The snake might not have even looked at the ball before trying to eat it.

Congratulations. You have just helped your first wildlife patient. What other surprises will you find as a wildlife veterinarian?

▪ This feature is part of the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Focus Wild Arizona program, a free educational program for teachers, parents, students or anyone interested in learning about wildlife and habitat. Visit our Web site, www.azgfd.gov/focuswild, to find exciting lessons and resources.