

How can I become a herpetologist? By Dr. J. Whitfield Gibbons, Savannah River Ecology Laboratory.

Your question or similar ones are asked often, so what I will do is give you a consolidation of some recent replies that give you some Web sites and other information.

The steps of getting a degree for people who like herpetology involves majoring in college in biology, ecology, or some larger field and then specializing in reptiles and/or amphibians. However, lots of people who have other careers become really good herpetologists by reading, getting together with other people interested in herpetology (such as a local, regional, or state Herp Society), and having experiences with herps in the field or as pets.

College requirements in the field of herpetology are a strong background in ecology and zoology with the usual additional courses in genetics, mathematics, wildlife ecology, and other special areas that are of interest. Most herpetologists get degrees in zoology or biology but specialize in reptiles and amphibians in some way. Whatever field you go into, making good grades in high school and college are always a good idea. In looking at the academic background of a variety of individuals who would be considered to be the best herpetologists today, some have obtained their undergraduate degrees from small colleges, some from state universities, and some from elite universities. Most people presumably attend a particular college because of location and financial considerations. So, I think if you pick a standard accredited college that meets your financial needs for undergraduate study you will be doing well. A more specific choice of colleges is important for graduate school where you will want to focus on a particular topic and be certain that a professor is available to serve as a mentor in your area of interest.

Many people ask about the pay scale. Herpetology is like any other profession, with salaries ranging from minimum wage to more reasonable ones for positions that require more training or professional degrees. Many herpetologists (including me) started first as a volunteer at a zoo or helping someone do research.

I suggest you go to the Davidson College Herpetology Website (www.bio.davidson.edu/dorcas) and the SREL herpetology Web site (www.uga.edu/srelherp/) to get some ideas about what herpetologists do and see some of the information available. Some of the essays may provide more details for you. You should also join PARC (Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Herpetology) at www.parcplace.org as this will introduce you to other herpetologists who may have similar interests to your own - whit gibbons