

Idaho Snake House

It was a story to gladden the heart of an editor or blogger facing a slow news day: The nice-looking little house had been marked down from \$175,000 to \$109,200 because it was infested with ... snakes. Adding to the fun was the fact that the Rexburg, Idaho, home was located in the Snake River Valley.

But the former owners weren't laughing. They, like the owners before them, opted to stop paying their mortgage and move out rather than live among snakes — even if they were just nonpoisonous garter snakes.

"It's really hard to rest assured at night, to not think that you've got a snake in your bed," the next-to-last owner told a local TV news reporter. There are also suggestions that at least one real estate person may have spoken with a forked tongue: In January of this year, outgoing homeowner Ben Sessions told the Rexburg *Standard Journal*

that before purchasing the house, he and his wife had been told that the prior owners "didn't want to pay their mortgage, so they made up a snake story."

Largely overlooked in this media squirmfest is the plight of the snakes themselves. According to Lawrence, Kan., herpetologist and environmental consultant Joseph T. Collins, who has written several popular field guides to North American reptiles and amphibians, it's the snakes, not the homeowners, who should be complaining. He says the Rexburg house may have been built on or near a communal winter den site — or "brumaculum" — that had been in use by area snakes for many years. Or, he says, the snakes may have opportunistically colonized the house because it is conveniently located and provides suitable cold-weather quarters.

"They have to den below the frost line for the winter or they'll die," he says. "If you build a house near an existing den, they'll go through the house to get to the den." During their spring and fall migrations to and from their den sites, he explains, garter snakes leave a scent trail that enables them to reliably find their way back to the site year after year.

Human-snake conflicts like the one in Rexburg are not especially rare, notes Idaho State University herpetologist Charles Peterson, though the numbers are often exaggerated. "I remember a house up by Aberdeen that had maybe a hundred snakes in the basement, but the homeowner was pretty excited," he says. "She thought it was a lot more." In the Rexburg case, the *Standard Journal* reported that a home inspector hired by the bank concluded that "multiple thousands" of snakes were present.

Regardless, Chase Bank — which now owns the house — still hopes to find the right buyer. Spokesperson Darcy Wilmot says the bank has been diligent about briefing potential buyers on the snake situation. "We did an inspection in December and didn't find any snakes," she says hopefully. (At that point, of course, any snakes in the area would have been sleeping safely underground.) "We're going to look again in the spring," she adds.

If past history is any guide, they may not have to look very hard. — *Jon Vara*



The tendency of garter snakes to spend the winter in large communal dens (left) has proven problematic for the bank that owns this pleasant-looking Idaho home (above) — and downright unnerving for its last two owners.