

Dave's cricket farm

When Elizabeth and Patrick had reached an age where they were easy to travel with I began taking them to my mother's house in North Miami Florida for my annual vacation. In a few years Catherine began traveling with us. God knows there was plenty to do; lots of cleaning (my Mother was a pig), trees to trim, home repairs, and on and on. We all bored easily with the work. A day here and there at the beach was fun but my Mother's emphysema always made the beach visits far too short. We also would visit the Everglades, my most favorite place in the world. We'd just leave my mother at home and go have fun fishing and aggravating alligators.

Trying to be a good Dad and keep the children from being bored to tears at night I devised an activity that I even liked- we would catch lizards. I began making cages using my Mom's band saw.

Florida had changed tremendously from when I was growing up. Now exotic species of snakes and reptiles were everywhere; cobras, pythons, parrots, and lizards. All kinds of animals had escaped during hurricanes. The huge Crandon Park Zoo disappeared when hurricane Andrew hit and all the animals were either killed or escaped. Whole communities were leveled and whatever pets had escaped and gone wild.

In my Mother's backyard during the day was the best time to catch large Cuban Anoles. This species, not native to Florida, grows easily to three feet and they have a nasty bite. I would use a ladder and a noose to grab the big ones.



Cuban Anole (unhappy)



Cuban Anole (happy)

Night time was the best time for all the other smaller exotic lizards, six inches would be large. The children, armed with flashlights, would comb the bushes and call for me when a lizard was spotted. These little guys were fast, usually too fast to just grab. However, if I used the flash unit from my 35MM camera I could blind them for just an instant and make the catch.

We would return to North Carolina with a van full of lizards. Local pet stores would buy what they thought they could sell in a reasonable time leaving me to care for the remaining creatures until refills were needed. The lizards in my care even laid eggs which would quickly hatch. So, I had a problem finding enough food for a hundred or so lizards especially the newly hatched babies. Mosquito traps worked okay but I couldn't always catch enough for the babies. The older lizards preferred crickets. For awhile I was buying crickets from bait stores but then began ordering from a cricket farm in Atlanta Georgia to assure a supply of baby crickets.

Buying crickets was eating up all the potential profits. So there I sat drinking a beer and wondering what to do when I got this brilliant idea- I'll raise my own crickets!! A quick Google search led me to many useful sites with detailed instructions. It really seemed easy. Go to the bait store and buy several containers of crickets, turn them loose in a large cardboard box. Provide a light/heat source, food, water, and a container of dirt where the eggs could be laid. No, you don't have to match up males and females- just turn them loose and they will figure out what to do.

Preparing the cardboard box was the hardest part. Crickets can jump and they can climb. The boxes had to be tall enough so they couldn't jump out and the inside corners and top edges had to be lined with clear shipping tape- they couldn't climb out on the slick tape.

The eggs began to hatch a few weeks after the first container of egg laying dirt was removed, I really felt like a proud father. Within a few more weeks the baby crickets were old enough to feed to the baby lizards but all were quickly eaten.

As time went by I had over thirty cardboard boxes of crickets and the work was getting hard and my basement was getting full of boxes but I had a supply of incubating eggs and crickets of all sizes- all in different boxes. Watering and feeding was easy except for the bending over part.

So there I sat drinking a beer and contemplating how to improve the situation. I ended up buying sheets of Styrofoam insulation for use in high humidity. One side of the four by eight foot sheet was covered in an ultra thin layer of solid aluminum while the other side was perforated aluminum for ventilation. The solid side was perfect for the inside of a cricket box. It didn't take long to fill the basement with the newly designed boxes and each was raised up on saw horses to make care easier without bending over to the floor.

What is it with women?? My wife complained constantly. She explained how she keeps a clean house so that there were no bugs but her idiot husband was raising thousands in the basement! Women just don't like bugs in their homes! I tried to explain that I was a reptile breeder. She countered with "No, you are a damn cricket farmer!" Then she asked if I knew a divorce lawyer. Apparently the cricket thing was just another event on her long list of reasons to divorce me.

I could just see myself in front of a judge- "Mr. Daly were you raising thousands of crickets in your basement?"

"Yes"

"Did you catch a copperhead and toss it into the canoe?"

"Yes"

"Did you?... and did you?... and did you?"

"Yes, yes, and yes..."

"How many snakes got loose in your house and were never found?"

No, divorce court would go well for me.

After a few beers I realized she was right. I now had far more bugs than I needed but didn't know what to do with the excess. And my damn neighbors would catch a cricket in their yard or house and bring it to me claiming one of mine had escaped. Even the neighbors didn't like my farming activities.

Then the idea struck. The pet stores were buying crickets directly from me to feed the reptiles in the stores but where were the customers buying crickets?? I began making plywood cricket bins and putting them into pet stores at no cost to them until the first batch was sold. The stores would call saying they were running low and I'd resupply charging only for what had been sold. It was a win win situation. My pet store cricket business soon covered a three county area but made little profit although it did get rid of crickets.

Winter began to set in and the basement was cold. Each bin had a light/heat source overhead so I lowered the lights to just under the top edge of each bin. It is true, there is an idiot born every minute. I thought my Styrofoam bins were the work of a genius. Too bad I used a hot glue gun to fabricate the bins.

The answer of how to get rid of the crickets came to me, running to me. My son ran up to me and asked if God was mad at us. I said I thought we got along pretty well with God. Then he said "Then why is there a Biblical Plague in the basement?"

I opened the basement door and looked down the stairs- I saw crickets everywhere; my heart sank. It looked as if God had sent a giant swarm of locusts. The floor and walls were covered; just crickets everywhere. My wife looked over my shoulder and calmly said "Don't forget the divorce lawyer." "The children and I will be living at Mother's until you get this mess straightened out." As she left she muttered my full name, you know- "GodDamnYou DaveDaly". She can make it sound just like two words.

Yes, the lights/heat sources had melted the hot glue and the cricket bins simply fell apart. The aluminum conducted the heat right into the glued joints. I turned off all the pilot lights in the basement and went to the grocery store. As I got up to my favorite cashier he said "Looks like you are in trouble again." My look invited more information from him.

"Hmm" he said. "Crickets are crawling out of your clothing and you have three cases of bug bombs, sumpt'ns up." "Looking for a place to stay again?" And then he just laughed-screw him.

I tossed bug bombs as if they were hand grenades. Eventually I was able to stand the cans upright and set them off correctly. The cleanup was difficult. All the Styrofoam pieces and bin trash- water bowls, feed bowls, bedding, egg laying dirt, all went out front to the trash pile. The dead bodies of all my friends were swept up and eventually filled two thirty gallon trash cans- one hell of a lot of dead crickets.

This was not the way I wanted to end my "farming" activities but at least the end came quickly even though painful. I miss my little friends and all the noise they made. Too bad

the bug bombs also killed my reptiles. I hadn't even thought about them in my panic to stem the tide of the Plague.

So there I sat drinking a beer. My wife walked up behind me and slapped the back of my head and said "Don't even think about it!" How did she know I was creating my next adventure??

So what did I learn from this experience? Well, I can't tell the difference between Bud and Bud Light. And divorce lawyers are expensive.