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northeastern Australia.

Gripping a tree branch with a coil of its body, a hungry green tree python (*Morelia viridis*) hangs in a tight S-curve waiting for a rodent to scurry along the ground. The snake's heat-sensing pits give it a three-dimensional infrared image, complete with heat gradients, of mammalian activity on the forest floor, allowing it to zero in on prey in complete darkness. Still hanging from the tree, the snake can strike, constrict and suffocate its prey, then swallow it headfirst and whole.

At Shedd, aquarist Alice Bereman feeds the sisters every two weeks, giving each snake two items from a diet that includes adult mice, quail and rat pups, plus a "fuzzy" mouse for dessert. (The commercially raised feeder animals arrive at Shedd frozen. They're thawed and warmed under a heat lamp before being served from the end of tongs.)

Young green tree pythons are neither green nor especially arboreal. These lime-colored snakes with the blue, white and yellow confetti markings started life (at the Milwaukee County Zoo) lemon yellow with red spots. Hatchlings can also be brick red. The earthier colors camouflage them as they spend their days hunting lizards and small invertebrates in the trees or near the ground. When the snakes are big enough to swallow rodents, and take to the canopy, they undergo what has been called the most amazing color transformation from juvenile to adult in the animal kingdom.

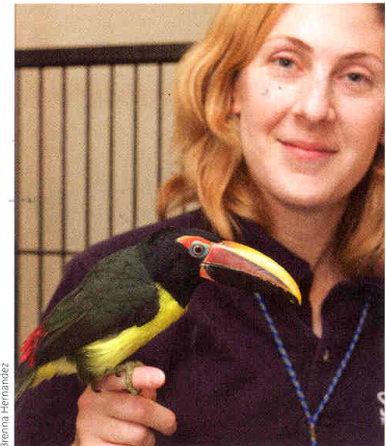
"They normally sleep in trees during the day," Alice said, and draped around a branch, "they look like a bunch of unripe bananas, blending with the foliage." Viewed from below, the pythons' broad white belly scales, which turn a delicate pale blue where they meet the fine, flat green upper scales, look like sunlight and

sky through leaves. "They are some of the most amazingly colorful of all the snakes," Alice said.

(You can decide for yourself by comparing the pythons with the emerald tree boa on display in Amazon Rising. While both species are in the family Boidae, the New World boa is only remotely related to the Old World pythons. But they present guests with a beautiful example of convergent evolution, in which snakes half a world away adapted nearly identical strategies for survival in a rain forest canopy.)

Speaking of identical, to the untrained eye, the python sisters are indistinguishable. Alice, whose duties include husbandry for all the birds, reptiles, marine fishes and invertebrates in public programs as well as staff training for animal handling, pointed out that Jasmine has a smattering of white scales on her head while Ivy's crown is solid green.

Shedd offers nine Animal Encounters daily. You'll find a schedule at the information desk in the aquarium's main foyer. The Animal Encounters program is made possible in part by a generous grant from the Elizabeth Morse Genius Charitable Trust.



Breanna Hernandez