

Errant snake caught

21 Jul 2009 — Bucks County Courier Times

Middletown

At first, residents told police the snake was an 8-foot-long python.

The next sighting had it at 10 to 12 feet.

Soon enough, a 24-foot-long anaconda was allegedly slithering across the manicured lawns of Middletown's Snowball Gate section.

Or maybe not.

On Monday, Middletown police - with the help of a couple animal catchers - pulled a 5-foot-long black rat snake from a maple tree on the 200 block of Snowball Drive.

Police believe this snake is the one that has terrorized - or at least startled - some folks during the past two weeks, said acting Lt. Ken Mellus. The snake appears to be the same one that was recently photographed with a resident's cell phone.

A letter carrier spotted the snake Monday afternoon. Police officers fired balls of talcum powder through a paintball gun to get the snake to come down from the tree. Then, two men who often take care of reptiles for the township in situations like these - Jeff Atkins and Ray Blalock - grabbed the snake.

The reptile, which was reportedly healthy, was then handed off to "Jungle" Joe Fortunato, who runs the Bucks County Zoo in Warwick.

Black rat snakes are indigenous to much of the eastern United States. They're not venomous and can't do any real harm to humans. They eat mainly rodents and they do climb trees, usually to eat birds' eggs, according to the National Zoo's Web site.

Despite the sightings of a python in Snowball Gate, police there hadn't been any reports of a missing python in the area. Mellus said the snake's capture should put residents' minds at ease.

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