

Snake expert puts squeeze on errant boa

By Craig Dezern

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

Bob Cross, by this time a greasy mess, tugged from below the car's engine. Ed Young, rain running down his face, poked with a stick from above. Neighbors peered from under umbrellas. Passing cars slowed for a better look. Television cameras rolled.

Richard Wade could only shake his head at the spectacle in his south Orange County driveway Wednesday afternoon as Young asked the question of the day:

"How does one get a boa constrictor out of its new home?"

It had started as a typical scary-reptile-in-the-suburbs story. Man mows grass. Man frightens 6-foot snake. Snake slithers into station



JAMES BORCHUCK/SENTINEL

Former firefighter Bob Cross emerges victorious from beneath a car where a boa constrictor had slithered onto the transmission.

wagon engine.

But it quickly turned into the toughest serpent extrication that freelance photographer and snake hunter Cross had ever tried.

About 4 p.m., Leon "Bud" Cardwell, 71, was the first to spot the boa, a non-poisonous native of the

South American tropics.

"I think it came out of Ed's garage over there," Cardwell said. "I thought, 'My God, that's the biggest rattlesnake I ever saw!'"

He hollered at Young, 65, who

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looked up just in time to see the twitch of a tail disappear under the rear bumper of his neighbor's 1979 Ford station wagon at 4332 Brandeis Ave.

"I said, 'Man, there's a lot of snake under there.'"

He alerted Richard and Sue Wade, who called Orange County Animal Control. An employee there suggested the Wades call Cross, 44, a former firefighter, a current member of the Central Florida Herpetological Society and a frequent rescuer of constrictors in distress.

First Cross tried the direct approach.

He crawled under the car and tried to put the squeeze on the constrictor. No dice.

"He is right on top of the transmission," Cross said from under the car. "I mean right on top."

Next, he called for a wrecker, which lifted the car and gave him more room to maneuver. No luck.

"He's balled up in a ball," Cross explained. Each time he poked or prodded, the snake swelled its muscles and wedged itself in.

"You can see him," Young said, "but you can't get him. That sucker's up there."

Finally, Young started the car. As the engine heated up, the uptight constrictor began to unwind.

"He's moving, he's really moving," Young called out to the crowd of neighbors. Cross clutched at a coil. "He's got him by the tail. Oh, now he's got him by the head!"

Cross dangled the snake casually from his oil-slicked hands. The reptile's flicking tongue and unblinking eyes revealed nothing.

Neighbors snapped pictures and

reached out to pet the animal.

"That was the hardest capture I ever had," Cross said. "I think the heat was finally getting to him."

The snake, valued at about \$200, was probably a pet, Cross said. He said he would try to find the owner. If he couldn't he planned to add it to his collection.

His task completed, Young excused himself to get ready for a lodge meeting.

"Sue," he called after his neighbor. "We haven't had so much excitement since your dog had pups."