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Boa constrictor helps round up fugitives

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THOMASVILLE, Ga. -- Bail bondsman Gary Cooper speaks softly and carries a big snake.

If someone Cooper posts bond for doesn't show up for trial, he goes looking for the bail jumper armed with Pete, a 6-foot boa constrictor.

Cooper rarely has to pull out the snake. Just the sight of the huge serpent writhing in a pillowcase Cooper carries is enough to make most fugitives submit.

"There are two kinds of people I deal with: fearful people and rebellious people," said Cooper, whose mother named him after the Hollywood movie legend.

"The snake makes rebellious people fearful people. I have seen mean drug dealers from Miami melt at the thought."

Cooper owns Express Bond and Collection Agency in Thomasville. Surrounded by plantations, Thomasville's streets are lined with mossy oaks and Victorian homes built in the early part of the century when the town was a winter vacation spot for Northern industrialists.

Pete's mansion is a 4-by-2-foot aquarium in a back room of Cooper's office. The snake likes to sleep coiled beneath a black motorcycle helmet.

When Cooper takes Pete out, the serpent coils around his arm, peers around the room through beady, black eyes and flicks his forked tongue.

Boa constrictors are nonpoisonous snakes from the jungles of Central and South America. They kill their prey by squeezing it to death and then swallowing it whole. Most adults are between 6 to 10 feet long.

"I give him everything he needs," said Cooper, 49. "I'm his daddy image. I give him a rat once a month."

Daphna Nachminovitch, a manager with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which opposes the removal of exotic animals from their natural environment, said she thought Cooper should consider kick boxing or karate as a more humane way to bring in fugitives.

“What, heaven forbid, if he was in danger?” she said. “He'd ... have one hand occupied by a pillowcase.”

Cooper, a Sunday school teacher, said the idea of partnering with a serpent came to him while praying. Hoping to avoid the use of guns, pepper spray and violence, he said he asked God to help him find a way to nab fugitives “non-lethally, without abuse and trauma.”

“I got to thinking about two words: rebellion and fear,” he said. “This poor viper has been cursed and has had to crawl on its belly since Adam and Eve. It is the base root of absolute fear.”

He purchased Pete in 1993 at a pet shop.

“I only use Pete in high-risk situations, where a person is very dangerous and has a violent background,” Cooper said.

Bondsmen can go anywhere in the country to capture a fugitive. Unlike law-enforcement officers, they can bring fugitives across state lines without the extradition process.

To travel quickly, Cooper flies his own plane. In his spare time, he writes poetry and shows Pete at schools and nursing homes.

When Cooper goes after a fugitive, he carries Pete in the pillowcase. For backup, he packs a pistol and a beanbag gun, a non-lethal, carbon-dioxide powered weapon that packs the punch of a heavyweight boxer.

“I've never had to take out my snake,” he said. “It's the idea that works. Rebellion turns into fear.”

Cooper said he went to one house where he knew a fugitive was holed up and was met at the door by the man's mother.

“I said, 'Ma'am, I don't want to pull out my viper,'" he recalled.

When he entered the house, the fugitive was already waiting for him, standing spread eagle and propped against a wall.

“This is just another way to distract people enough to get them back in the criminal justice system,” he said. “We're desensitized to pepper spray and guns. We know guns will hurt us, but for some reason people don't seem to know because they shoot each other all the time.”