So, what’s on your to-do list this weekend? Me? I’m driving to Galena with two tortoises and an iguana.

I suppose I could just leave it at that. But I’d imagine that little statement might raise more questions than it answers. Plus, it probably leaves the impression that I, and therefore all naturalists are, to say the least, eccentric.

So, just to make sure there are no misunderstandings let me clarify. Yes, I’m going to Galena with a bunch of reptiles. But I hope to come home with spiders. Oh, and a snake.

No, the fine shops of Galena haven’t turned into reptile emporiums. Nor have the restaurants started serving turtle soup. At least not that I know of.

Rather, I’m heading to the county seat of Jo Daviess County to conduct a trade and, in the process, hopefully give some critters a shot at a better life. I’m meeting Josh Lange, who heads up the Northeastern Iowa Reptile Rescue, an organization founded to give some of our longest-lived companion animals a second chance.

I’m bringing him a leopard tortoise and a red-footed tortoise, critters I’ve cared for for 20 years and 10 years respectively. I’m also bringing an iguana I acquired in 1997, and some cash, a donation to support NEIRR’s efforts. In return I’ll receive a young black rat snake and two rose-haired tarantulas, little beasties destined to earn their keep as education animals at the St. Charles Park District’s new Hickory Knolls Discovery Center.

I mention all of this because reptile rescues—in fact, rescue organizations of all types—are a tremendous, yet often overlooked resource for people who either would like to acquire an animal or have an animal they need to rehome. Rescue groups exist for just about every breed, species and taxonomic order. Many have web sites—just do an internet search using your favorite search engine or look on Petfinder.com—and most are pretty easy to work with. Be prepared to answer some questions, such as why you want the animal or why you are giving it up. Also, don’t be shy about making a donation. The majority of these groups operate on a shoestring budget, at best, and rely on donations, grants and their own finances to keep their operations running.

So if you’ve got a turtle, or a bird, a fish, frog, even a dog or cat that you can’t keep anymore, look beyond the local animal shelters—most are bursting at the seams anyway. And don’t just let the animal go. That sort of “freedom” comes at a high price, not only for the released animal but also the wild population into which it is introduced.

Do your homework to make sure you’re dealing with a legitimate, USDA-inspected facility. And don’t expect overnight success. It took me almost three months to complete these transactions with NEIRR. But the results will be worth it—you’ll see. And, if you’re lucky, you might even get to spend a day chauffeuring chelonians, not to mention lizards, spiders and snakes.

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All right, maybe you don’t plan to spend your weekend joy-riding with cold-blooded critters, but would still like to do something not-too-taxing yet animal related. How about participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count?

This wonderful example of citizen science is a joint project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society. The easy to follow GBBC protocol asks you to spend a minimum of 15 minutes watching birds in your yard, or wherever you happen to be, count how many and of which species (including only the highest total for each), and send in your results. It’s that simple.

Even better, it’s fun! Almost as fun, in fact, as riding around with reptiles. Want more information? Visit http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/.

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