

A CASE OF MILD ENVENOMATION FROM A MANGROVE SNAKE BITE.

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INTRODUCTION

The Mangrove or Yellow-ringed Cat Snake is perhaps one of the most striking and beautiful of all snakes, having a glossy black body with bright yellow crossbands. It is a large rear-fanged colubrid of the subfamily *Boiginae*, having about 6 subspecies. Like other species of its genus, such as *Boiga irregularis* and the attractive *Boiga nigriceps*, it is highly arboreal and usually nocturnal, feeding in the main on small mammals, lizards, bird, bats and, possibly, on other snakes. The animal is well adapted to arboreal life, having a laterally flattened body. It occurs in Malaysia, Sumatra and the Philippines and their regions, its preferred habitat being rain and mangrove forests or swamps. It can attain a length of up to approximately 2.5 m.

CURRENT OPINION

Opinion as to the disposition and hazard of the mangrove snake varies widely. Thus on the one hand Keng & Tat-Mong are of opinion that "it is generally mild mannered, and rarely attempts to bite when handled", whilst at the other extreme Obst, Richter and Jacob state "The venom effect of the *Boiginae* is rather variable. Bites lethal to humans are documented for *Dispholidus*, *Thelotornis*, and *Boiga*. Extreme caution must be exercised with these snakes because antivenom is available only for *Dispholidus*". The authors also go on to state that the species is dangerously venomous. There thus appears to be considerable difference of opinion as to whether the Mangrove Snake constitutes any hazard to man, or not.

CURRENT STATUS (U.K.)

In the United Kingdom these snakes, together with a number of other opistoglyphous colubrids such as the Montpellier Snake, which used to be generally available through the pet trade, have now been included in the list of animals subject to the Dangerous Wild Animals Act, 1976. Keepers in the United Kingdom therefore require a DWA licence issued by their borough or local authority; the willingness of boroughs to grant such licences varies widely, as does also the cost of the licence itself.

CASE HISTORY

The writer keeps 3 specimens of *Boiga dendrophila*, one male and two females. The male is considerably smaller than the females and somewhat aggressive; one female is usually docile, whilst the second female is highly aggressive. All three are wild caught imports.

12 August: in the morning the writer was removing the animals from their caging for cleaning purposes, and was delivered a rapid and glancing bite to the left forearm by the larger female (approximately 2.2 m length), which became irritable and aggressive as soon as it was disturbed, in spite of it being only mid morning. The bite caused slight bleeding and discolouration and was so swift and apparently slight that the wound was only swabbed with alcohol and no further thought was given to it. The bite itself was approximately 5 cm in diameter and consisted of two distinct V-shaped incisions of approximately 1 cm each in length on the one side, and a semicircle of smaller puncture marks opposite.

13 August: in the afternoon there was a feeling of fatigue and some aching in the joints, which increased in the evening.

14 August: increasing feeling of fatigue and listlessness during the day; intense aching and pains in the joints, especially in the wrists and legs, stabbing pains to the kidneys, nausea, loose bowels, loss of appetite, metallic taste in the mouth and general very unwell feeling. In the afternoon the local doctor was visited, who established that body temperature was slightly raised, whilst blood pressure and heart functions were normal.

15 August: symptoms began to subside during the course of the day.

16 August: symptoms had virtually cleared by the evening.

CONCLUSIONS

The time between envenomation and the onset of symptoms was 26-30 hours. In general the symptoms were similar to those at the onset of a rapid and very unpleasant influenza virus, with the exception of the very strange taste in the mouth.

In no way could the symptoms be described as hazardous. However it must be assumed that they could become so in a recipient who was suffering from some other ailment (of which he might not even be aware), the old and infirm, or the very young. It may also be assumed that whether or not a person experiences any reaction to such a bite depends on whether that person happens to be allergic to components of the venom.

The above illustrates the fact that, whatever the popular wisdom as to whether a particular snake is hazardous or not, caution should be exercised when handling any rearfanged venomous snake, of any size. In the case of the highly dangerous Boomslang (*Dispholidus typus*) and also of the Twig Snake (*Thelotornis kirtlandii*) this should be obvious; as far as other large opistoglyphous species such as *Boiga*, *Cyclagras gigas* and *Malpolon monspessulanus* are concerned, it should be borne in mind that not only are no specific antivenins or detailed records of envenomation apparently readily available, but also that the effects of envenomation may vary widely from individual to individual.

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