

## A REMARKABLE HERPETOLOGICAL ESCAPE

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### INTRODUCTION

In a contribution to the second volume of *Litteratura Serpenti*, Jan van der Schilt cites an experience with an *Elaphe guttata emoryi* as an *Elaphe*-‘miracle’ (Van der Schilt, 1982, pag. 110). I do not want to entitle an experience that I had with a captive born *Elaphe guttata guttata* from 1990 as a miracle, but I think the event was nice enough to give an account of it.

### HISTORY

On 18 June 1990 there came an end to an exciting period for me: for quite some time I had ten eggs of *Elaphe guttata guttata* in an incubator, such as has been described by Ulf Olsen (Olsen, 1987, pag. 135). It was an exciting event for two reasons: in the first place it was the first clutch from the female and it is always exciting to wait to see if she has made something beautiful in it; in the second place it was also my first breeding and it was a question whether I had given good practical execution to the theoretical instructions.

But as I said: 18 June made it clear for me that the *Elaphe* female had made it fine: out of the ten eggs laid ten young hatched with an excellent sex ratio: five males and five females. The hatching of these eggs has been a spectacular event for me. Also the first slough of the ten youngsters occurred without problems and even the feeding gave no problems. I did not have to force-feed one of them.

I housed them all separately in round plastic boxes, with perforated covers, a small piece of tissue paper provided the only hiding place and took care of the absorption of the faeces; water in an aluminium tray took care of the drinking needs of the young. All these ten boxes were placed in a terrarium of 60x35x35 cm (lxwxh), made to a design example of Anton van Woerkom (Van Woerkom, 1986). A lamp of 40 Watt took care of the heating. The glass with which the terrarium should be closed was removed, to prevent the temperature from rising too much.

When in due course, it appeared that all the young ate well and also otherwise gave no problems, I put them all together in the above mentioned terrarium. Each time the young were fed, I placed them apart for a while in a plastic box until the prey was eaten.

### ESCAPE

I was obviously mistaken about the size of the young animals and their excellent instinct to detect escape possibilities: after four weeks I noticed during feeding (there were ten boxes ready with

ten nest-mice) that one specimen was missing. None of the other animals looked more full than the others, so I excluded cannibalism, thus the animal had escaped. My terrarium, also that of the young, stand in my studyroom and it was an endless task to search for the hatchling between a few thousand books. So this I have not done, in the hope that hunger and thirst would drive it sooner or later into my hands.

### SOME MORE ESCAPES

During the autumn I had sold all the young except two. I put these two in the large terrarium with the parent animals. One of the two appeared to be a moderate eater and was, in consequence, a lot smaller and lighter than the other young. This large, prosperous growing young I henceforth describe as young 1; his smaller brother as young 2. The smaller specimen has seen one chance to escape three times. A small cleft came into existence because a window did not connect right up to an aluminium strip. Only later I discovered that it was that tiny opening that gave the animal the chance to escape. He has done this again and again. Luckily these escapes were thwarted because when I was in my studyroom, I happened to be confronted by the escaped serpent. Three times I thus was able to catch this miscreant.

### A PLEASANT AND UNBELIEVABLE SURPRISE

It was on 27 April 1991, about ten months after the first escape from the terrarium, that I had to be in my studyroom late in the evening and I saw something crawling away before my feet. Somewhat annoyed I picked it up for the umpteenth time, I thought, the same young that had already escaped three times before. I had been convinced that I had not given it the opportunity to escape after all the previous times.

Well, that was right, because when I switched on the light in the large terrarium I saw young 2 laying in its usual place. I had the young in my hands that had escaped ten months ago (= young 3). On second thoughts this seemed to be right: it had not been eating for some time, while her brother in the terrarium had eaten two hairy nest-mice that afternoon which were still clearly visible. Besides that, the young I held in my hands must have sloughed only recently, something the 'terrarium animal' had done some time ago. I suspected the lost daughter would have an enormous appetite, but proved wrong: on 28 April the animal ate one little nestmouse and refused to eat more.

### SOME COMPARATIVE DATA

It is interesting to look at the consequences of the escape on the growth and development of young 3. On 28 April I weighed young 1, 2 and 3. Their weights were respectively 50, 25 and 10 g. So young 3 got rather behind in terms of weight. Also the difference in length is meaningful: young 1 is about 62 cm long, young 2 is 42 cm, while young 3 has still been able to reach a length of 38 cm in its paper environment.

### AN IMPROBABLE ASCETESISM

I was afraid that I would not be capable of getting enough nestmice for young 3, but again I was proved wrong. On 4 May she ate one nestmouse again. After that she obstinately kept refusing

all the prey animals that were offered to her without casting one glance at them. She did not come any prettier through the fasting: she was very lank and lethargic.

Around 15 May her eyes became dull and I diagnosed other symptoms of an approaching slough. This took place on 23 May. My expectation that it would go better with her from now on, was verified: that same day she ate one nude and one, already considerably hairy nestmouse. She did that with so much avidity, that I am completely confident that she is busy trying for an overtake-manoeuvre with her greater brother.

## QUESTIONS

In the meanwhile the following intriguing question remains for me: how has the escaped snake kept itself alive during that time? The wintermonths can hardly have been a period of hibernation for her, because the temperature in my studyroom has been too high for this. Has it taken spiders as food? Has she been able to get hold of mice? Although I have sometimes found mice stools on the shelves behind the books during a periodical cleaning, I have never found any traces of mice nests. Besides that, the animal had great difficulty in eating a hardly hairy nestmouse, so I doubt that she has been able to eat mice that were a lot bigger, during that time. Thus yet spiders?

That covers the food; another problem for the animal has to have been drinking. It is a mystery to me how she has managed all that time without water. After I had put young 3 in the large terrarium, it started to crawl around, investigating, and came to the drinking vessel. It diagnosed that there was water in it, but there the matter rested. I did not see the animal drink that time, something that I thought it would be desperate to do.

## CONCLUSION

Some days after the remarkable catch I had to remove all my books off the shelves during a periodical cleaning. At different places on various shelves I found remains of faeces, which presumably were coming from the young snake. Remarkable however, up to now I have found no remains of sloughings, though the animal presumably has sloughed more than one time.

## REFERENCES

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