# REMARKABLE TAIL LOSS IN *PSAMMOPHIS SUBTAENIATUS SUDANENSIS*

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## INTRODUCTION

Sand snakes *(Psammophis subtaeniatus)* are often troublesome, as is surely the case when they are fed. The animals are in fact always on the look-out, so that it is hardly possible to feed them comfortably. The trick is to approach their cage very gently, open the glass panes quietly, then throw the mouse with a quick movement into the cage and hastily close the panes again. Often the last element is hard to perform, as at least one snake will come towards you very quickly. Apart from feeding, it is not even possible to clean the cage normally or remove faeces with a long spoon. Often they bite fiercely at the tweezers or the spoon.

Let us return to the thrown in mice. Immediately after the throwing in a sharp hunt begins, during which the snakes heavily react to each others' hunting behaviour. When one of the snakes spots a moving mouse, it goes rapidly after it and seizes it with great force on the neck or the back. Then - if the prey is considered potentially dangerous - the snake coils the front part of its body tightly around it. The other sand snakes, as mentioned, react even more to the movements of their companions than to those of the prey. Consequently, they are inclined to go for the same prey. Regularly, there are fierce fights, one snake holding a tight grip to the head of the other, or both snakes pulling the same mouse. Serious injuries never occur, even though sometimes some blood is running.

## STRANGE EVENT

On 30 September 1991 around noon I was feeding two sand snakes, captive bred males of about 80 cm length, housed together in a cage of 70x50x50 cm (lxwxh). When I had introduced the mice into the cage, the usual hunting started, but this time a strange event took place: one snake seized the other one half-way its body, and when I observed that (it all happened very quickly) I saw something else: something small whipping on the ground. At first I considered it to be a mouse tail (it was of about that length and thickness) but on closer observation it appeared to be the tail end of the larger male, which had broken off and was wriggling just as a thrown-off lizard tail does.

For some minutes the tail end kept on wriggling. When I took it away at last with long tweezers (the snakes were fighting and had no attention left for me), it still moved when touched. This reaction remained for about ten minutes, though it became ever weaker.

When measured, the tail end appeared to be 75 mm long. The wound had hardly been bleeding, and the former owner did not appear to be very concerned.

## AN EXPLANATION?

I have none. Is it very tempting though to think of an interesting explanation: a throw-off trick as occurs in many lizards, being in this case a reaction to the sudden 'quarrel' between the snakes.

On the other hand: it may as well be plain coincidence. The piece may be broken off as a result of the force with which the animal whipped its tail against anything. This explanation is far less interesting, but is supported by the fact that I never before noticed any tail loss in these snakes (nor in other snakes) in spite of all the fights I did observe. Also, I do not remember ever having read anything about such a tail trick in snakes.

On the other hand, again, Branch (1988, p. 70) mentions that sand snakes (in general) are known to spin wildly when caught by the tail, causing it to break off. He further states that the tail tip cone may be regenerated, resulting in false low subcaudal counts. It would then be plausible that this regenerating potential can be connected to a supposed inclination to throw off the tail in other cases of danger too. Branch adds that truncated tails are more common in some species (63% in *Psammophis biseriatus*) than in others (8% in *Psammophis crucifer*).

## REFERENCE

Branch, 1988. Bill Branch's Field Guide to the Snakes and Other Reptiles of Southern Africa. London 1988. New Holland (Publishers) Ltd.