
HERPETOLOGIA

A column for short herpetological contributions

* * *

A DANGEROUS GOPHER SNAKE

By: Marcel van der Voort, Heerbaan 14, 5721 LS Asten, The Netherlands.

Translation by René van der Vlugt; English corrections by Chris Mattison.

On two stories:

1: From the newspaper *Tubantia* (no date). Recently, a snake keeper from Almelo, The Netherlands, wanted to show his friend how his 'rattlesnake' killed its prey. Just after this demonstration had taken place, a second friend arrived, who was also interested in the demonstration, so a second mouse was offered to the snake. She had apparently had enough, however. When the man went to remove the mouse, the snake bit his thumb and index finger. A few hours later he became unwell and went into a coma. In the hospital an antidote was administered.

2: The editors received a mailing from 'Het Noorder Dierenpark', a zoo in Emmen, The Netherlands, which read as follows: 'Recently, the zoo was offered a gopher snake (*Pituophis melanoleucus*), a species harmless to man. It soon turned out that there was something special about this snake. A story appeared in the papers about how a very venomous snake has almost killed its owner: after being bitten he had gone into a coma and only serum treatment in the hospital had saved him from an untimely death. According to one paper, an Indian cobra was responsible, whereas another paper mentioned a rattlesnake. The real offender, however, turned out to be the snake that had been brought in at 'Het Noorder Dierenpark'.

* * *

So far, two connected reports and, for the editors, enough reason to dig a little bit deeper into the matter. The physician at the 'Twenteborg' hospital who had treated the unlucky snake keeper could clarify a few misunderstandings. When I asked him, he was able to confirm that the man had indeed been bitten but the bite had only been superficial and he had not gone into a coma. No serum been administered and he was released from the hospital after being held for a twelve hour observation period at the casualty ward. With the help of the RIV in Bilthoven, the snake was identified as a gopher snake.

It is curious that someone can get so ill, even ending up in the hospital, after being bitten by an absolutely non-venomous snake. Perhaps this incident will serve to illustrate a passage from Zimniok (1984, p. 140) in which he says 'Far to little is known and it is

estimated that about 20-30% of all fatal accidents (involving snake bites, ed.) are caused by harmless snakes. People die from shock, fear or purely from the suggestion that they have been bitten by a venomous snake.'

Even more mysterious was that the victim received an antidote, according to the newspaper story. An antidote is always very specific, which implies that every snakebite should be treated with a special antidote. Using the wrong antidote can sometimes be more dangerous than the bite itself (Verkerk 1991, p.25).

In the meantime people in Almelo are not at all happy with these sensational happenings. This event, which made the newspapers three times, each time more sensational than the last, will strengthen many people's prejudice against snakes and the people who keep them. Another snake keeper from Almelo, picked at random, whom I called for information on this matter, told me that in all the years that he has been involved with his herpetological hobby he has been fighting the lack of understanding with the neighborhood and the council. Everything he has accomplished has been nullified by the acts of someone who doesn't even know what kind of snake he keeps.

This event also illustrates nicely the principle that an objective fact can turn into story, growing ever more fantastic in which truth and fiction can hardly be separated.

REFERENCES

Press report dated 29 march 1994 from 'Het Noorder Dierenpark', Emmen.

Verkerk, J.-W., 1991. Gifslangen. Beten, behandeling. Zaandam.

Zimniok, K., 1984. Die Schlange, das unbekannte Wesen. Hannover.