

Keeping and breeding the Ladder snake,



ELAPHE SCALARIS

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■ INTRODUCTION

The Ladder snake, *Elaphe scalaris*, is not a ratsnake for the faint-hearted keeper. Whilst they make a good terrarium subject and are not difficult to keep or breed, most specimens are lively, fast-moving and nervous snakes which rarely hesitate to bite at their own discretion. If you want a tame snake or one that is not likely to bite you, don't buy a Ladder snake.

As far as European ratsnakes are concerned, the Ladder snake is considered to be the only species of truly European origin, the other species being thought to have originated in Asia and have since extended their ranges ever westward into Europe with time. As such, *E. scalaris* is confined to most of Portugal and Spain, a few Mediterranean islands (including Iles d'Hyeres and Minorca) and southern France. The young of this species give it its common name, for they bear the pattern of a "ladder" along their back, but this fades with age to leave behind only two dark lines. Unusual for a ratsnake these snakes have a very large rostral scale (rather like *Pituophis* species from the U.S.A.) and they are not likely to be confused for any other European snake. The coloration varies, some specimens are quite orange but they may also be olive-green or olive-brown. The young measure around 30 cm and adults are typi-

cally around 1.2 metres in length, though some can reach 1.6 metres.

■ CAPTIVE HUSBANDRY

If you want an easy to keep and breed ratsnake this is one such species, but of course its temperament could be better. Unlike some other European and North American *Elaphe* species I have kept the Ladder snake is not put off its food by higher temperatures of around 30°C in the warmest summer months - in fact they seem to relish it. I began keeping this species with two hatchlings (one of each sex) which were given to me in 1990 and in exchange the following year I gave their breeder a baby female Leopard snake. The two babies posed no problems to rear and were kept initially in small separate boxes with paper towelling substrate, a cardboard tube for a hiding place and a small dish of water. The temperature was around 28°C, and as they grew they were simply transferred to increasingly larger quarters until they were adult, and then they were placed in a fauna box each and kept in the warmest part of my snake room.

I did find that both male and female preferred smaller mice than I would expect snakes of 1.2 metres in length to accept, but they would eat two or three mice each week so long as the mice were not too big.

■ CAPTIVE BREEDING

During their first winter (1990 - 91) they were kept

warm and continued feeding throughout this period and the rest of the year. Then in the winter of 1991 - 92 I hibernated them because they had reached a little over one metre in length and appeared to be approaching maturity.

Following hibernation, in March 1992 these snakes were gradually warmed up and soon began to feed again. Once they had sloughed I placed the male in the female's cage. At first the female did not appear to want to mate - whenever the male approached her she would speed away from him with her tail thrashing from side to side rapidly. The male eventually resorted to biting

Captive bred baby *Elaphe scalaris*.

Note the 'ladder' pattern which gives this species its common name.



Photo: Kevin J. Hingray

the female whenever he could get close enough to do so, but this did not help matters and the female appeared to be quite scared by the proceedings.

I separated them for a few days and then placed the male in the female's cage again. The response was very similar to before at first, but gradually the female became more calm and mating took place. The male insisted in biting the female by her head and once the mating was over I could see that he had caused numerous small wounds to the female's head and neck with his teeth, although only one puncture produced any blood and it was by no means serious. A few days later they mated again with an equal amount of commotion and frenzy - these snakes do not do anything by half measures!

I have not been able to locate my notes to be able to say with accuracy how long the gestation period lasted, but I remember it was shorter in this case than I had read about by other authors, and lasted less than 50 days which is approximately two weeks shorter than the other cases I had read about. There were four eggs but only two of them hatched, the other two proving to be infertile quite soon after they were laid. The female went for several weeks without food after she had laid the eggs and became quite thin. But once she began to accept food again she put on the weight she had lost and the rest of the year for both snakes proved to be trouble-free.

They were hibernated again during the winter of 1992 - 1993 and once this was complete I witnessed the usual exciting mating throes of this species.

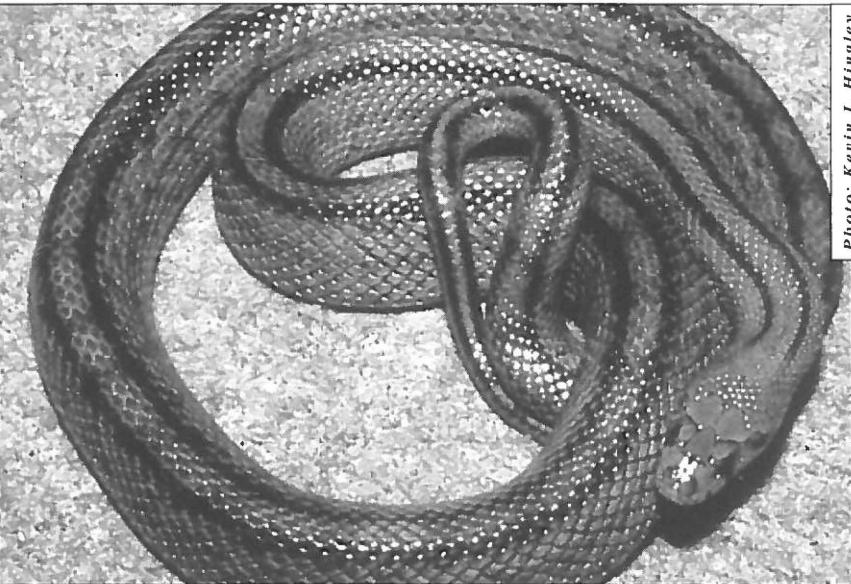


Photo: Kevin J. Hingray

Subadult captive bred Elaphe scalaris. The 'ladder' pattern is beginning to fade.

During the second mating in 1993, the male caused the female's neck to bleed more heavily than I had witnessed before, but after cleaning the wound I could see that the actual damage was minimal and this caused no further problems for the snake.

The gestation period on this occasion lasted for about 60 days as far as I am able to recollect and without my notes for reference, more in keeping with other breeding reports for *E. scalaris*. Again four eggs were laid but they all failed to hatch. This confirmed my suspicion that breeding from a closely related pair (these snakes were brother and sister) was not a good idea. Later that year I sold them to a dealer who had another pair in his shop and who could swap them around so that they would then comprise unrelated pairs and perhaps solve the problem of poor fertility

that appeared to be associated with my related pair.

■ SUMMARY

I must confess that I miss keeping this species because they make a change from snakes that are placid to handle, but at the moment there is no room in my collection for another pair of snakes of any description. Maybe sometime in the future I will be able to take my gloves out of the cupboard in readiness for the handling of some replacement Ladder snakes. Don't

be deterred from keeping this species just because they are excitable and it is normal for them to bite when handled, they are an otherwise easy snake to keep and breed from.