



AN ENGLISHMANS STORY

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It is a known fact that our earliest childhood experiences often stay with us and influence us for the rest of our lives.

My earliest recollections were of life in Gibraltar in the 1950's where my father was stationed in the army and where we lived for 3½ years. I remember being fascinated by the geckos that lived behind our fridge and appeared every evening to chase the moths around the ceiling light. We used to have wonderful trips across the border to a completely deserted Spanish coast-line and my older brothers used to bring me water-snakes that they had caught with the aid of long sticks. I was also allowed to keep terrapins in an old iron bathtub on the balcony.

Back in England in the 1960's, we lived in North-east Essex, and I eagerly anticipated the weekend outings to the local woods where there was a large pond in which I caught Crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*) and Smooth newts (*Triturus vulgaris*). Frogs and toads were quite scarce locally in those days, so I joined the local

Natural History Society in Norfolk, where they were particularly abundant. I was dismayed to arrive there on one occasion when conditions were ideal for the frog and toadlets to leave the water in their thousands, and it was impossible to walk through the damp grass without standing on them.

In the mid 1960's, whilst still at school, I used to travel further afield by bus in search of reptiles. My favourite place was Tollesbury, a coastal village about 15 or so km's from my home in Colchester. I used to go there with a school friend with similar interests, who sadly died a few years later. It was nothing to catch 20 – 30 slow worms (*Anguis fragilia*), on a single visit. We used to lay out sheets of corrugated iron in the long grass alongside a disused railway line and turn them over on a sunny day. There would often be three to four slow worms under a single sheet I saw my first Grass snake (*Natrix natrix*) under one of these, but I was so surprised by it that it evaded capture – much to my disgust.

I made several return trips to Tollesbury before I actually caught my first Grass snake on turning over a rotten log. I had no idea that they could feign death and I was very concerned that I had killed it by

Photo by A. Nöllert



Grass snake pretending to be dead

grasping the animal to tightly as it hung limply from my hand with it's mouth gaping.

It was about this time that my friend and I started to buy our first foreign species, but I was somewhat frustrated in that I was not allowed to keep snakes at home due to my parents fear of them. I will never forget the look of horror on my mother's face when one of my friends knocked on the door to return my pride and joy - a 120 cm long Grass snake that I kept without her knowing and that had escaped the previous day.

The first species I kept were Green tree frogs (*Hyla arborea*), Edible frogs (*Rana esculenta*) and some nice little Anderson's toads (*Bufo andersoni*), from Pakistan and which were purchased from the English agent for drs. De Rover from Holland.

As my friend's parents were a lot more reasonable then mine (!), he had a shed of his own in which he was allowed to keep virtually anything. I was as eager as he was to see the contents of the first box to be sent to his house from the importers. We opened it in the middle of the lawn as it contained 150 cms of very bad tempered

Yellow Ratsnake (*Elaphe obsoleta quadravittata*) and it was lucky we had leather gloves handy. I could not afford £ 5 for a rat snake, but £ 3 bought me a Diamond-backed watersnake (*Nerodia rhombifer rhombifer*), which I kept at my friends house along with an Adder (*Vipera berus*) that we had caught on the edge of some marshland about 8 kms away. Adders have always had a reputation for being delicate in captivity, but this specimen thrived on a diet of field voles.

In 1967, I gave up keeping reptiles for the first time when I left school. A couple of

years later, I moved to London for a while, and it was not until my return to North Essex in the early '70's that I started up again. I had my first home of my own, and I thought a tank or two of reptiles would brighten up the décor of the lounge. I started with a Grey Ratsnake (*Elaphe obsoleta spiloides*), bought from a local guy who had kept it as a novelty and then lost interest in it. With the memory of my friend's Yellow Ratsnake firmly etched in my mind, this snake was very lucky indeed as I felt very sorry for it because it was confined to an unheated aquarium in a garage with winter fast approaching.

Elaphe situla



Photo by E. Pozio

The following year I ventured abroad for the first time since my childhood and in the spring I returned from Morocco with a couple of Montpellier snakes (*Malpolon monspessulanus monspessulanus*), and an assortment of lizards, which included Berber skinks (*Eumeces algeriensis*), Bibrons Agamas (*Agama impalearis*) and a helmed gecko (*Geckoria chazaliae*).

In late August the same year, having well and truly bitten by the travel and collecting bug, I drove down to the south of France and, when I caught a juvenile Ladder snake (*Elaphe scalaris*), I began a love affair with the European *Elaphe* that has stayed with me ever since. The capture of a gravid female Aesculapian snake (*Elaphe longissima*) on a subsequent trip quickly enhanced that affair, and when I saw my first photo of a leopard snake (*Elaphe situla*) I was well and truly hooked.

About this time I joined the British Herpetological Society and one of the first magazines I received, in July 1976, contained an article by Chris Mattison on the reptiles of Yugoslavia, in which he described catching a juvenile leopard snake on a dry stone wall. From that moment on I dreamt of visiting Yugoslavia and catching my own, as they were totally unobtainable from any other sources.

The following year a good friend visited Yugoslavia and returned with four Leopard snakes, all of which I purchased.

The problem was, though this was an amazing number to find on one trip, they were all males and I had to wait another two years before I could get to Yugoslavia myself. My delight at catching my first Leopard snake on that trip quickly turned to dismay when I caught my first female on a dry-stone wall.

Three Four-lined snakes (*Elaphe quatorlineata quatorlineata*), another favourite of mine, were caught on the same trip, along with a very nice male Nose-horned Viper (*Vipera ammodytes ammodytes*).

Over the next couple of years the Greek islands were visited several times and interesting captures included dwarf Nose-horned Vipers (*Vipera ammodytes meridionalis*), Leopard snakes and Cyclades Four-lines, (*Elaphe quatorlineata muenteri*), including the stripeless form from Amorgos.

Apart from the previously mentioned snakes, I was also interested in the American Milk snakes which had just started to be imported but were very expensive. I bought the first pair of Honduran Milks (*Lampropeltis triangulum hondurensis*) to be imported into England. Along with a friend I also bought six Sinaloans (*Lampropeltis triangulum sinaloae*) and three Jaliscan Milks (*Lampropeltis triangulum arcifera*).

Personal circumstances in the 1980's led to my giving up reptile-keeping for the

second time and though I still maintained a passing interest it was not until 1994 that I started keeping them in earnest again.

Though many species were new to me and I was fascinated by many of them, particularly the Asian *Elaphe* species, I found myself drawn to my old favourites, The European ratsnakes and especially Leopard snakes. I count myself very lucky that, at the time of writing (February 1998), of the 60 or so snakes in my collection I have 29 Leopards, including 11 babies that I bred in 1997. The travels

have also resumed and I have been particularly interested in Turkey, but although I have found many species there, including Eastern Four-lines (*Elaphe quatorlineata sauromates*), Leopards, Sand boas (*Eryx jaculus turcicus*) and the delightful little Asian Minor Dwarf Snake (*Eirinis modestus*), I have not been successful in finding the Transcaucasian ratsnake (*Elaphe hohenackri*).

As to the future there are still so many things I would like to do and places to go if only I had the money to do it!

ANNOUNCEMENTS

■ ERRATUM

Unfortunately a mistake appeared in issue no. 3 of this volume in the article by Keith Werb, 'An Englishsmens story' (18-3, page 68 – 72). The meaning of one sentence was quit significantly changed because part of it was deleted. Fortunately the author pointed out this mistake to use and we are more then happy to correct it here. It concerns the last sentence of the first paragraph in the second column op page 71. This sentence should read:

My delight at catching my first Leopard snake on that trip quickly turned to dismay when I realised it was yet another male, but all of that was forgotten a couple of days later when I caught my first female on a dry-stone wall!