

# A MISPLACED BLOW

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For many years, the animal shelter in Someren, near Eindhoven (a city in the Netherlands) was a place for taking care of wounded and orphaned birds. Toon and Mary, the managers, and their assistants are used to dealing with strange animals other than disabled pigeons or wing-damaged blackbirds. Nevertheless, the animal they got from the Someren police on Friday the 31st of August was a great curiosity. It was an approximately 50 cm long snake. The snake was found in Someren (a small village in the Netherlands - ed.) in a shed next to the house of a snake keeper. Before catching the snake, they injured her by striking her just behind her head. The snake was severely injured by this

blow. The skin was stripped off just behind the head exposing the raw flesh beneath.

The managers of the animal shelter asked me about 'the patient' because they know that I keep snakes. After I examined the snake I concluded it was an *Elaphe taenura friesei* hatchling, a Taiwan Beauty Snake. As snake keepers know, these beautifully marked and colored animals are neither venomous nor aggressive. They are harmless to man even if they are 2.50 m long and the thickness of your wrist.

Although her wound was deep the snake seemed to be fine. When I caught her she tried to escape and flicked her tongue. For me this was an indication that she wasn't wounded as seriously as I had thought. After I telephoned him, veterinary surgeon Grondhuis examined



*Elaphe taeniura friesei*. Photo by Marcel van der Voort





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the snake. While he was cleaning the wound he found the wound to be very deep. He wondered if the trachea and the esophagus were damaged. Mr Grondhuis sutured the wound as accurately as possible using the thinnest needle and the thinnest thread. He also gave an antibiotic and a multi-vitamin tablet to expedite skin casting. Although the snake was not under anesthetic during the operation, she was very relaxed.

Subsequently the snake was returned home again. Her owner came home from holiday the day after she had been caught. He told me 'the patient' ate some small food items after her surgery. So I can conclude her esophagus had not been damaged. It looks like this *Elaphe* will survive its adventure.

The owner told me this snake escaped about three weeks before he went on holiday. In spite of searching intensively he didn't find her. I know snakes are very good escapees by experience. One of my own snakes disappeared once (Van der Voort 1991). Snakes can use very small holes in the terrarium to escape. As a snake keeper you have to prevent this and never give your snakes the possibility of escape. Imagine this will happen with a venomous snake!

Due to the lack of prey and the cold temperatures of the dutch environment, escaped exotic snakes cannot survive. I cannot foresee what will happen to exotic species in our environs but I can imagine that if escapes occur frequently it will be harmful to the local native fauna. In my opinion this is unacceptable.

But perhaps something else is more important. Almost every time someone in the Western world faces a snake they kill it. In the Netherlands wild reptiles are a rarity, and this is why we are not prepared to face a snake while we are picnicking or walking. Most people react in panic and beat the snake. And even if they do not react in panic they may think killing the snake is a beneficial act.

In the case documented here the snake could have been caught without injury to her. Hopefully the neighbours would not have injured the snake if they had been informed about the snake keeper's hobby before. Telling your neighbours you are a snake keeper and giving them some information about the animals you keep seems wise to me. We all know there are many prejudices against snakes that are hard to dispel. In my opinion it is desirable to get your neighbours acquainted with your snakes and their terrariums. You can give them information about details and identification. If they are faced with unexpected escaped animals, they will be more prepared for it.

## LITERATURE

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