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# HE REBIRTH OF THE BASILISCUS



*In July a citizen from Enkhuizen (a town in the west of Holland) told the police that a green snake had escaped from his shed. The snake belonged to a friend, who was on a camper holiday somewhere in France. He was not sure what kind of snake it was but it looked a lot like the dangerously venomous Fer-De-Lance (Bothrops atrox) in a picture shown to him. A major search operation, led by Walter Getreuer from the SERPO reptile house, was started. For two weeks the search was a major topic, nation-wide, in the media. After two weeks the search was stopped. The snake was not found and the owner never returned from his holiday. The whole story was probably made up.*

## *The board of The European Snake Society and the Editors of Litteratura Serpentina*

In ancient times people thought that a snake called Basiliscus could kill a human just by looking at him. That is why old and middle aged snake men did well to cover themselves with mirrors and to wear a glass hat on their head, when such a monster had to be killed. In that way the killing stare of the animal was reflected back and the Basiliscus was killed by its own venom.

For a moment it looked like the middle ages would return in Enkhuizen. Someone said a very venomous snake, had escaped. Just looking at the animal would make the snake strike. Let this story be told several times and it is not unusual that the story has changed, to one where a human will be killed only by one look from the snake. In



*The very dangerous medieval basiliscus. The Hague, Royal Library.*

# 'Het is chic om te zegen: ik heb een boa constrictor'

In Enkhuizen heeft geen zeldzaam en een afrijke zeldzaam. Slangen zijn er niet veel. Maar in Enkhuizen zijn er wel. Het is chic om te zegen: ik heb een boa constrictor.



De boa constrictor wordt vaak gezien in Enkhuizen. Foto: M. de Vries

## Zoektocht nog zonder succes

De zoektocht naar de gifslang in het schuurtje van de gifslang is nog zonder succes. De zoektocht is nog in volle gang.

## Gifslang en eigenaar blijven weg in Enkhuizen

De gifslang en de eigenaar zijn nog steeds weg in Enkhuizen. De gifslang is nog steeds in het schuurtje.

## Commissaris Rex insprire voor Enkhuizer slang

Commissaris Rex is de inspire voor de Enkhuizer slang. De gifslang is nog steeds in het schuurtje.

## Beperk handel exotische dieren

De handel in exotische dieren moet beperkt worden. Dit is de mening van de commissaris.

## Politie in Enkhuizen laagt op gifslang

De politie in Enkhuizen is op zoek naar de gifslang. De gifslang is nog steeds in het schuurtje.

## Slang?

De gifslang is nog steeds in het schuurtje. De zoektocht is nog in volle gang.

## Beet is binnen enkele uren dodelijk

Een beet van de gifslang is binnen enkele uren dodelijk. De gifslang is nog steeds in het schuurtje.

## Enkhuizer slang ruikt besaan

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## Enkhuizen is in greep van angst door gifslang

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## 21 Slangenbieten

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Sensation seeking articles. Photo: Atty Bening.

## THE REBIRTH OF THE BASILISCUS



this way all snakes, from innocent *Thamnophis* to aggressive rattlesnakes, would be in tall stories linked to the properties of the Basiliscus.

These are the occasions when times grow bad for serious snake keepers. They have to defend themselves again and again, to disapproving dog and cat owners, explaining patiently time and time again that their Royal Python is only dangerous to rats and mice and definitely not venomous. Despite all that, they are marked as "lunatics keeping snakes".

It should be clear: the 'escape' in Enkhuizen does our hobby no good. Not only is there a lot of individual distress by this event, for the neighbours and the "friend of a snake keeper", the image of snake keeping in general has been highlighted in a negative way again. The professional handling, during the several meetings in Enkhuizen by Walter Getreuer, can hardly provide a balance to the violence from the sensation seeking media. There



*Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis.*

is only one way to prevent such things: make sure you know what kind of animals you've got in your terrarium (not everybody does: see Van der Voort 1994: also in the case of Enkhuizen it was not sure what kind of snake it was, *Bothrops asper* or *Bothrops atrox* or a *Thamnophis sirtalis similis* "that one is also green").

Escapes by venomous snakes just shouldn't happen. Neither by non venomous snakes, but when such a specimen escapes there is no need for great alarm. Snakes do escape easily. Many (beginning) snake keepers experience this in great fright (among others Van der Schilt 1982; Van der Voort 1991; Dimit 1997; Sie 1999; Van der Voort 1999; Dekker).

Snake keepers need to be serious about their hobby. They need to, because the animals they love and are fascinated by, deserve it. It's a pity that a large number of prejudices still exist about snakes. One escape like in Enkhuizen, one snake bite from a venomous snake that reaches the newspapers, and it's like a procession where you make one step forwards and three steps back.

Anyone who starts keeping venomous snakes, should know what they are dealing with. Already in the first few volumes of *Litteratura Serpentina* Walter Getreuer wrote about responsible keeping of venomous snakes. (Getreuer 1982 and 1985). Coote also has written about the equipment that should be in every (venomous) snake room (Coote 1984). Among others Mavromichalis has developed a safe system for keeping venomous snakes (Mavromichalis 1994) and recently John and Marion Bakker published a series about different species of *Bitis*, with useful tips for handling venomous snakes. At this moment we are publishing a triptych by Allen Hunter in *Litteratura Serpentina*.

These articles may be somewhat "teaching a lesson" but there are things worthy of consideration in them. Those that do not know, by now, how to keep venomous snakes, do not want to know at all.

The board of the *European Snake Society* and the editors of *Litteratura Serpentina*, appeal urgently to all members to exercise their hobby very carefully. They point to the fact that it is very important to tell each other which snakes are kept. This makes determination of an escaped, dangerous, specimen easier. In such cases, the finding of the owner will not be a task for Interpol.

Neighbours should know that you are in the possession of snakes. They should know that (in most cases) it concerns harmless animals. The situation in Enkhuizen has proven this once more. When you are open about your hobby it might reduce the pre-judgement about snakes.

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