

DICE SNAKES IN AN OUTSIDE TERRARIUM



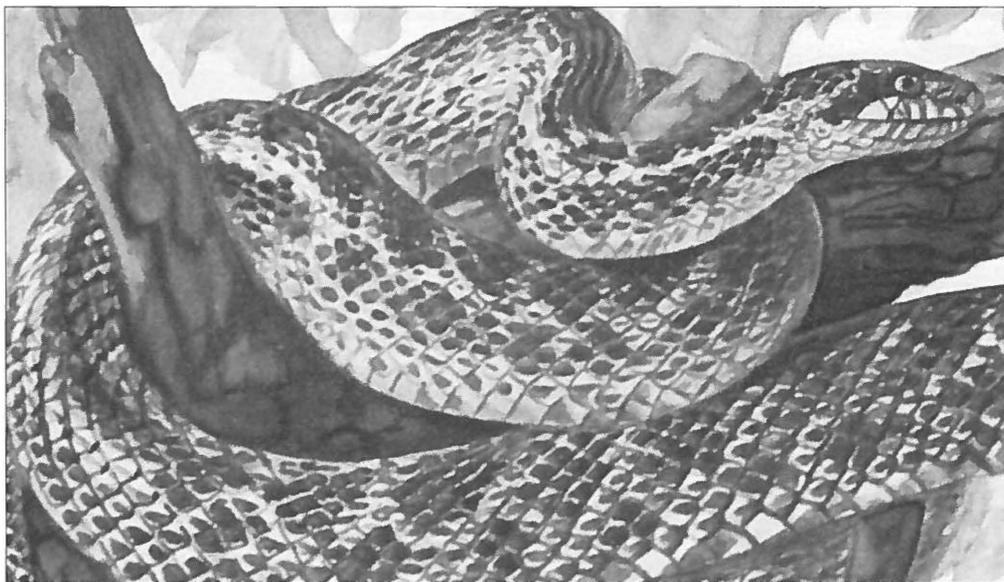
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My brother and I had kept snakes in an indoor terrarium when we were younger and because of this, it had always been a great wish of mine to do this again but in the 'open air'. I had spent the winter of 1999-2000 building an outside terrarium in the back of our garden (on the waterside), it was now the beginning of May, the time had come! After getting the required BUDEP-exemption (BUDEP is the Dutch Law for Endangered Foreign Animal and Plant species), I succeeded in buying five *Natrix tessellata*. One of these was in the last months of its pregnancy. The rest of the group consisted of two large specimens, a slightly smaller one

and the smallest was \pm 30 cm. I placed a breeding-box with a heater (a four watt winter heating element from a birds drinking dish) in the terrarium. The expectant mother disappeared directly into the box. She was also seen, in the following weeks, by the entrance of the box. I even saw her wrapped around one of the similar sized animals. It was wonderful to see them swimming now and again in the boxed-in pond, hunting tadpoles that had suddenly appeared.

It was a real big disappointment, when on the 13th of June, I saw the expectant mother lying dead outside the breeding-box. After making inquiries with the shop assistant, I learnt that this happens quite often, even though this was of little consolation.



Natrix tessellata.
Drawing by I. Daxwanger



Entrance of the terrarium



Wire against cats and birds



Two snakes along the wire



Hibernation place and drainage tube



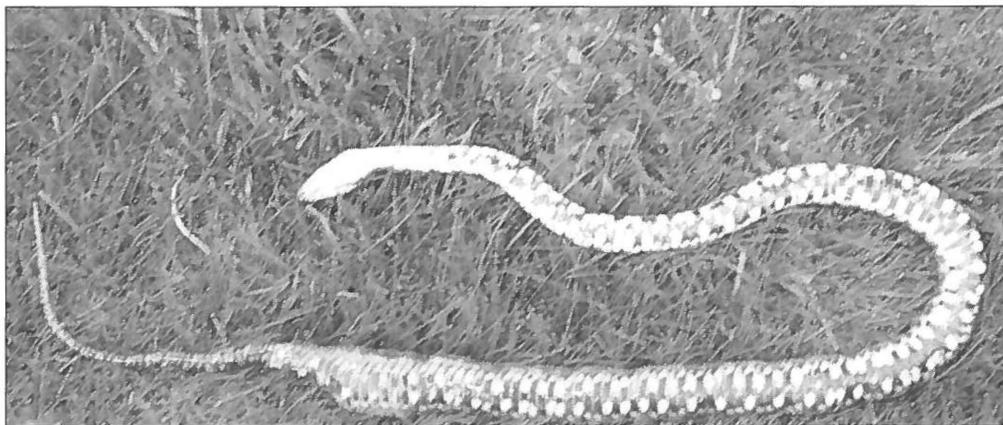
Hibernation place and drainage tube



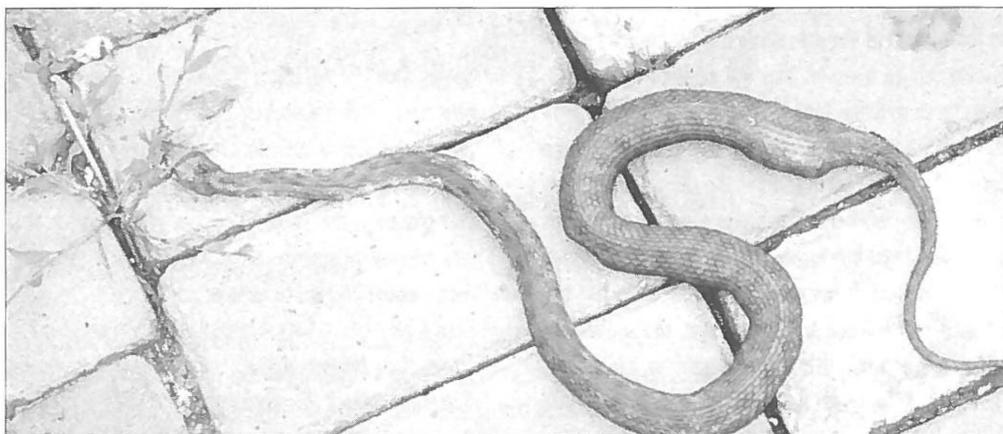
Drainage tube leading to hibernation place



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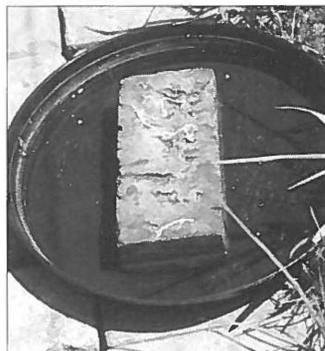
Dead pregnant female



Dead pregnant female



Two snakes



Snails having dinner



During the summer I saw the others outside daily, although a few months later the smallest was nowhere to be seen. I fear that this was possibly a victim of cannibalism, by one of the other three. After a while the middle size snake was also nowhere to be seen but maybe this one had grown, so that I had mistaken him/her for one of the two larger specimens. For the remainder of the season I only found two discarded skins, one of 65 cm. and one of 67 cm. in length. This could have been an indication that both the smaller snakes had kicked the bucket. Or could the smaller skins be lying somewhere under twigs or in the winter box?

In the context of the previously alleged cannibalism, it is also fair to mention that my attempt to let large slugs serve as living food in the terrarium was not very successful because they ate the laid-out deep-frozen smelts. So, first I had to remove the slugs. Indeed after a while there where no fish bones to be seen (gnawed on by the slugs) but where had the fishes gone, eaten by the snakes? Sometimes the fishes were left untouched and I asked myself whether the snakes ate other sorts of food, such as worms, spiders, beetles and flies that can be found naturally under dead twigs and stumps (put there by me).

Just before the autumn, on the advise of an expert, I made a sheltered area under a glass plate so that the animals could profit from the sun as long as possible before beginning their winter-sleep. This was a great success and I saw the snakes under (and on) the glass plate right up until the 24th of October. I hope that they are lying in their winter-box now. In the spring I'll be waiting full of expectations for their awakening. One day in November the water table was also extremely high in the Molenvaart (Mill-canal) behind our house (and therefore also in the terrarium). I now hope that I built their winter-stay high enough above the normal water level and that it did not rise into their winter-box.

Seeing that I do not know the sex of the three (maybe now two) surviving snakes, I would like to buy a couple of adult *Natrix tessellata* in order to let them mate and to have young in the following spring, see the advert placed in this issue. If anyone should know of a way to prevent cannibalism amongst *Natrix tessellata* then I would be glad to hear it.

Translation: Marion Jasker

Corrections: Mark Wootten

Remark: first snake was seen again march 12, 2001

