snake breeder

The International Newsletter for Snake Enthusiasts

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS MATTISON



Best-selling herpetological author Chris Mattison (shown above at the '89 Dutch 'Snake Day' signing copies of his books) gives his views in an exclusive interview with Snake Breeder.

BREEDING REPORT ON THE COMMON BOA

Cheltenham snake breeders Chris and Marcia Martin report on another successful breeding resulting in 20 young snakes.

INFO

Snakes In Print keeps you informed about other publications which feature your favourite reptile and Forthcoming Events provides information on the latest snake events including the IHS Reptile Fair and the European Snake Society 'Snake Day'.

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*** SEE YOU AT THE IHS REPTILE FAIR ON THE 16th! ***

Snake Breeder

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159 Stanley Hill
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Telephone (0494) 722769
International +44 494 722769
Fax (0494) 728786 (Phone first)

Editor Michael Connolley
Asst. Editor Lesley M. Close

Canadian Representative:
Scott Allen
77 Baronwood Court
Brampton, Ontario
Canada L6V 3H7

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We always need articles and news items for Snake Breeder. The number of people keeping reptiles is growing rapidly and many newcomers to the hobby may benefit from your advice, experience or tips. Don't worry about minor points such as speeling or . punctuation - we'll sort that out. Don't forget, if you don't write it - we can't print it! Obviously you would be offended if we offered you money for your contribution and we respect you for that so, instead, we'll send you five free copies of the newsletter containing your article. Your favourite aunt or uncle will view you in a new light when you present them with a copy of Snake Breeder containing your work. We look forward to hearing from you - soon!

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Welcome to the following new subscribers to Snake Breeder:

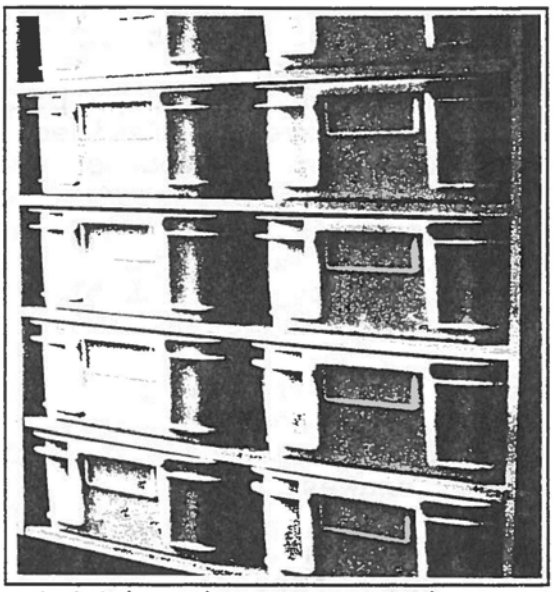
B Ballantyne, Newquay Zoo,
D Legge, A Woods, S Smith,
T Dixon, V Waddingham,
Mr & Mrs Goodfellow, M Smith,
E Kellet (Canada), J Surcouf,
P Longley.

Snake Keeper Back Issues

We can still supply back issues of our previous publication Snake Keeper. If you would like a list of contents and prices telephone (0494) 722769 or write to Snake Keeper Publishing (Back Issues), 159 Stanley Hill, Amersham, Bucks HP7 9EY.

An Interview with Chris Mattison, Part I

The city of Sheffield lies in the north of England at the confluence of the Don River and its tributaries the Sheaf, Rivelin and Lordey rivers. It is a major industrial city, noted especially for its steels and steel products particularly cutlery. Amongst its many inhabitants Sheffield can count herpetological author and MG renovation enthusiast Chris Mattison.



Part of Chris Mattison's snake collection, housed in plastic containers set on heat pads. Photo: Lesley Close.

sb: *Apart from a Sand Boa, some House Snakes and Children's Pythons, all of the snakes you keep are North American species. Why?*

CM: I think there are two reasons. Firstly, there are some interesting snakes that come from North America and, secondly, most North American snakes can be kept in the same way whereas a lot of Asian snakes and African snakes have different requirements from one another. For example, Egg-eating Snakes, desert snakes, arboreal snakes and species like that make a collection interesting but also make maintenance a lot harder. You're talking about different types of cages, different temperature requirements and different food items. By standardising on what I keep and the way that I keep it I find that I can keep a lot more animals and groups of animals rather than just odds and ends. It's really just the way the collection has evolved. I dare say that if something good comes along in the future and I'm interested and I could keep it under more or less the same conditions then I might be tempted. There are one or two African snakes that I'm quite interested in: I like the House Snakes in general and, if I had the opportunity to get hold of some of the more interesting House Snakes, I'd probably start keeping those. My main criterion is that the animals are going to do well in captivity. I'm not really interested in how pretty they are or how big they grow or how much money I can make out of them. I don't like to keep things which I feel are going to be a struggle to keep alive.

Another interesting point about your collection is the absence of any large snakes.

No, they're not my thing. It's like asking someone who keeps guppies why they haven't got a shark. It's a totally different ball game. You need different types of equipment, different cages and methods of heating to say nothing of the extra space. They are not the sort of snakes

that I keep. It's not that I'm discriminating against them, they just don't fit into my set-up and so they don't really appeal to me. I like to see them and I get quite a kick out of seeing a python or boa in a large cage nicely set out but I haven't got the facilities so I tend to stick to what I can keep easily. For a given amount of space and time I'd rather keep 20 pairs of colubrids than one or two pairs of boas or pythons. I'm more interested in having a variety of species.

You're using wood shavings as a substrate in your cages instead of the traditional newspaper. Why?

I never ever did find newspaper was all that good even years and years ago when I used to keep snakes. It never did quite work for me, the damn snake would always crawl under the newspaper. Most of the snakes we keep are secretive things, they like to burrow down in the wood shavings, they don't really like to display themselves. Wood shavings are easy to spot clean and they are not that expensive.

Have you ever had problems with snakes ingesting them?

No, never. How many people do you know that have had that problem? It's the kind of thing people sit at home and theorise about. They assume that if they use wood shavings the snake is going to eat them and die. Take the snakes in Arizona, for instance. No-one is walking around removing all the sand from their food! It's the kind of thing people like to speculate about. I wouldn't keep very small hatchlings on it for other reasons but I've kept everything else on it and never had a problem.

You're selling various products for snake keepers including the heat strips. Why?

The thing about the stock I sell is that it's quite hard to obtain. Over the years I've scrounged around and found things that worked well. I found out where to get the boxes and then where to get the gauze to go in the boxes. Visitors come along to see the set-up and say where do you get that, where do you get this? I didn't really want to become involved with dry goods, I'm not that interested in plastic boxes. However, I decided that I would keep a stock of useful things. It's all stuff that I use myself. It's easier to offer the equipment for sale than to try to think where visitors can get hold of it.

You have a few mouse cages in the snake room but surely not enough to supply the demands of your snakes?

That's right. I get 75% of what I use frozen; it's more convenient but expensive. I wouldn't want to breed a hundred mice a week which is what I'd have to do. It would become almost a full time job just breeding them.

You seem to have a constant stream of visitors to see your animals. Are you ever asked to recommend snakes suitable for beginners?

Yes and I always recommend them anyway, whether the visitors ask for advice or not! When someone calls me I ask them how long they have been keeping snakes. If it's not very long and they ask if I can supply them with a pair of, say, Grey-

banded Kingsnakes I would try to put them off and suggest they go for something easier like California Kingsnakes or Baird's Rat Snakes with which I know they will have success. That will encourage them and they will stay in the hobby. Over the years they will gain expertise and then they can try one or two of the more difficult species. If they lose them it's not the end of the world because they will have already been successful with two or three other things, maybe bred them, made a bit of money out of them. But if the first snake they buy is a Grey-banded Kingsnake which pops its clogs a month later there is a very good chance that they'll go over to parrot keeping or collecting jelly moulds or something. I won't say that I would refuse to sell somebody something if they were determined to have it but I'd certainly do everything I could to put them off. Some people sell snakes for a living so they can't afford to turn customers away. If necessary I could give all my snakes away as I don't rely on that money to pay the mortgage, I just do the snake breeding for fun. I do make some money out of it - it's inevitable if you're successful at breeding something that you're going to make money out of it - but I don't look on it as a business by any means. The money I do make out of it, up to now, has always gone back in for new cages, new animals, equipment and books. I look on it as a hobby that pays for itself.

You're obviously a successful snake breeder. To what do you attribute your success?

Well I think that the biggest problem everybody has is with choice of species. I think that is the single most important reason why people don't do well with snakes. Once I twigged that that was what was happening I decided that, although it is okay to keep all those outrageous kinds and they are very interesting, they don't really adapt very well to captivity. I thought let's forget that stuff for the time being and get on to something that's much more straight-forward, whose biology and needs I understand. I know what makes them tick; I tried out some of my ideas about hibernation and things started to go right. Now I guess I'm in a position where, if I wanted to, I could be a bit more adventurous because I've got a good base level to work from and I could modify the conditions slightly.

You've made regular trips to the United States for the past three years so why not this year?

Well it's a combination of reasons. One is that I have now got a lot of snakes breeding here, more than I had last year. A lot of the animals that I've accumulated over the last couple of years have now begun to breed so it seemed a bit foolish to disappear when things were getting interesting. The other reason is that while I was doing my degree my holidays were restricted to the summer vacation so I went to the States. That is where it was all happening at that time of the year so it seemed an obvious thing to do. But now I'm in a position to take a break when I want to so I can enjoy the summer here as well as my snakes and, if necessary, I can go away in the winter.

How does snake keeping in the States compare with over here?

It's not that different. A lot of people over here have the idea that the keepers over there are the experts, they really know a lot and snake keeping here is still in its infancy. It's just not true. The difference is that over the years they have obviously had access to a lot more animals and they've obviously been able to be a lot more selective with their strains. The ones they keep are nicer, they tend to send us what is left, which is inevitable. It's not a conspiracy, it's what happens. If I've got 10 Pueblan Milk Snakes upstairs that I've bred and somebody in the States that I've never heard of has ordered four then, obviously, all my friends that have ordered them get first choice and the remaining four get sent to the States and that is what has been happening in reverse. They are prepared to spend a lot more money on their animals. They appreciate quality and if it's something exceptional they don't really mind what they pay for it. Their techniques are the same. Their outlook is more or less the same. Prices tend to be about the same. Generally speaking, snakes aren't any cheaper in the States than they are here. The best people here are doing just as well as the best people there and the beginners here are doing just as badly as the beginners there.

How do feel about the strange crosses some North American snake keepers produce?

It is interesting from a biological point of view to know that snakes will hybridise. So I'm for it in that way. If someone has tried something and it has worked then that is interesting. Having tried it and got some babies which are very pretty what are you going to do with them, flush them down the toilet? It is inevitable that the breeder is going to try to sell them. Now if there is somebody else who likes them and is prepared to pay money for them suddenly you've got a market. No-one has actually sat there and thought 'let's mess up snake breeding, let's produce hybrids': it happens without anybody doing anything about it. From my point of view I wouldn't want to have a collection of hydbrids and I wouldn't want to introduce hybrids but if there are people who are into that kind of thing then who am I to criticise. I just think we have to be a bit careful. The main worry is that some of these things are going to get into the trade and they won't be sold as what they really are, either by accident or design. You'll buy a pair of Arizona Mountain Kingsnakes in all good faith and two years later breed them and the young will come out pink with purple spots and what you have actually bought is some kind of hybrid, perhaps three different parent species, and suddenly you're getting all these throwbacks and you won't know where you are.

*****

In the second part of this interview, which will appear in next month's issue, Chris explains how he came to write his first book, gives advice to would-be authors and offers a prediction for the future of UK snake keeping.

Editor's note. For a description of Chris Mattison's collection and methods of housing see Barry Pomfret's 2½ page article in the August '90 issue of the MKHS Newsletter.

Breeding Report on the Common Boa Constrictor

by Chris and Marcia Martin

Our story starts back in 1985 on the night of April the 17th. On this night Abigail, our Common Boa Constrictor, gave birth for the third time in her life. She lifted her tail and, with a natural knowledge, gave birth to 41 young.

A week or so passed and all of the young snakes sloughed. We decided to keep one of them for breeding purposes and the chosen female was named Gorbash because of the manner in which she attacked her food.

Gorbash was housed in a wooden vivarium heated by a trough-type ceramic heater and lit by a True-lite tube. An electronic thermostat kept the temperature at 90°F during the day and 80°F at night. All our boas are kept at this temperature. This temperature and the photoperiod (12/12) is maintained for 365 days a year, no seasonal variation is needed.

As soon as Gorbash was big enough she was kept with her half-sister, Guinivere, until the beginning of 1988 when Guinivere was placed with a male. The subsequent mating resulted in 28 young.

Time passed for Gorbash. Sleeping and eating were her main activities until the day came, in mid-March 1989, when she met her first male boa. The two snakes crawled all over each other and then went to opposite ends of the 6'x2'x2' vivarium, curled up, and went to sleep!

We decided to leave them together but nothing happened until 4pm on the 5th June when they finally came together and mated. They stayed together for about four weeks. Over the next few weeks Gorbash started to change shape and get fatter. She would still eat but only half-grown rats - her normal food is 4lb to 5lb rabbits.

Using her mother and half-sister as a guide we estimated that Gorbash would give birth in early January.

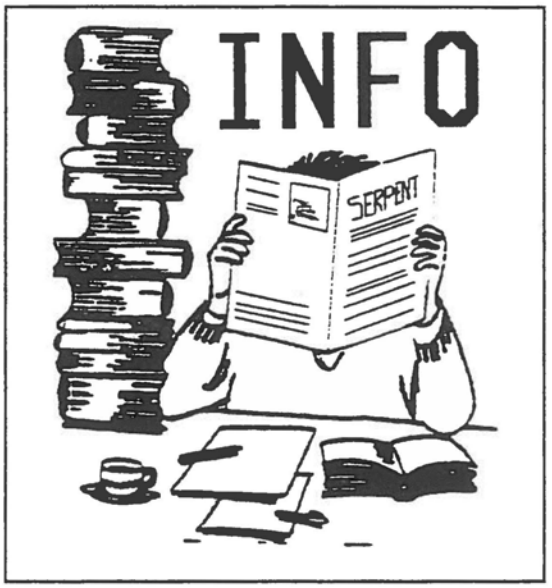
January came and went but no young appeared. Gorbash wasn't that fat but she 'jumped' every few weeks. We have found that our boas 'jump' when they are gravid. It is almost as though one of the babies is kicking. February and March came and went, still without any young being born. April arrived and, finally, on the evening of the 4th day of the new month Gorbash gave birth to 20 live young and 13 infertile eggs. The young started to slough on the 16th and their first meal was offered on the 21st. Sixteen of the 20 fed and the remaining four ate a few days later.

On June 6th 1990 Guinivere gave birth to another large clutch.

If you wish to contact us about keeping snakes you can write to us at 18, Ballinode Close, Cheltenham, Gloucs GL50 4SQ or telephone (0242) 573477.

APOLOGIES

Because of events beyond our control (we needed a short holiday!) the editors apologise for the late arrival of this issue of Snake Breeder.



SNAKES IN PRINT

Reptile Keeper International
Number 4 (A4)
Northern Herpetological Society
8 Bromley Gardens, Battle Hill, Wallsend, North Tyneside, NE28 9BS.

Garter Snakes - *Thamnophis, Part II* by Dr. sc. Dieter Schmidt. (2 pages.) Second part of Dr. Schmidt's article on Garter Snakes covering feeding and breeding.

Early Experiences with the Pacific Boa, *Candoia carinata* by Kevin J. Hingley and Mark Hemmings. (2 pages.) West Midlands snake breeding duo offer a description of the Pacific Boa and describe the maintenance and feeding of their four month-old snakes.

Remarks on the husbandry of *Pseustes poecilonotus* by Rolf Rese. (1 page.) Translation of German author's experience with this nocturnal, semi-arboreal snake from Central America.

The Aesculapian Snake, *Elaphe longissima* by Richard Zychski. (1 page.) Brief account of the this species from a Polish perspective covering habitat and location.

MKHS Newsletter
September 1990 (A4)
Milton Keynes Herpetological Society
15 Esk Way, Bletchley, Milton Keynes MK3 7PW.

Bob's Rescue by Barry Pomfret. (2½ pages.) MKHS Secretary's interesting account of how he purchased a Red-tail Boa and was given an emaciated Royal Python. Although the python must surely have been close to death Barry managed, through patience and perseverance, to save the snake and this article explains how he did it.

The Corn Snake, *Elaphe guttata* by Jeff Protheroe. (1½ pages.) MKHS Chairman's description and guide to the captive keeping of his "ideal first time purchase".

BHS Bulletin
No 32 Summer 1990
ISSN 0260-5805 (A5)
British Herpetological Society
c/o Zoological Society of London, Regent's Park, London NW1 4RY

Snakebite by Saul Halpern. (3 pages.) A general overview of snakebites as presented by the author in his lecture at the BHS 1989 AGM. Short but detail packed article covering the pathological effects of snake venom, gangrene, sea snake bites and recommended first aid.

Notes on Black Mamba *(Dendroaspis polylepis)* Envenomation Treatment Using the Pressure/Immobilisation First

Aid Technique by GV Haagner. (4 pages.) The author describes the history of the treatment which originated in Australia and its application. A case history is given for an adult male who was bitten by a three year old captive raised Black Mamba. The victim had previously been bitten by *Bitis arietans arietans*, *Bitis caudalis*, *Dendroaspis augusticeps*, *Naja haje annulifera* and *Naja mossambica*. Symptoms and treatment are listed, followed by a discussion.

Notes on the Genus *Atheris* by Catharine E. Pook. (6 pages.) Includes introduction, description, scalation, habitat and distribution and feeding for this genus of attractive arboreal vipers. The account mainly concentrates on *Atheris squamiger* and *A. nitschei* and includes two colour plates of the latter.

Litteratura Serpentium
Volume 10 No 2 - April 1990 (A5)
Dutch Snake Society
Pauwenweld 18, 2727 DE Zoetermeer, The Netherlands.
Telephone 079-416592.

Thermoregulation of the Adder, *Vipera berus berus* by Hans van der Rijst. (9 pages.) In-depth account of how the Adder regulates its temperature during the spring and summer.

Venomous or Not?: Some Further Data by Ton Steehouder. The author believes it is not correct to classify snakes as venomous or non-venomous or to conclude that all non-venomous snakes are completely harmless under all circumstances. He advises caution with respect to all snake bites and cites various examples to justify his claim.

Melbourne's Snakes, Part I by Raymond T. Hoser. (10 pages.) Mr Hoser begins his two part guide to the snakes of Melbourne with a description of the city, its population, weather and geography. Melbourne has only seven species of snakes within 50km of the city centre. These are the Copperhead (*Austrelaps superbus*), Small-eyed Snake (*Cryptophis nigrescens*), White-lipped Snake (*Drysdalia coronoides*), Eastern Tiger Snake (*Notechis scutatus*), Red-bellied Black Snake (*Pseudechis porphyriacus*), Eastern Brown Snake (*Pseudonaja textilis*) and the Little Whip Snake (*Unechis flagellum*). The first two snakes are covered in detail in part one (including a colour plate of each). The author explains that the Copperhead, Eastern Tiger and Eastern Brown Snakes are deadly and before the advent of antivenoms claimed numerous lives. He continues, "Deaths are recorded from the bites of the Small-eyed and Red-bellied Black Snakes, but in all cases have been in exceptional circumstances, (such as severe alcohol inebriation of the victim)..." Exceptional circumstances! What's this? And I believed those adverts about hard-drinking Australians who wouldn't give a XXXX for anything else!

elaphe
Volume 12 No 3 1990 (A5)
ISSN 0233-1470
Kulturbund e. V., Heinrich-Heine-Strasse 86, Schönow, DDR-1282.

Haltung und Nachzucht von *Pituophis melanoleucus* by R Schulz and W Buchorn. (G) (1 page.) The authors' 1.7m snakes

were cooled for eight weeks during the winter. They mated and the female produced three eggs measuring 8cm x 6cm. These were incubated on top of the vivarium and the young were born in September 1988 after an incubation period of 60 days. Another clutch of eggs were laid in 1989 and the article describes the feeding of the young.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Items for inclusion in this column are welcome and should include time, date, venue and a contact telephone number.

15th & 16th September

PRAS Annual Show, Co-op Hall, Fratton, Portsmouth. Contact PRAS on (0329) 833017

16th September 10.15am - 4pm

IHS Reptile Fair 1990. Sports Hall, Alumwell Centre, Primley Avenue, Walsall, West Midlands.

16th September

WHS Reptile Appreciation Day, Visitors Centre, Arrow Park, Birkenhead. Contact Eve Cavanagh on (051) 639 1197.

20th October 9.30am

European Snake Society 'Snake Day', University of Utrecht, Dept 'Bizondere Dieren', Yaleaan 1, De Uithof, Utrecht.

IHS Reptile Fair 1990

This event takes place on the 16th September and was very popular (and well organised) last year and promises to be even better this year. To reach the new venue leave the M6 at J10 and follow the signs for Walsall. Approximately 200 yards from the junction there is a set of traffic lights. Go straight over (when they're green!) and Primley Avenue is the first turning on the right along the dual carriageway. The Centre is a quarter of a mile along the avenue on the right hand side.

Adults (16 and over) will have to pay £1 for entrance and children (10 to 15 years) 50p. Refreshments will be available. Traders attending include Dave Blatchford, Tony Mobbs, the British Tarantula Society, Geoff Clarke, Ann Clegg and Kim Loader, Cliverton Ltd, Jerry Cole, Jon Coote, Custom Aquaria, Custom Badges, Dave Garthwaite, Locusta, MF Exotics, Chris Mattison, IHS (Nottingham Branch), Peregrine Supplies, JJE Wright and Snake Breeder. Don't forget to say hello!

European Snake Society 'Snake Day' 1990

The ESS, formerly the Dutch Snake Society, have announced that their popular 'Snake Day' will be held on the 20th October this year. The venue is the same as last year, the University of Utrecht. HM Customs and Excise will no doubt be practising their body search and vehicle stripping routines in preparation for those misguided snake keepers who think they can just pop through the green channel without raising suspicion. Don't take the risk! If you intend to bring snakes back and they need documents, now is the

time to act. Write for details to the Department of the Environment, Endangered Species Branch, Tollgate House, Houlton Street, Bristol BS2 9DJ. Telephone (0272) 218202. Fax (0272) 218206. The DoE advise that applications take at least three weeks to process.

MAILBOX

Dear Snake Breeder,

I read with interest P. Kite's letter in Snake Breeder, August 1990, regarding her 'Honduran Boas'. If the author is correct in their subspecific identification (*occidentalis*) then it is little wonder that she cannot find any information or decent photographs of similar snakes because the subspecies *Boa constrictor occidentalis* is found in Argentina and Paraguay, not Honduras. However, the Common Boa Constrictor can be highly variable in colour and markings when adult, so it may be that P. Kite simply owns dark examples of *B. c. constrictor* or even hybrids between two or more subspecies. There are several books with colour photographs of *B. c. occidentalis*, three of which spring to mind immediately. These are: 'Fascination (Snakes and Lizards)' by F. Kundert, 'Pythons and Boas' by Peter Stafford and 'The Snakes of South America' by Dr Marcus Freiberg. With regard to sexing these snakes they should be very easy to probe considering the lengths given. I have found scale counts amongst most boids to be very confusing compared to colubrid snakes. Hopefully P. Kite is either familiar with the use of sexing probes or has a friend who can do this.

The common names applied to the subspecies *occidentalis* are Argentine Boa, Southern Boa or Chocolate Boa if it's of interest to anyone.

Yours sincerely,

Kevin J. Hingley
Dudley

Dear Readers,

I am hoping someone can help me discover the whereabouts of Barry who used to own Respectable Reptiles in Hampton Hill. He was selling my female Indian Python for me on a commission basis but has since closed his shop and taken the tanks and snakes (including mine)!

I have left several letters at the shop which have been collected but he has still not contacted me. I am very concerned about the situation and I hope someone may be able to help me.

Yours faithfully, A. Harris
London



CLASSIFIED ADVERTS

FOR SALE

Indian Pythons. Female 14½', £175. Female 10', £165. Male 8½', £155. All feeding well on dead food and very tame. All three purchased together will include very large vivarium. Tel: Mike on (081) 886 9962.

Hatchling striped-phase **California Kingsnakes, Corn Snakes** and **Sand Boas.** Phone Mark Johnson on (0272) 853894.

Sliding glass locks, £3.50 each including postage/packing. Chris Martin, 18 Ballinode Close, Cheltenham, Gloucs GL50 4SQ. Telephone (0242) 573477.

Indian Pythons. Hatched mid-June from captive-bred parents. All very tame and eating well (dead). Parents may be seen. Collection only. £100. (0323) 898515 (Sussex).

Carolina Corn Snake hatchlings. Ready September, £15. Telephone (0394) 271500.

Two **Black Rat Snakes** (*Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta*). Captive-bred, approximately 36" long. Feeding well, £40 each. Two **Bull/Gopher Snakes** (*Pituophis melanoleucus spp.*). Captive-bred, approximately 30" long. Feeding well, £45 each. All plus carriage. Contact Ed Dixon, 1 Birds Nest Road, St Anthonys, Newcastle on Tyne NE6 2TD.

Captive-bred **Burmese Pythons.** Hatched early July. Feeding on frozen food. Parents can be seen. £50 to £60 each. Captive-bred 4' male **Corn Snake.** Feeding on frozen mice, £60 ono. Phone Mark on (08323) 492 (Cambs).

Captive-bred **Corn Snakes**, £20. **California Kingsnakes**, £35. Phone Plymouth (0752) 790748.

Captive-bred **Fox Snakes**, *Elaphe vulpina vulpina*, £40 each or £70 pair. **Black Racers**, £25 each or £40 pair. Captive-bred *Elaphe schrenckii anomala*, £45 each. Captive-bred *Elaphe bimaculata*, £15 each. Captive-born **Western Garter Snakes**, £5 each. Telephone (0494) 815319.

Corn Snake hatchlings, feeding well. £16.50p each. Phone Maidenhead (0628) 32166 eves.

Burmese Python, male, 8'. Feeding well on dead rats. Forced sale. £120 ono. Phone Caleb on (0487) 822237 (Cambs).

Albino **California Kingsnakes**, £50 ono. Replies to: Box 33, Snake Breeder, 159 Stanley Hill, Amersham, Bucks HP7 9EY.

Pair of **Honduran Milk Snakes**, 4', £150. Pair of **Honduran Milk Snakes**, tangerine phase, 3', £150. Pair of **California Kingsnakes**, male 2½', female 3', £150. Will not split. Captive-bred **Grey Rat Snakes** and captive-bred **Black Rat Snakes**, £15 each. Telephone (0442) 41453.

WANTED

Adult male **Common Boa Constrictor** for breeding. Contact Mark on (08323) 492.

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