snake breeder

The International Newsletter for Snake Enthusiasts

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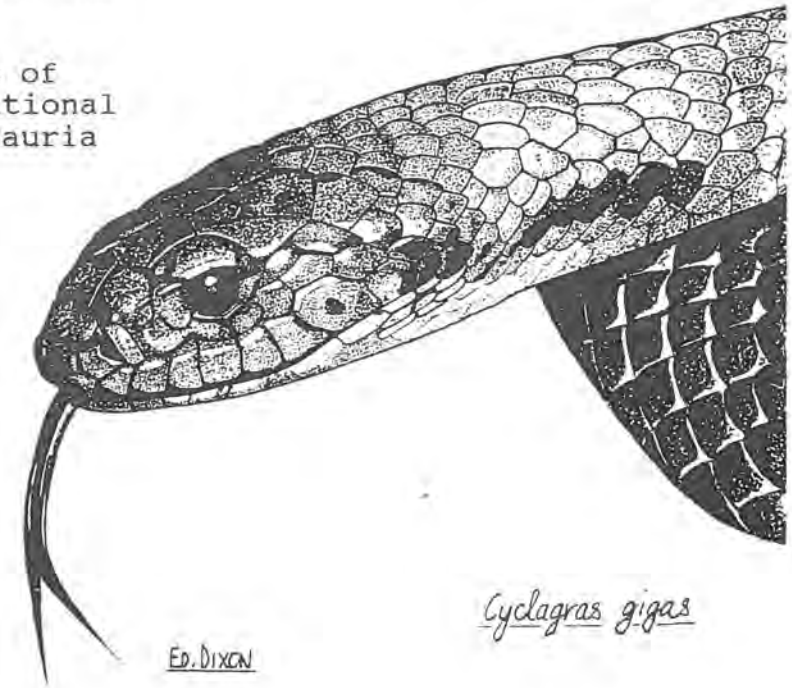
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Subscription Rates:

UK & Europe	6 issues	£10
	12 issues	£18
Rest of the World	6 issues	£11
	12 issues	£20

Payment by cash, cheque or money order in Sterling or US$.

Trade Advertising Rates:

Display	1/4 page £8
	1/2 page £15
	1 page £30

(based on ready-to-paste copy)
Inserts (A4) £5 per 100 (UK & Europe).

NEW SUBSCRIPTIONS AND RENEWALS

Thank you to the following people who have recently subscribed or renewed their subscriptions to snake breeder:

K Burnett, D Chappell, J Burgess, J Brown, S Goss, M Bannister, P Busfield, D Silvester, J Cooper and R Trant.

snake breeder
January 1991 1/91

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snake breeder NEWSFILE

Welcome to the first issue of 1991, you will probably notice a few minor changes have been made to your newsletter for the new year. No doubt you will remember reading in last month's issue that there will be no increase in the subscription rates for this year. This will be achieved mainly by savings in production costs; during 1991 the newsletter will be printed rather than photocopied. We should also be able to include more colour pictures and occasional extra pages in forthcoming issues, including an updated list of British herpetological societies and a list of British snake breeders.

Our current print run is 400 copies a month.

FREE COPIES AND SUBSCRIPTIONS

Readers are invited to submit articles on any aspect of snake keeping and breeding whether they be crisply laser printed or hastily scribbled on the back of a cornflakes packet. Instead of offering money (which you would only squander anyway) we will send you five free copies of the issue containing your article and extend your subscription.

The Care of Hatchling Blood Pythons, *Python curtus breitensteini*

by Simon J Crunden

Ever since I first became interested in herpetology, one of my greatest ambitions has been to keep Blood Pythons, *Python curtus*. I was immediately attracted by photographs of the python which is totally the wrong reason for wanting to keep a snake as the beauty of the animal has no bearing on its being easy or practical to keep.

Blood Pythons, in fact, are very difficult to keep because of the conditions they require. Most specimens that are available are wild-caught adults which are vicious and rarely settle in captivity. The lack of detailed literature on them and the rarity of captive bred snakes led me to believe it would be a long time before I would own one.

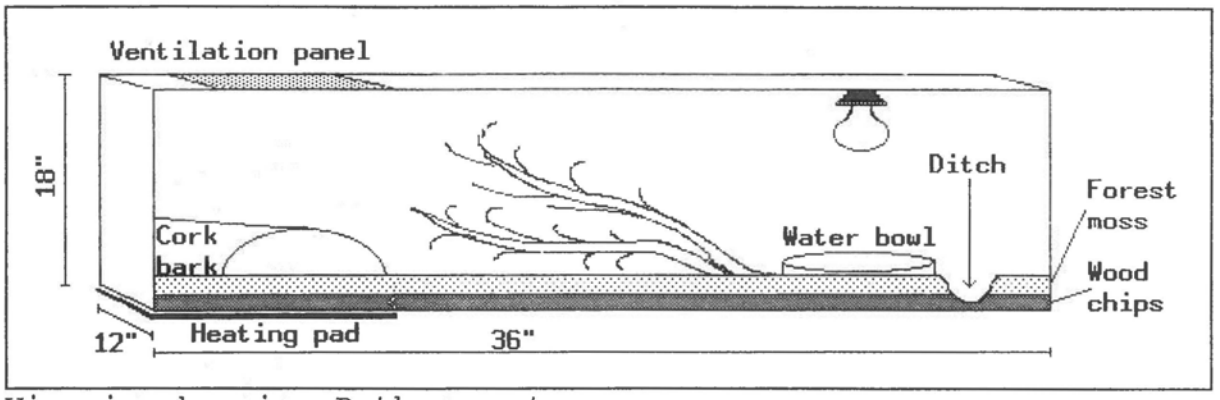
However, early last year I was lucky enough to find a captive bred hatchling *Python curtus breitensteini* which had been bred in Germany. It was reasonably priced and I felt I could not pass up such an opportunity. I was lucky enough to see six that were available and chose what I thought was the brightest, fattest and most alert specimen.

There are three subspecies of the Blood Python, the nominate form from Western Sumatra, *P. c. brongersmai* from Southern Indo-China and Eastern Sumatra and *P. c. breitensteini* from Borneo. There are three distinct colour differences between the three. *P. c. breitensteini* is not the brick-red coloured snake that most photographs show but a deep rusty brown with yellow and silver on its back and flanks and a cream-coloured head still bearing the familiar line from the eye to the back of the mouth. It is a stunningly attractive animal.

The natural habitat of Blood Pythons is swampland and dense rainforest; they are basically semi-aquatic. It is usual to see them at night partially submerged in water-filled ditches or at the edge of rivers awaiting prey, predominantly small mammals and birds.

Due to the lack of information on keeping these animals I had to decide, using the little literature which I had, how to accommodate my new guest. I felt that correct humidity was, clearly, the key to keeping them successfully and having spoken to a few people who I knew kept adults successfully I decided on my method and prepared suitable accommodation.

I used a glass aquarium with a vivarium lid instead of a wooden vivarium because the humidity required would soon rot a wooden box. Also the ventilation available on a tank lid is not too great and doesn't allow too much moisture to escape. As substrate I used a thin layer of woodchips covered by a second layer of forest moss. I put a ceramic water bowl at the same end of the tank as the light bulb. I dug a ditch round the back of the water bowl and placed an arch of cork bark at the other end of the tank and added a



Vivarium housing *Python curtus*

couple of tree branches.

This set up, in my opinion, provides three vital things:

1. High humidity created by shining the light bulb directly into the water bowl and by the low ventilation (but not too low) provided by the vivarium lid.

2. A ditch beside the water bowl which allows the snake to dig in and gives the illusion of a swamp or river bank. This feature also allows the snake to be kept in that part of the tank at its optimum temperature of 86° to 90°F.

3. Plenty of opportunity to hide and keep dry at the other end of the tank. A heating pad (as shown in the diagram) was placed under the glass at the cork bark end of the tank for night-time heating, keeping that end dry and providing a place for the snake to heat up if necessary. The temperature was allowed to drop to around 80° F at night.

When I was satisfied with the tank layout I left the snake undisturbed for a few days. The next step was, of course, feeding. Again from what I could gather, Blood Pythons could be difficult to feed but a dead mouse was offered (with its head heated in hot water) at about 10pm on the fourth night. After a few seconds it was struck and consumed readily. I was amazed at the power of the strike but then they are extremely powerful animals.

Four months have passed since that first feed and the snake has consumed 30 mice and is now taking small rats. This I found miraculous as Blood Pythons have such a bad reputation. The fact that he was captive bred made life easier but I believe the vivarium conditions contributed a great deal.

I have since acquired another hatchling Blood Python of the same species and, once again, under the same conditions, he too is thriving. I hope this article will prove helpful to others who keep this beautiful and fascinating animal.

Royal News
The Newsletter for Royal Python Owners Everywhere

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Difficult Babies

by Kevin J Hingley

With more and more people beginning to keep snakes each year it is hardly surprising that, equally, more snakes are being bred annually and nowhere was this more in evidence than at the International Herpetological Society's 'Reptile Fair' in September. However, not everyone who bought snakes at the fair was, it seems, entirely happy with the snakes they bought. I have no intention of naming names or apportioning blame: these things happen and even captive bred snakes are not infallible. In addition it may not be the snakes that are at fault but their new owners, whose systems of keeping snakes may differ somewhat from the methods employed by those people who sell their surplus stock at such an event.

One assumes that by buying captive bred or born hatchling snakes nothing should go wrong but it can and sometimes does. We would be extremely fortunate if every snake to hatch from a clutch of eggs fed immediately after the neonate slough and continued to do so unerringly. Sadly they don't always behave so favourably and newcomers to the hobby may be unaware that it is they who are doing something wrong. Probably the most common cause of newly purchased snakes, especially hatchlings, not feeding is that their new owner is handling them far too often, the 'child with a new toy' syndrome, as I call it. Hatchling colubrid snakes often measure less than 30cm in length; imagine, if you can, what it must be like to be so small and to be picked up by a giant creature. It isn't difficult to understand why these little snakes are petrified and won't feed. An absolute minimum of disturbance, even only for a few days can make all the difference and often does once suggested to the owner.

Most of the larger scale keepers/breeders do not have the time to handle their snakes frequently simply for pleasure. They have many snakes to care for: maintaining a large collection is akin to painting the Forth Bridge in that by the time you've got around to the last cage the first one you cleaned has been soiled again. These keepers usually also breed their own supply of mice and rats and these are also time consuming and leave even less time to 'play' with their snakes. If you bought a young captive bred snake at the Fair or from some other source which has yet to feed for itself, consider first the possibility that you (or someone else in the family) is overhandling it or disturbing it unduly in some other way.

Another cause of refusal to feed, other than the obvious incorrect temperature levels (too high, too low or no thermal gradient), is cage size. I have heard of people placing hatchling rat and king snakes (used as examples as they rank amongst the most popular species) in vivaria large enough for adults. This rarely works for a number of reasons, the main one being the psychological effect it has on the snake. Obviously in the wild, hatchlings have plenty of space to move around in but we know comparatively little about the behaviour patterns of

hatchlings in the wild compared to those in captivity. Captive hatchlings do appear to suffer from something very similar to agoraphobia when placed in a large vivarium. Therefore it seems quite logical that they will do better in small housing. Before someone writes in to say that they have a hatchling Corn Snake doing fine in an adult Burmese Python-sized vivarium, I'm quite prepared to accept that there will always be exceptions. There are various ways of raising young snakes, one of the most popular methods at the moment is to house them in small well-ventilated plastic containers which are kept in either a large heated vivarium or on heated shelves. I won't go into detail as these and other methods are described in good books such as Chris Mattison's 'Keeping and Breeding Snakes', as well as in many articles in **snake breeder** and other publications.

Overcrowding may also be the cause of a snake refusing to feed, young and old alike. For a number of reasons snakes are always best housed individually outside the breeding season. This not only reduces or eradicates the risk of cross-infection but it also avoids accidental cannibalism and eliminates one source of stress.

Your snake may be refusing to feed because it is being offered the wrong size or type of prey, or this prey is being presented in the wrong manner. It has recently been written (Simpson, 1990) that young boids such as Rainbow Boas, *Epicrates cenchria* ssp., would find mice larger than pink mice acceptable as they are unlikely to encounter mice as small as newborn or pinkies on the forest floor. Each species has different capabilities; king and milk snakes, for example, do not have as large a gape as other colubrids or boids. Large prey may be refused simply because the snake is instinctively aware of its capabilities and will thus only tackle small prey items. Stubborn non-feeders can be found amongst most, if not all, species but there are several methods which can be used in order to induce these snakes to feed before resorting to force feeding or pinky pumping. Some hatchlings will accept mutilated prey, whereby a dead mouse has had its nose tip cut off or its belly slit open and blood smeared over the head and body. Another method involves rubbing the prey with a dead lizard, snake or frog or even the amniotic fluid from a reptilian egg shell (odour manipulation) in order to impart the scent of a reptile onto a mouse and fool the snake into thinking it is being offered more 'natural' prey. Many young snakes feed on other reptiles and amphibians before graduating onto mice and rats when older.

Assist feeding is the penultimate stage before force feeding or pinky pumping. This involves taking the snake firmly but gently behind the head and tapping its nose with a dead mouse of suitable size. This usually induces the snake to open its mouth and by placing the prey in the mouth the snake should bite it and subsequently swallow it. This process takes patience and an ability to keep fairly still; sudden movements can cause the snake to spit the prey out. The process may have to be repeated several times before the prey

is swallowed completely but after a few such feeds the snake will probably begin to feed on prey simply placed in its cage or offered on tweezers or forceps. If pinkies appear to be too large then sections, such as a rear leg, can be used instead of the whole pinky. Make sure there are no sharp fragments of leg bone sticking out though as these may cut or pierce the snake's throat. Feeding in this manner is best restricted to once per week to reduce the number of times the snake is subjected to any stress.

I'm not saying don't handle your snakes, just don't handle them too often, especially on a daily basis. When a regular feeding pattern has been established or the snake is older and therefore larger and easier to handle it is less likely to be affected by this handling. Be prepared to experiment with food types and feeding methods. Most hatchlings can go for a month without food so don't be tempted to assist or force feed simply because it has refused the first meal it was offered. Try offering food during the day and at night and, if necessary, cover the cage or leave the room if the snake refuses to feed because it can see you watching it. Do experiment with temperature levels, as one or two degrees higher or lower can sometimes make all the difference.

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Mattison, C. 1988. Keeping and Breeding Snakes. Blandford Press, London.

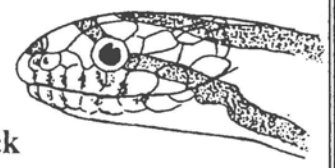
Simpson, S. 1990. Letter to the Editor, The Herptile 15 (4). Journal of the IHS.(Due out December 1990).



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A Case of Egg Binding in a Corn Snake

by Allison McNeill (USA)

This year we had an interesting experience with our female Corn Snake, *Elaphe guttata guttata*. Last year when we mated her she had a false pregnancy (see **snake breeder**, 7/90).

This year we decided to try the same pair again and see if we would have better luck. The male of the pair, Cinnabar, is a captive bred, amelanistic Corn Snake hatched in 1987. The female, Poppy, was acquired from a pet store in 1987 and her origin and age are unknown. Both were in good health as far as we could tell.

The snakes were hibernated from the 9th of December 1989 to the 4th of March 1990. They were kept at room temperature for a week after coming out and then heated to their normal cage temperature. The female weighed 500 grams and the male weighed 410 grams after hibernation. The female ate eight mice between the 10th of March and the 4th of April, when she shed her skin. The male ate only two mice during that period and was very restless. The year before, when he had failed to fertilise the female, he had eaten much more during that period and had not been restless, so we were hopeful that this year would be different.

Poppy and Cinnabar copulated four times, on the 7th, 11th, 12th and 13th of March. Poppy was introduced into Cinnabar's cage and copulation lasted 10 to 15 minutes each time. By lining the cage with paper towels I could tell if copulation had occurred by the presence of semen stains on the substrate. Following the last copulation Poppy began to swell and she became enormous. She ate only two more mice in March. We kept her in a cage consisting of two plastic storage boxes, one stacked inside the other. The lower one was painted black and lined with damp sphagnum moss. A hole led to the upper level which was lined with paper towel and contained the water bowl. We hardly saw Poppy at all during this time.

Poppy finally shed on the 14th of April. After that I checked her frequently. With our other females we could tell when they were about to lay because they would spend all their time in the nest box but Poppy had been spending all her time there anyway. On the 25th of April we came home from work and found Poppy laying eggs; she had already laid about 12. At about 11pm we assumed she was probably done and decided to check on her again. She had laid 22 eggs! However, she still had one egg about a foot from her vent and some others lower down. We decided to wait until morning to see what happened.

The next morning Poppy still had not laid the remaining eggs. We decided to remove those which had been laid and put them in the incubator. However, they were stuck to the bottom of the cage so we had to incubate the bottom part of the cage and set up a new nesting box for Poppy in a 10 gallon tank. I noticed that the last eggs to be laid were yellowish and less firm than the earlier ones. Perhaps this is why Poppy had had so much trouble

expelling them. That morning she did manage to lay the three that were near her cloaca but the one further up had not budged. We called a friend and he told us to try soaking her in warm water, which we did to no avail. By the 28th, despite repeated soakings, there was no progress so we called our friend again and he suggested we take Poppy over to his house.

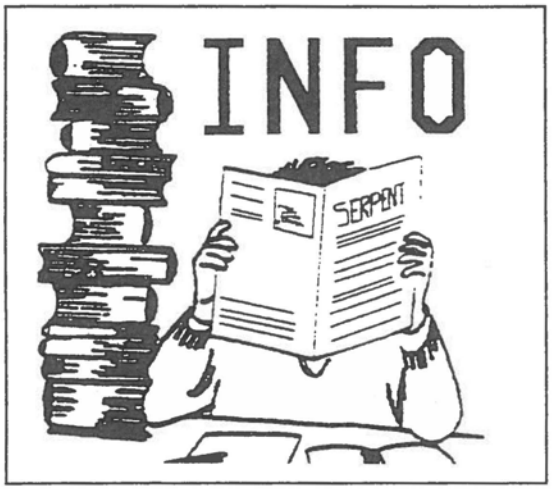
Our friend, Kevin, sterilised a syringe and punctured the egg through Poppy's belly to withdraw some of the fluid in the egg. He hoped that by reducing the size of the egg it could be manipulated. He withdrew as much fluid as he could but was only able to move the egg about an inch. So we took Poppy home and tried soaking her again, once more without success.

The next day I called our veterinarian, Dr Carolyn Glass, and explained the situation to her. (This whole episode happened over a holiday weekend when vets are not available.) I asked Dr Glass whether the egg should be removed surgically. She said she would like to try some other things first, so I took Poppy into the surgery where she was kept overnight. While there she was given fluids, lubrication in her oviduct and Oxytocin. By the next day there was still no progress so it was decided that surgery was in order. Dr Glass had never done this operation and suggested that we contact the veterinary school at Tufts University but we decided we would like her to do the operation. After consulting the vets at the school, Dr Glass operated on Poppy on the 31st of May and removed the egg through an incision in Poppy's side. We took her home on the 1st of June. We had to give her an oral medication, liquid Ditrim, every night and tube feed her a baby food mixture every few days. She was not very cooperative about this which was odd because she is normally very docile and she was one of the most difficult snakes we have ever medicated orally. Things went well until the 4th of June when the wound began to seep and I noticed heat in that portion of her body. The next night I took her back to the vet who determined that the dissolving sutures had dissolved too soon. On the 6th, Dr Glass operated again and resutured, using permanent sutures this time. She said Poppy might have sustained intestinal damage from the shifting of her oviduct which had been pressing on her intestines and we should keep a close eye on her defecations. Fortunately Poppy continued to defecate fairly normally.

On the 27th of June we started offering her solid food again, starting with fuzzy mice and pinkie rats. Since then she has had a good appetite and her wound has healed very nicely. She has regained the weight she lost during her ordeal and is now up to 580 grams. Needless to say we aren't planning to mate her again. This was a traumatic and expensive experience for all concerned. Cinnabar will be mated with a friend's females next year and we have a yearling amelanistic female who will be ready to breed the year after so Cinnabar is not forced to retire.

In addition to Poppy's survival there is another happy ending to this story. Eighteen of her eggs hatched, starting on the

26th of June. All but one of the babies ate without needing any encouragement and they are all doing very well now. Two of the babies have unusual markings: one has about four blotches joined together on the front portion of its body with spots over its eyes and another has a lot of striping. Another interesting thing is that there are four distinct colour phases among the babies. I suspect that the eggs that didn't hatch were duds to start with and by the time they were ready to be laid Poppy was tired out. Since they had thin skins they didn't pass easily along the oviduct. After all 26 eggs is a lot! Hopefully we won't have this problem again.



SNAKES IN PRINT

MKHS Newsletter
December '90 (A4)
Milton Keynes Herpetological Society
15 Esk Way, Bletchley, Milton Keynes MK3 7PW.

▸ **Courtship Behaviour in *Lampropeltis* (Kingsnakes and Milksnakes)** by Jeff Protheroe. (Two pages.)

Submission, tactile chasing, tactile alignment, intromission and coitus; a brief guide for keepers who have a suspicion their snakes are not just playing follow-my-leader.

▸ **The Golden Python** by Barry Pomfret. (Two pages.)

A history of the albino Burmese Python from their first appearance (on the cover of National Geographic magazine in 1981) to the present day, priced now at only £500 a head and falling.

▸ **Genetics of Albinism** by Mike Mixon. (Three pages.)

Punnett square time again as Mike offers a guide to anyone confused by the genetics of albinism and explains the difference between amelanistic and anerythristic snakes.

▸ **The Royal Birth** by Nina Alpe. (Four pages.)

Time was when unicorns were more common than captive bred *Python regius* in Britain but that's all changing thanks to people like Hertfordshire keeper Nick Bessant (three eggs hatched out of five in early July) and Milton Keynes based Nina Alpe (eight eggs hatched out of nine on the 21st of June).

Reptile Keeper International
Volume 1 Number 7 (A4)
8 Bromley Gardens, Battlehill, Wallsend, Tyne & Wear NE28 9BS

▸ **Cannibalism in *Elaphe guttata*** by Lothar Neumann. (One page.)

Herr Lothar warns of the

dangers of leaving two snakes in the same tank with five pink mice. He returned after lights out to find his 32cm Corn Snake had swallowed 27cm of his 31cm Corn Snake.

Sauria
Volume 12 Number 2 June 1990
ISSN 0176 9391 (17 x 23cm)
TGB-Sauria, Lepsiusstr 53, D-1000 Berlin 41

▸ **Beobachtungen an der Pfeilotter (*Causus rhombeatus*) Lichtenstein 1823) im nördlichen Transvaal, Südafrika** by Harald Nicolay. (Four pages, three colour plates. G with E extract.)

The Common Night Adder is briefly introduced. Reference is made to feeding behaviour, reproduction, venom toxicity and natural history in the northern Transvaal, South Africa.

▸ **Über eine verkannte *Trimeresurus*-Art aus Thailand** by Gernot Vogel. (Three pages, three colour plates. G with E extract.)

A snake imported into Germany under the name *Trimeresurus erythrurus* is compared with the real *Trimeresurus erythrurus* and *T. popeorum* which reveals that this dubious species appears to be a subspecies of the latter.

▸ **Beitrag zur Ernährung eines Jungtieres von *Elaphe helena* (Daudin 1803)** by Thomas Ulber. (One page, G with E extract.)

A captive bred *Elaphe helena*, about seven weeks old was observed voluntarily eating crickets.

▸ **Die hinterasiatischen Kletternattern der Gattung *Elaphe*, Teil XVIII, *Elaphe mandarina* (Cantor 1842)** by Klaus-Dieter Schulz and Jürgen Münzenmaier. (Five pages, seven colour plates. G with E extract.)

Description, coloration, distribution, habitat and diet of *Elaphe mandarina*. Includes treatment of captive specimens for parasites and data on multiple captive breeding.

Sauria
Volume 12 Number 3 Sept. 1990
ISSN 0176 9391 (17 x 23cm)
TGB-Sauria, Lepsiusstr 53, D-1000 Berlin 41

▸ **Die hinterasiatischen Kletternattern der Gattung *Elaphe*, Teil XIX, *Elaphe cantoris* (Cantor 1839)** by Klaus-Dieter Schulz. (Two pages, two colour plates. G with E extract.)

The poorly known *Elaphe cantoris* is introduced. Morphological characteristics and coloration are summarized and scattered distribution records are compiled.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

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

2nd February 1991
Herpetofauna Recorders' Meeting
David Attenborough Laboratories Leicester Polytechnic, Scraptoft Campus, Leicester LE7 9SU Enquiries phone (0533) 577726.

20th - 23rd June 1991
International Herpetological Symposium, Seattle, Washington, USA. Enquiries phone (9-5 Pacific time) (415) 941-4596.

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Three **Boa Constrictors**. All captive bred, sex unknown. Approximately 3½' long. (One believed to be a Red-tail.) Prices between £125 and £160. Telephone (0483) 67924 (Guildford).

Female **Burmese Python**, 10'-11'. Approximately five years old. Feeds very well. Contact Snake Breeder on (0494) 722769.

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