# snake breeder

The International Newsletter for Snake Enthusiasts

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

J Brown, J Nicholls, M Haigh, I Stray, J Wilkins & B Hawtin.

**Goodbye to Scott**
Due to other commitments, Scott Allen is unable to continue representing **snake breeder** in Canada. Scott has given us tremendous (and unpaid) support, not only by publicising snake breeder in Canada and dealing with enquiries but also by writing articles. Many thanks, Scott!

# Mating Behaviour and Gestation in the Checkered Garter Snake, *Thamnophis marcianus* (Baird & Girard)

by Adam and April Wright

## Introduction

The Checkered Garter Snake is generally considered to be amongst the most attractive of *Thamnophis* species and is popular with snake keepers, being robust and easy to maintain. Females are heavily built, attaining a length of around one metre; males are comparatively slightly built and seldom exceed 0.6 metres.

Despite their popularity, like virtually all *Thamnophis* species, very little accurate data is available regarding gestation period in these live-bearing snakes. Riches (1976) gives data for *Thamnophis elegans elegans* suggesting a gestation period in the range of 114 to 128 days, at normal vivarium temperatures of around 80° F. These figures tie in well with most available data for *Thamnophis*.

Clutch size in Checkered Garter Snakes is normally not large - Wright and Wright (1957) give 12 to 18 young; Mattison (1988) gives four to nine.

The information in this article is based on the authors' experiences with one adult trio in their breeding group of Checkered Garter Snakes. These three snakes are permanently housed together (including during hibernation) and fed exclusively on defrosted rat pups. The male of this trio is wild-caught and the females are captive-bred three year olds. All are unrelated to each other.

## Mating Periods and Gestation

Copulations in 1990 were observed in late August, September and early October. The animals were cooled in late October and hibernated at approximately 55° F from the 11th of November 1990 to the 18th of January 1991 (normal summer temperatures for these snakes was 82° F). Attempted mating with ♀2 was noticed on the 20th of January, only two days into the warming up period. Further mating attempts with ♀2 were seen on the 28th and 30th of January, and the 2nd and 3rd of February. Attempted mating with ♀1 was observed on the 10th of February.

On the 17th of April ♀2 produced 13 live babies; ♀1 produced 26 healthy young on the 19th of April. This gives a gestation period of 87 days from the first noted mating attempt with ♀2, and a period of 68 days in the case of ♀1.

Although no further matings were observed, ♀1 delivered another litter of 25 healthy young on the 5th of July 1991, only 77 days after her first litter of that year. Female 2 also produced a second litter (although none were viable) on the 26th of July, 96 days after her first clutch of the season. Despite the fact that both females double-clutched and that ♀1 produced very large litters, both females remained in excellent health throughout and have maintained good bodyweight. Autumnal matings in 1991 commenced in mid-August

and are continuing at the time of writing (30th September 1991).

## Discussion

From the data available it would be easy to suggest that the gestation period for Checkered Garter Snakes is less than in other *Thamnophis* species. Our 1991 observations give a suggested gestation period in the range 68 to 96 days (average of four observations 82 days).

However, it is the authors' belief that the young produced in Spring 1991 were the results of successful matings in the Autumn of 1990 (both females appeared gravid when placed in hibernation) and that the early Spring 1991 matings were responsible for the July 1991 litters. In this case, gestation period between last observed Spring mating and deposition of young is 152 days for ♀1 and 156 days for ♀2. These figures are much closer to those generally suggested for the genus.

If this hypothesis is correct then obviously Checkered Garter Snakes are capable of having a second litter developing whilst the first litter is nearing full term. This was suggested by the appearance of the females after production of the Spring litters - they still retained considerable bodyweight.

The phenomenon of having two clutches at different stages in the same snake has previously been documented. For example, the Western Hognose Snake, *Heterodon nasicus nasicus* frequently mates in Autumn, the female entering hibernation carrying developing embryos. Further mating frequently occurs in Spring. Marr (1944) examined nine female *H.n. nasicus* to find all specimens examined in May and June contained two sizes of eggs, some nearing full term and others in early stages of development.

It seems possible that a similar developmental pattern has occurred in the group of Checkered Garter Snakes under discussion.

## Request

The above hypothesis is based on a single season's observations only and, obviously, requires further research. The authors would be grateful to hear from anyone working with *T. marcianus* who has concurrent (or contradictory) data.

## References


Marr J.C. (1944). *Notes on Amphibians and Reptiles from the Central United States*. Amer. Midl. Naturalist 32, 478-490.

Mattison, C. (1988). *Keeping and Breeding Snakes*. Blandford Press, Poole.

Riches, R.J. (1976). *Breeding Snakes in Captivity*. Pet Reference Series No.3. Palmetto Publishing Co., St Petersburg.

Wright, A.H. and Wright A.A. (1957). *Handbook of the Snakes of the United States and Canada*. Comstock Publishing, Ithaca & London.

# Hog Island Boas

by Sue Reilly

We have been keeping snakes for a number of years now and we recently bought a pair of captive-bred Hog Island Boas (*Boa constrictor* ?). (The rest of our collection consists of snakes of the genus Elaphe; *Elaphe guttata guttata, Elaphe schrenckii schrenckii, Elaphe schrenckii anomala, Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta, Elaphe obsoleta spiloides, Elaphe helena, Elaphe radiata* and *Elaphe taeniura friesei*.) This article offers a brief description of the Hog Island Boa followed by details of our experiences with the species.

## Origin

The Hog Island Boa is a dwarf, island species. It could originate from an island off the coast of Honduras: there is such an island listed in *The Times' World Atlas* as Hog Island. No one is certain where this species originated and this is just one possibility.

## Description

This species grows to approximately six or seven feet. The females may grow slightly larger. We were told that the mother of some babies we bought was eight and a half feet in length. The ground colour is silver-grey with beige markings getting progressively darker towards the tail which is a dark brick-red colour. There is a scattering of black spots on the body (as if ink from a pen had been splashed on it) and irregular pink markings on the ground colour. The ventral scales are a clean, cream colour. The Hog Island Boa is a slender snake with the typical boa head.

## Sexing

Apart from the most reliable method, namely probing, the male seems to have clearly visible anal spurs whereas the female's spurs are only just visible. Male caudal scale counts are from the high 60s to 70s with the high 50s to low 60s for females. Clark (1989) records the following; male 68, 62, 70, 68; female 58, 58, 68?, 56, 60, 56, 59. (The female with a count of 68 is rather questionable as it had never been probed and its sex was stated by the dealer.)

## Temperament

We have found this species to be non-aggressive, even the wild-caught specimens we owned. One female would strike the glass front of her vivarium every time someone entered the room. It took her about thirty minutes to calm down. To lessen the risk of her hurting herself we blocked off the front of the vivarium so she could not see any movement in the room. We assumed her behaviour was due to the fact that she was ill when we purchased her. As mentioned previously, she died shortly after purchase.

## Our Snakes

We have in the past had four (2.2) wild-caught Hog Island Boas but they all died. The females within weeks of purchase, one from Coccidia,

the other from *Pseudomonas*. The males lasted a bit longer. One, after a year in our care, died because he had a hole in his stomach. The other male died after 18 months. The reason was stress due to unsuccessful sloughing. We tried everything to help him. When he came to slough for the fourth time he managed to break the skin on his snout and with some assistance successfully sloughed all four skins The next day he died.

All the wild-caught specimens around at that time were dropping like flies so we decided to give up with this species and use our finances to expand our *Elaphe* collection. However, when we saw captive-bred Hog Island Boas for sale this year we couldn't afford to miss them as we liked the specimens we had before so much.

On the 17th of July 1991 we purchased a pair of baby Hog Island Boas. They were twelve days old and had just completed their neonate slough but had yet to feed.

We put them into their new home, a vivarium measuring three feet by two feet by 18 inches. This is furnished with climbing branches, a large water bowl and some pieces of cork bark. We use wood shavings as a substrate. The cage is heated by an Ultratherm heat pad and a 100 watt spot light which is directed onto the branches so that the snakes can bask if they wish. A 40 watt bulb is also used directly above the heat pad. The vivarium has a temperature gradient of 80° to 90° F with an air temperature of 84°F during the day. The bulbs are controlled by a dimmer switch which is lowered at night to a temperature of 78° to 86° F with an air temperature of 80° to 82° F. The whole heating system is wired into a Uni-Stat thermostat.

On the 20th of July we offered the snakes live furry mice but they showed no interest. Over the next couple of weeks we tried them with everything from freshly-killed mice to gerbils. We tried removing them from their vivarium and putting them in a small container to eat but nothing seemed to work.

Because these snakes had spent most of their time in the tree we thought that perhaps they would accept birds. We went to the local pet shop and bought two live Zebra Finches (of a size small enough for the birds to accept). These were put in the cage on the 8th of August and the male readily caught, constricted and ate one of the birds. The female showed no interest. The remaining bird was left in the cage. Various rodents were also offered to the female to entice her to eat but she showed no interest. The male caught and ate the other bird on the 11th of August. After a couple of weeks had passed we were getting very anxious about the female's lack of appetite. The male had by now had four meals.

On the 20th August, eight weeks from the day she was born, the female accepted a live, furry mouse.

We hope to wean the male off birds pretty soon by offering dead rodents scented with a bird, then gradually moving him on to unscented mice. The female eats mice, as did our wild-caught specimens. We have found that nearly all our Hog

Island Boas like to live and eat in their branches. Our male hangs from a branch, catches his food and eats it in the tree. This behaviour was observed in our wild-caught snakes. Although the female spends most of her time in the branches, she comes down when she is hungry. This is usually in the night. She buries herself in the wood shavings substrate with her head showing and waits for prey to come past. She then strikes, constricts and eats it on the floor of the vivarium.

Feeding record

| ♂ | | ♀ | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8.8 | 1 lzf | 20.8 | 1 lfm |
| 11.8 | 1 lzf | 23.8 | 1 lfm |
| 14.8 | 1 dzf | 29.8 | 1 dfm |
| 19.8 | 1 lbg | 1.9 | 1 dfm |
| 22.8 | 1 lzf | 9.9 | 1 lfm |
| 3.9 | slough | 16.9 | 1 lm |
| 16.9 | 1 lzf | 23.9 | 1 lm |
| 21.9 | 1 lzf | 26.9 | slough |
| 29.9 | 1 lzf | 29.9 | 1 lm |

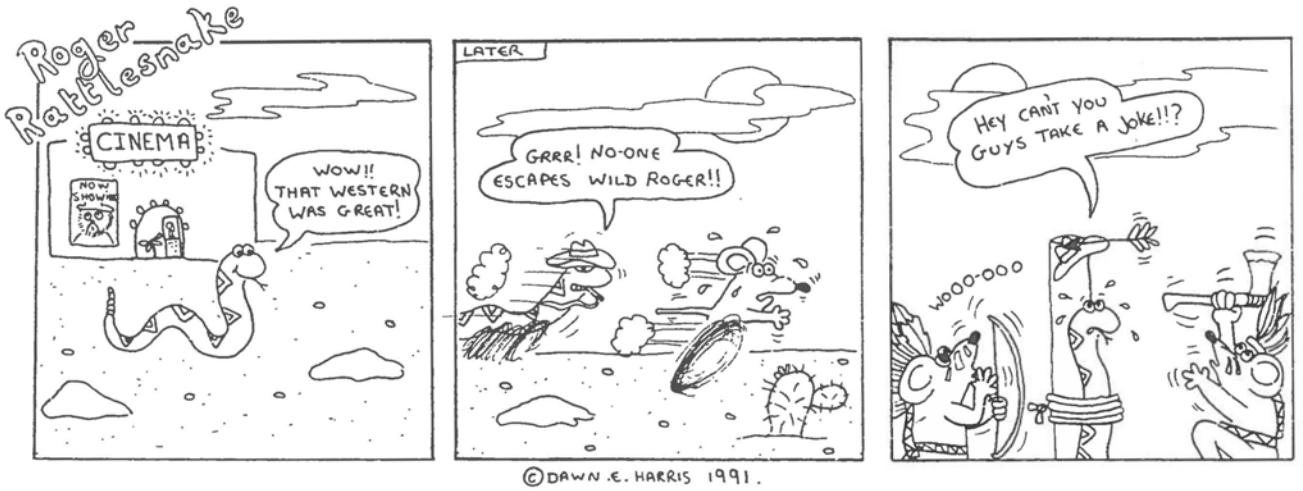
Key: lzf = live zebra finch
dzf = dead zebra finch
lbg = live baby gerbil
lfm = live furry mouse
dfm = dead furry mouse
lm = live mouse

A chameleon-like ability to change colour was observed in our four wild-caught specimens and this occurs to a lesser degree in our captive-bred babies. Although we did some research into the phenomenon we drew a blank. We found that external conditions such as temperature and humidity did not coincide with the changes in colour (usually from the normal silver-grey to a more metallic grey and even a near white colour). The stages in the sloughing process were not a contributory factor either.

Our captive-bred babies are doing well at the moment and we hope to be breeding from them in three or four years by which time they should be over four feet in length. This article was written from our own experiences and what we believe to be true for this species. We have found no other information available elsewhere to contradict this.

Reference

Clark, C. (1989). Hog Island Boa Scale Counts. *Snake Keeper*, Vol. 3 No.6, p.18



# A Cause For Concern

by Tony Skinner

In the past ten years enormous advances have been made in all aspects of herpetology. Species that were previously thought impossible to keep alive in captivity are now bred regularly by amateur herpetologists. Equipment specially designed for reptile husbandry is now widely available negating the need for the old 'light bulb and prayer' approach. Information on most species is available and even the solution to the most obscure problems is often only a phone call away.

However there is one area where reptile keeping seems to be stuck in the bad old days and that is the treatment of reptiles in pet shops. Let me make it clear that this article is not targeted at the specialist reptile dealer. Some of these provide a good service, partly because they have to, as their customers are often very knowledgeable and have specific requirements and, partly, because they are run by people who care about their animals.

The type of shop I am concerned about is that run by the non-specialist. Some of these shops are owned and staffed by one person, although recently a nationwide chain of 'one stop' pet stores has been causing concern to numerous reptile keepers because of their cavalier attitude to reptiles.

Reptiles are popular with pet shops as they are cheap to keep (especially if you dispense with items such as heaters, thermostats and food). Reptiles are unusual and will attract people into a shop. Once inside, the visitor may buy something, probably not a reptile but it will have done its job of enticing the customer into the shop. Reptiles are normally very expensive in these shops, providing the shop keeper with a good mark-up. Joe Public doesn't know a thing about the reptile trade and will frequently pay over the going rate (anyone for an imported Royal Python for £130?). Incidently why do some people think nothing of paying £50 for a hatchling Corn Snake yet balk at paying £15 for a good book on husbandry?

Some of the incidents that I've encountered are so farcical that they would be laughable if not for the effects on both the reptile and the inexperienced keeper.

I recently visited a new branch of a pet chain store. I asked the livestock manager if I could have a look at one of the hatchling Burmese Pythons she was selling. She replied, "if you're feeling brave - but I don't touch snakes, you'll have to get it out for yourself!" If the livestock manager isn't competent to handle the stock should the shop be selling the animals and what chance does the prospective first-time buyer have? This shop also featured full under-floor heating, giving no opportunity for thermoregulation, with the inmates suffering as thermal prisoners. A side effect of this set-up is that the water provided quickly evaporates forming condensation on all sides of the glass tank and soaking the substrate. True-lite was provided for the

lizards by suspending a bulb outside the tank not allowing light in the ultra-violet range to reach them. I pointed out these anomalies to the shop manager and was told there was nothing wrong with the system: there couldn't be as it was installed by a professional electrician!

One thing I've frequently seen in pet shops is wrongly identified species. Sometimes names are simply invented such as Yellow-bellied Rock Python (*Python reticulatus*) or Jig-saw Snake (*Natrix tessalata*). Problems occur when a snake is described as a different species and the new owner mistakenly keeps the snake in inappropriate conditions. I'm amazed at the way some shops describe all Boa Constrictors with the slightest hint of an orange tail as Red-tailed Boas and add £50 to the asking price!

If anything really gets my back up it's being deliberately lied to. Some shops seem to say anything to get a sale. Some of the falsehoods I've endured include being told that a Burmese Python I was looking at would "grow to about eight feet long". A snake I'd previously owned was sold by a pet shop as "a definite male"; I was surprised to hear this as it laid several clutches of eggs in my care! A very distressed woman approached me for advice on her ailing Red-tailed Racer which she had bought on the assurance that it was "one of the easiest species to keep and breed". I know of one shop that wished to buy a hatchling Everglades Rat Snake but refused to buy it because it wasn't orange.

By far the most common care fault I've seen in pet shops is keeping the snakes in filth. In one shop I visited the smell when the lid of a tank containing Royal Pythons was removed was so foul it made me feel physically sick. The tank was unheated and the occupants were infested with ticks and mites. One snake had weeping open sores on its ventral scales and smelt of rotting meat. I alerted the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) to the situation and the shop received a visit although it was too late for this snake. I understand the owner agreed not to stock any more reptiles as he didn't know enough about them.

Another common abuse is keeping snakes requiring different care together. This can be particularly worrying when imported snakes from different continents are kept together, exposing them to bacteria to which their immune systems have no resistance. Often these problems don't manifest themselves until the animal has been sold, leaving the buyer with an expensive corpse. The worst case of keeping incompatible species together must be the shop which has an aquarium labelled Florida Kingsnake £150, Garter Snakes £35. I could see the Kingsnake but not the Garter Snakes. The shopkeeper informed me that they were "hiding" and rooted around in the substrate in a vain effort to find them. A friend of mine who owns a respectable reptile shop told me that a large portion of his time is spent answering questions from worried people who have bought ill or unsuitable snakes elsewhere and who knew nothing of their care requirements. Many people copy

the conditions their snake was kept in when they purchased it so correct husbandry by the shops is essential. I realise that the conditions the animals face in some pet shops are not as bad as some of the deplorable conditions they encounter before and during exportation from their country of origin. However, the mistreatment they suffer in pet shops happens in Britain, a 'nation of animal lovers', and should not be tolerated.

If this article has any purpose other than to highlight the plight of reptiles, it needs to offer some solutions. Unfortunately as reptiles aren't cute and furry and don't cry or whimper, some members of the public don't give a damn and can't see what the fuss is about. One suggestion which may help is if you see any reptile suffering in a shop don't just walk out seething; bring it to the attention of the owner. If this doesn't work then contact the RSPCA or the local authority which licenses the shop.

What is really needed is better training for all dealers in exotic pets and possibly the introduction of some form of specific licensing. I'd like to see care sheets given with the animals stating the common and scientific names, sex and information on care and feeding. The Kennel Club has a code of practice which insists that all registered breeders provide care and diet sheets when selling puppies. Perhaps an Association of Snake Breeders could be formed, operating a responsible code of practice that members must agree to adhere to. For this to work a lead would need to be taken by some of the more responsible and influential specialists in the trade.

For anyone wishing to learn more on the plight of reptiles may I recommend reading *Reptiles- Misunderstood, Mistreated and Mass Marketed* by Clifford Warwick (reviewed in **snake breeder** 2/91).

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# INFO

## SNAKES IN PRINT

***Litteratura Serpentium***
Volume 11 Number 5 October 1991
The European Snake Society, Pauwenveld 18, 2727 DE Zoetermeer, The Netherlands.

▸ **The Eastern Coachwhip, *Masticophis flagellum flagellum*** by Pete Strimple. (2 pages.)

▸ **Sydney's Snakes, Part 3** by Raymond Hoser. (13 pages, 10 colour plates.)

***Lacerta***
Volume 50 No 1 Oct/Nov 1991
Nederlandse Vereniging Voor Herpetologie en Terrariumkunde, Zoetendaal 213, 6662 XM Elst (Gld). The Netherlands.

▸ **Vijf geboorten van de Madagascar-hondskopboa *Sanzinia madagascariensis*** by G.M.M. Foekema. (16 pages, 1 colour plate. Dutch with English abstract.)

▸ **Voortplanting in het terrarium van de Roodstaarslang *(Gonyosoma oxycephalum)*** by C.A.P van Riel. (4 pages, 1 colour plate. Dutch with English abstract.)

# Reptile-Book Collecting #5

by Richard Trant

***The Vivarium***
**by Rev. G.C. Bateman**
424 pages & 97 ink engravings.
Published in 1897 by Upcott Gill, London.
Price: £40 upwards.

In introducing this book I must state that, to my knowledge, this is the first book in the English language on keeping reptiles and amphibians as a hobby and not for scientific study. The book is a charming volume, bound in green cloth, with a tapestry depicting vine leaves housing birds, bees, foxes and monkeys in the background with what looks like an Aesculapian Snake in gold leaf in the foreground. To say that they don't bind them like that any more is an understatement!

The book is divided into chapters on lizards, crocodiles, turtles and amphibian species. The section on snakes is large; about one-third of the total volume. The information on snake keeping is very good, perhaps not surprising when one considers that Bateman collaborated with such noted authors as Günther, Boulenger and Tyrell.

An interesting feature is that Bateman supplies the prices of the snakes he is describing so the reader can discover what a herpetological price list was like in the 1890s. For example, an African Python, four feet in length would cost £2, a Ladder Snake was four shillings (20 pence) and a Gould's Monitor five shillings (25 pence).

The illustrations are a real joy and are crafted in fine detail by AJV Farrow. Given the date of the book it is obvious that it has limitations on today's snake keeping. However, as an interesting insight into reptile keeping in the last century, this book is a great collectors' piece - a worthwhile addition to the reptile library.

## The Pick of 1991

In addition to collecting old and classic books one must try to keep abreast of new literature. I have drawn up a list of what I consider to be the pick of 1991.

***Snakes of the Agkistrodon Complex*** **by Gloyd and Conant.** (Price £50.) A monogram of exceptional quality, the best single species account since Klauber's *Rattlesnakes*.

***The Reproductive Husbandry of Pythons and Boas*** **by Ross and Marzec.** (Price £45.) The long-awaited bible of boid breeding - essential.

***The Snakes of Iran*** **by Lattfi.** (Price £20.) Excellent colour guide, well produced at a fair price.

***Snakes of Thailand and their Husbandry*** **by Cox.** (Price £35.) A good account of a large area. Photographs a little disappointing and rather expensive.

***A-Z of Snake Keeping*** **by Mattison.** (Price £15.) A new format for Chris and a good book for all levels. Superb photographs and exceptional value for money.

# CLASSIFIED ADVERTS

## FOR SALE

1991 hatchlings. American captive-bred. Anerythristic **Corn Snakes**, black/white colour (no red), £25 each or £47.50p pair. Albino **Sonoran Gopher Snakes**, beautiful lemon yellow with orange blotches, £140 pair (will not split). Albino **California Kingsnakes**, classic lavender with yellow bands or stripes, £50 each or £85 pair. **Pueblan Milksnakes** (*Lampropeltis triangulum campbelli*), beautiful clean bands of red/black/white, strain stays bright as adults, £75 each or £135 pair. **Mexican Rosy Boas**, white with chocolate brown stripes, £85 each or £160 pair. **Central Baja Rosy Boas** (*L.t. saslowi*), silver grey background with orange stripes - gorgeous, £165 each or £320 pair. Guaranteed unrelated pairs and feeding. Phone Mark on (0275) 853894 (Avon).

Frozen mice and rats. Top quality, all sizes available in any quantity. Competitive prices. Can deliver. For further details phone Richard on (0488) 71439.

Hatchling **Western Hognose Snakes**, £35 each. Phone Fred on (0442) 241453 (Herts).

**Burmese Python**, approximately 12', 4½ years old. Good temperament, captive-bred, only one eye. Feeds well on rats and chicks. £180 or p/exchange for female Royal Python. Phone (08444) 3280 after 6pm weekdays (Bucks).

'The Ultimate Corn Snake' Juvenile Miami **Corn Snakes**. Outstanding colour, not unlike *mexicana* or *greeri*, £35 each. Also **Black Rat Snakes, Yellow Rat Snakes, Grey Rat Snakes, Carolina Corn Snakes, Ruthvens Kingsnakes, Black Kingsnakes, Blotched Kingsnakes, California Kingsnakes, Desert Kingsnakes, Sonoran Gophers, Pacific Gopher Snakes** (albino and hetero). All snakes sexed and feeding well. Phone Richard on (0488) 71439 (Berks).

Pair of **Indian Pythons**, 5' long. Good feeders. £250 the pair. Phone (0639) 887342 (Port Talbot).

Baby **Common Boas** (*Boa constrictor constrictor*). All feeding on dead mice. £75 each. Vivarium equipment. Dull heat emitters, electronic and mechanical thermostats. UV lighting, Ultratherm heat mats and strips, Sunlight systems. Sliding glass locks £3.15p inc p & p. Price list available. Please send and sae to Chris and Marcia Martin, 18 Ballinode Close, Cheltenham, Gloucs GL50 4SQ. Telephone (0242) 573477. Visitors very welcome by appointment only.

**Florida Indigo Snake**, *Drymarchon corais couperi*. Male, 5'. Feeding record. £250, collect only. Phone (0494) 525345 (Bucks).

## WANTED

Male Honduran Boa Constrictor, 5'+. Telephone Dennis on (0243) 828451.

Grey Tree Frogs (*Hyla versicolor*), young or adults. Also Southern Alligator Lizards (*Gerrhonotus multicarinatus*), young or adults. Pair of adult Alpine Newts. Phone George on (0475) 87002.