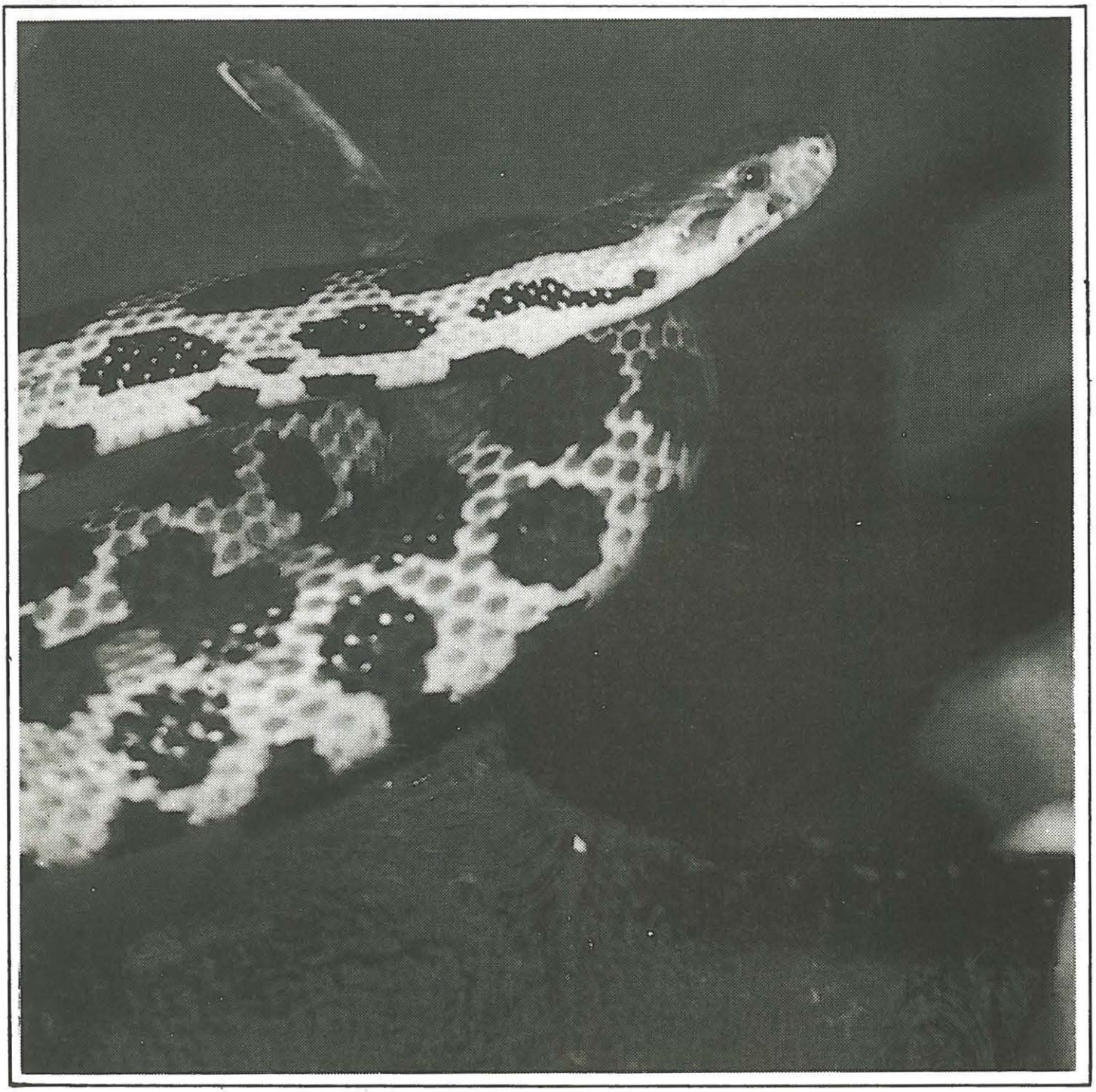
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INFORMATION

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c/o The Zoological Society of London
Regent's Park
London, NW1 4RY

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Journal published June & December.
Ten meetings a year.
Subscriptions: Ordinary members £15.

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West Midlands, WS3 1JA

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Branch and/or regional meetings monthly.
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Oxon, OX8 4JW

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Journal published annually.
Monthly meetings
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The Treasurer, P.R.A.S.
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Illinois 60614

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cont. on back page

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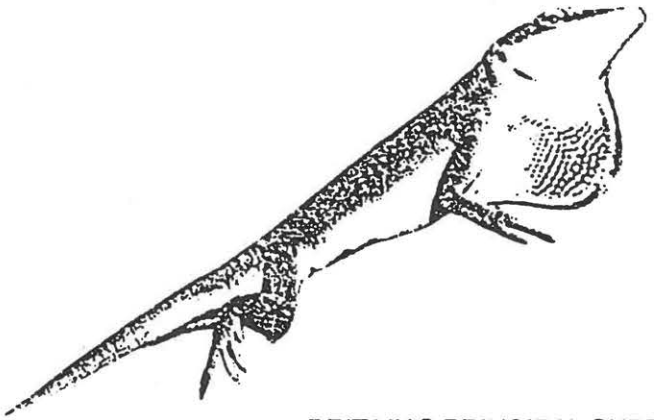
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Elaphe vulpina vulpina
by Kevin J. Hingley

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The Eastern Milk Snake Lampropeltis t. triangulum

by Kevin J. Hingley

I owned a pair of these attractive little snakes several years ago. Both specimens were of a similar size, around 36 cm long. The male had a ground colour of light fawn with a series of black-edged brown coloured blotches running the length of his back. He also had smaller, similarly coloured blotches along the side of his body. The female was a much darker colour, the ground colour being grey-brown with dark brown black-edged blotches. The head markings in both specimens were very similar to those seen in the young of Elaphe species (Rat Snakes), consisting of a backward pointing Y-shaped fork. The chin and throat region was white in colour, the belly being white with black checkers. The eye of these snakes is quite small, the iris being red in colour with a round black pupil.

Both snakes were housed in a small vivarium, heated to 23 to 25 degrees C during the day, falling to 20 degrees C at night. Newspaper was used as the substrate, cork bark sections for shelter and a small dish of drinking water.

Feeding commenced a short while after the purchase, and both snakes accepted newly-furred mice. Food was offered once a week, and each snake would accept two or three mice at one feed. After about five weeks in my collection they both sloughed. Following sloughing feeding recommenced for two weeks and then both snakes underwent another slough. They sloughed well but the female's appetite declined, and the male's increased to the point that he ate six furred and one small mouse at one sitting. This was followed by yet another slough from the male. Both snakes then refused to feed for several weeks, so the decision was taken to assist-feed. The female resisted all attempts to be fed so she was returned to the cage. The male was quite happy to swallow a small mouse placed in his mouth. A few more weeks went by and both snakes were still refusing to feed voluntarily. Another slough occurred but both snakes had to be helped to shed. Food was offered but refused. I then noticed that both snakes had mites. These had been transmitted through most of my cages when I checked them all, and must have been on two female House Snakes (Lamprophis fuliginosus) that I purchased a few weeks before the mites were evident. Vapona was used in each cage for a period of 12 hours and then removed. No living mites were seen for ten days after the use of the Vapona, but then they returned so the treatment was repeated. In the meantime, following the eradication of the first wave of mites, both Milk Snakes fed, although the female's appetite was still not up to par. However, following the eradication of the second wave of mites both snakes continued to feed, and the female's appetite increased. Unfortunately my wife and I decided to go our separate ways and I had no alternative but to sell off most of my collection in order for my son and I to return to live with my parents.

The use of Vapona to treat snakes with mites should not be taken lightly. I use a piece of Vapona, 2 inches square, and this is placed in a 250g margarine tub with large holes in the lid to allow the vapour to escape, at the same time preventing the snake coming into direct contact with the Vapona. It is also advisable to remove the water dish from the cage when Vapona is in use. An outbreak of mites can be eradicated by three 12 hour treatments, three days apart.

Design shows front cover of issue six printed red and black on white. Sizes: Small, Medium, Large and Extra Large.

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Keeping African House Snakes in Captivity

by Stephen Spawls

There are some eleven known species of African House Snakes (Lamprophis). As the name suggests, they are found mostly in Africa, although one species inhabits the Seychelles and one species occurs in the southern part of the Arabian peninsula. Curiously, in the centre of their distribution, the Kenya-Tanzania area, only one species is found, whereas at the far ends of their range, south and west Africa, a number of species are found, four in West Africa and seven in South Africa. Until recently, the House Snakes had been grouped in two genera, Lamprophis and Boaedon, but recent work (see Broadley's item in Fitzsimon's "Snakes of Southern Africa" 1983) has proved that the supposed differences between the two genera were non-existent and they all belong in one group. Since Lamprophis was the first generic name used to describe them, it has precedence (although one recently described species now included in the group, the Swazi House Snake, Lamprophis swazicus, is thought by some authorities not to be a House Snake at all; certainly it does not look like one).

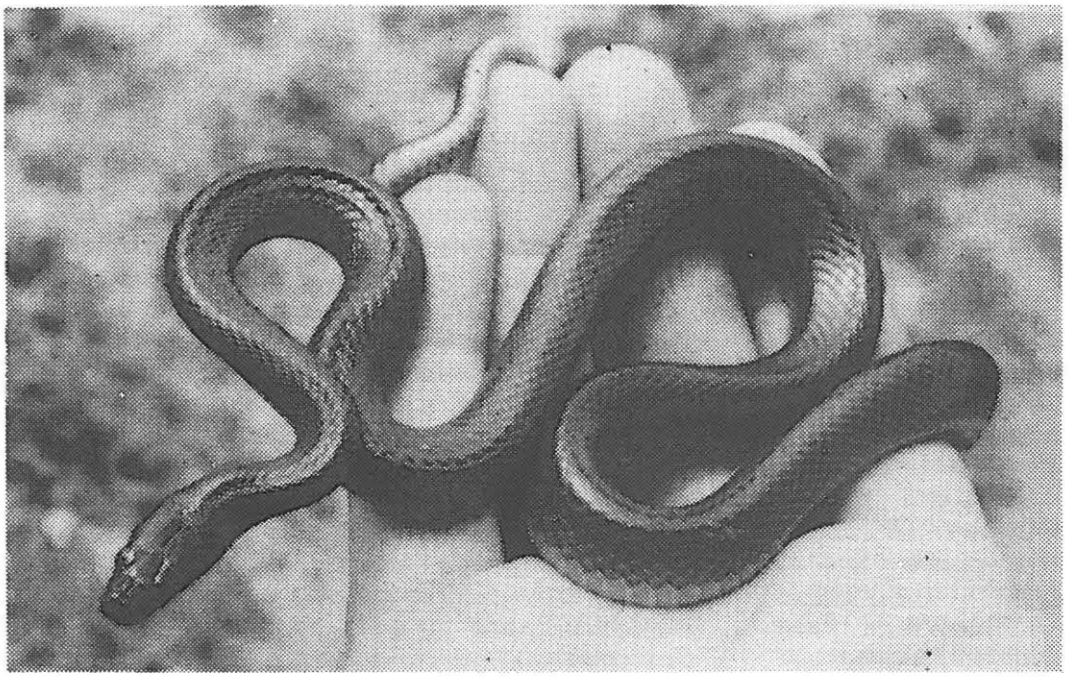
They are all harmless, nocturnal snakes, the largest species growing to a metre long or slightly larger, although most are much smaller than this. Some species (especially the miniature southern African ones) are bright orange or yellow, with spots or stripes, but most are brown, grey or black, although they often have a most beautiful irridescence on the scales. They have a characteristic python-shaped head and the eye has a vertical pupil.

The species most commonly appearing on pet dealers' lists is the Brown House Snake, Lamprophis fuliginosus. This is the most widespread species: it occurs from Morocco south through west Africa (excluding the desert) and east to the Sudan, then south to the Cape. It is the largest species, with occasional female specimens reaching a length of 1.4 metres, although most adults are 60 - 90 cm long. Brown House Snakes are found in a range of habitats, from semi-desert scrubland to savanna, dense woodland and light forest. They are ground-dwelling, and spend the day hiding in holes, under ground cover or any suitable refuge, coming out to hunt when it is totally dark. I have never seen one active during the day.

When first captured, they may bite viciously, often leaving their tiny, needle-sharp teeth in the wound but they become tame fairly quickly, although the odd specimen will always remain vicious. They are prone to necrotic stomatitis (mouth rot), especially specimens which have been roughly captured or handled. If you are thinking of buying or acquiring a House Snake, it is worth having a good look at the mouth. The infection (sometimes called mouth fungus) appears as small dull white patches or crusts on the mouth lining. Wild caught specimens often have ticks and mites on the skin, and Cestodes and Nematodes in the gut. A snake that bites viciously may not be a good bet, unless it is freshly caught.

Although most specimens, as the name suggests, are some shade of brown, there is a lot of colour variation. Where I live, in south-eastern Botswana, Brown House Snakes are medium to dark brown, but, as one goes westwards towards the Kalahari, one finds light-phase examples that are a beautiful pale brown. Specimens from coastal Kenya can be pinkish in colour, and those from the red soils of north-eastern Kenya and southern Somalia are a beautiful red or orange. Specimens from the Nairobi/Mt Kenya massif area are often dark olive-green, and those from West Africa are a shiny jet black. Juveniles from eastern Africa often have a mottled appearance, which may persist in adults, with dark red, brown or pinkish spots on the neck and anterior part of the body, paler in between. Large adults often turn very dark brown or dull black. Most specimens, especially juveniles, have a pair of pale lines running from the tip of the snout through the eye to the back of the head. In occasional specimens, and also in the West African species Lamprophis lineatus the Striped House Snake, these lines extend along the anterior half of the body.

The systematics of the species are not fully understood. No-one has attempted to mate, for example, a black West African specimen with a light brown southern African specimen, and they might prove to be genetically incompatible. If you want to breed Brown House Snakes, it is worth trying to get two of similar colour or provenance. It is important to have some



Black West African specimen of Brown House Snake

Photograph Stephen Spawls

idea of where in Africa your specimens come from, as the seasons, daily temperature range and day length can vary quite dramatically, depending on the area of origin. For example, a southern African specimen will be active from September through to late April, and will aestivate from May to August, as this is the southern winter. During its times of activity, if it is from a lowland area, it will expect night-time temperatures of 22 to 28 degrees C. A specimen from highland Kenya will be active most of the year, although it may show less activity in January and February, and July and August (which are dry months). A specimen from coastal Kenya will also be active throughout the year, but will expect night-time temperatures six to eight degrees higher than the highland specimen. West African specimens will be active from February/March through to November, but will expect night-time temperatures of 26 to 33 degress C. They feed actively in April/May (beginning of the rainy season) and will respond to the cage being humidified at that time. Although your supplier may be unable to give you exact collection localities he should be able to give you a rough idea of where the snake is from.

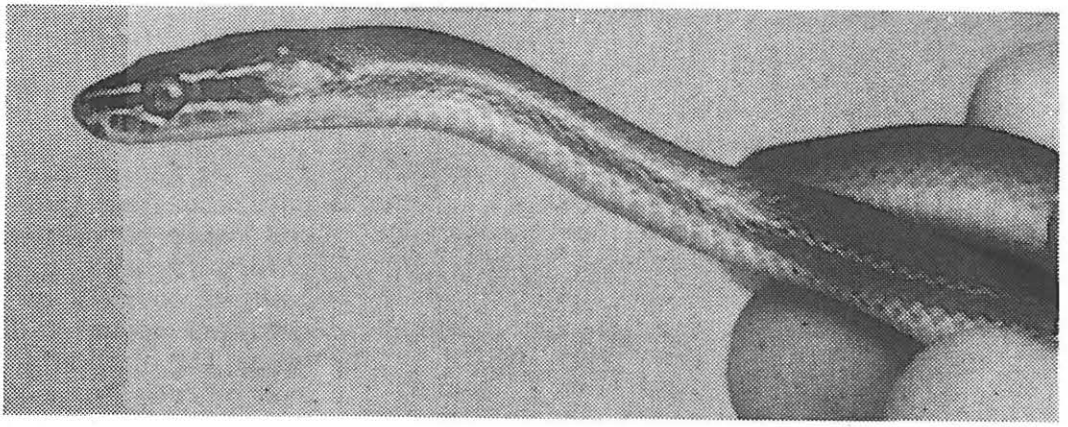
It is often believed that the diet of Brown House Snakes is exclusively rodents, and this is why they are popular with snake keepers. They are rodent eaters, certainly, and the diet of large adults is mostly rodents, but they will eat a range of other prey, including various sorts of lizards and frogs. Captive juveniles I have had have usually preferred lizards, especially skinks, and in their habitat this sort of prey is usually much easier to come by than rodents. If you have a juvenile Brown House Snake and it is refusing to take pinkies, you might consider rubbing one with a skink or frog (or offering it a juvenile frog if you can get one. Once they start feeding, they usually become voracious feeders; large adults will take five or six mice at one sitting.

They are usually active during the first three or four hours of the night, although once they become tame they will accept food at almost any time. Field work indicates that they often find their prey by recess or hole hunting, by crawling down holes, poking about under stones, etc. At Nairobi Snake Park we were sometimes able to persuade the odd individual that was refusing prey to start feeding by removing cover from its cage and putting in lengths of black plastic piping. The snake would hide in the piping and we would pop a mouse into the pipe. When snakes feed like this, incidentally, they often do not coil about the prey but slam it against the wall and compress it with their body.

Your House Snakes will drink, although in the wild they often do not. I have collected House Snakes in semi-desert areas where there was no standing water for 11 months of the year. They need some substantial cover to hide under, where they can get completely in the dark. In the field they hide themselves very securely. For this reason, night heating the cage with light bulbs may be traumatic

Striped
House Snake
Lamprophis
lineatus
from Ghana

Photograph
Stephen Spawls



for the snakes, which like to hunt in total darkness. Bear in mind that during the day they often hide in deep burrows, where the temperature will be very steady, often over 20 degrees C, and the humidity quite high.

Brown House Snakes lay eggs, usually 7 to 12. In West Africa, mating probably occurs in February/March, laying in April/May and hatchlings are found between August and October. In southern Africa, eggs are laid in October/November and hatchlings appear in February/March but sometimes later. I have found hatchlings in Botswana in June and July, which is a bad time to be a hatchling! In the wild, the eggs are often laid in termite hills, where temperatures are fairly steady and between 25 and 30 degrees C, and humidity is high. The hatchlings are between 18 and 25 cm in length.

Conservation And The Snake Keeper

by D. Manning

Through television and magazine articles we have become more aware of some of the exotic and diverse life forms with which we share this planet.

Many people, like myself, are obviously greatly concerned by our contempt for nature, the loss of rain forests, erosion of the soil and pollution of our atmosphere. Britain is a world leader in air pollution.

Thankfully, from this concern, the naturalist/ conservationist/ herpetologist can emerge and become totally absorbed by the beauty and mystery of a particular species. They may wish to re-create in the home a miniature habitat in which an animal can thrive. A vivarium should be just this, a happy and natural home for the snake you choose. With care and understanding, breeding ought to follow.

It is extraordinary that many snakes, let alone plants, frogs, lizards and mammals are doomed to extinction beneath bulldozers before they are named, let alone studied or kept by the hobbyist. Guatemala, Colombia, and Mexico are all to lose one third of all remaining rainforest by the end of this century. Stop and think about it.

It is nothing new for the herpetologist to come under pressure from anti-pet-keeping lobbyists. This affects YOU, your supply and what species may legally be kept and traded. It is very unfortunate that these same societies do not divert their efforts and large funds into constructive and supervised activities such as encouraging wild harvests, habitat management, and the education of the public and loan banks of the economic viability of such activities.

It is wrong to presume that not collecting a species in the wild ensures its continued survival. Due to mass habitat destruction, wild collecting can be the only way to protect some species; normally very small numbers of animals are involved compared to the number affected by the thousands of acres of rainforest felled monthly for dam projects or logging.

Hopefully some of these creatures will be kept, studied and bred by a growing number of concerned people. It must be better to work alongside our wild places than without them. Habitat conservation is of paramount importance.

Problems with a Water Snake

by Bernard Forshaw

I recently purchased a Northern Water Snake, Natrix sipedon, sex unknown. The snake was wild-caught and had about 3 inches of its tail missing so I bought it at a reduced price.

The snake measured 66cm from head to stump. As soon as I arrived home I heated a fish tank to 27 degrees C, put some cork bark in for it to bask on and shelter under and finally added a bowl of fresh water. I let the snake make its own way to its new home by placing the bag in the tank and leaving the creature to come out by itself. The snake shot out of the bag, darting all over the tank. Once it had settled down it retreated under the cork bark.

I left the snake for about a week without food but I replaced the water and newspaper substrate frequently. After the week had passed and the animal seemed more settled I thought it was time to try it with some fish. The only fish that I had at the time was trout, which I used to feed my other Water Snake of the same species. The newcomer would not entertain the trout so I experimented with other cold and freshwater fish. Again it refused to eat so I tried goldfish (which I don't like using). However, the food was taken instantly so that was that.

The snake was very nervous and bad-tempered and never really seemed to settle down as I hoped it would. Each time I walked past the tank when the snake was out, it would either quickly retreat under the bark or strike at the glass sides. A few more weeks passed and everything seemed to be fine. The snake was still eating and any movement outside the glass did not seem to bother it anymore. I decided to introduce my other Water Snake, hereafter called (a), into the tank, with my recent purchase, Water Snake (b), to see how they got on together.

Water Snake (a) didn't seem to mind (b) joining him and they seemed happy enough except that at feeding time (a) took all the food. As (a) was tame enough to take food from my hand, I would feed him first and when he was eating I would quickly put a goldfish in the water bowl where (b) happened to be at the time. I thought that as (a) was already eating (b) would have time to finish his food in peace. However, (a), knowing that there was more food available hurried to gulp down what he was eating (trout) in order to reach the water bowl as quickly as possible and eat the goldfish as well. I had a problem on my hands but I didn't like to separate them every feeding time as (b) was still expelling the foul secretion they are known for and biting when handled. The problem was quickly solved when I noticed that (a) always came out during the day and (b) always came out at night and so I fed them at the appropriate times.

Then (b) came up to slough and naturally ceased to feed. It sloughed without any problem except for a piece of skin which refused to come off. I dampened the neck where the skin was stuck just below the neck and eased it away with a pair of tweezers. For the next two weeks (b) continued to feed until one day it refused all food. When I tried to pick it up, the snake bit me and went beserk. As I was closing the lid of the tank, the snake jumped right out onto the floor. After a couple of minutes which seemed like hours, I caught the snake; I noticed a brown blotch on its ventral scales and immediately separated the two snakes.

I kept checking on (b) daily to see if there was any change, but there wasn't. This problem went on for about two or three weeks and during this time (b) hadn't eaten and was starting to lose weight. The vets in my area are not skilled in treating reptiles (although they will still take your money) which is why I hadn't taken the snake for treatment when the problem first appeared.

I force fed the snake and the food went down without any problems but a few minutes later it was regurgitated. The second time I tried, the snake seemed to want the food (trout). As the food was placed in the snake's mouth it tried to swallow it but needed assistance to take it right down. The food stayed down but had been regurgitated by the next morning.

The next day I looked in the tank and found the snake lying upside down. The brown blotch seemed to be penetrating into the body and and some small green blotches were also forming. I thought that it was a

fungal infection. When I touched the snake it jumped back onto its right side and started to have spasms. Its neck was twisted round and the snake was spinning round in circles at a very fast rate. I also noticed blood in its faeces. This behaviour continued for a couple of days until a friend told me about a vet who knew something about snakes.

On the way to the vets I was thinking about having the snake put down. I showed the snake to the vet and explained the problem. He said it sounded like a blood parasite and said that it could be treated with a course of anti-biotics. While the vet was out of the room his assistant said, "We don!t get many snakes in here". Upon hearing that remark I wondered whether I was right in bringing the snake to this vet. However, the vet seemed to know what he was talking about. He returned with a drug called Metronidazole and gave the snake an injection. I was told to bring the snake back the next morning for another injection and thereafter once weekly. The snake didn't last that long. I arrived home about 3pm and replaced the snake in its tank where it remained motionless for hours. I noticed the snake was having the spasm-like fits again but this time it was upside down. The whole of its body looked like it was going to explode: it was puffing in and out. At 10.30pm that day the snake died.

I read up on blood parasites and found that they are highly contagious. I immediately cleaned out the tank (a) was in and also the spare tank that had been occupied by (b) with a solution of Detox and hot water.

I phoned the vet the next morning and told him that the snake had died. He said that he was sorry to hear that. My original snake, (a), is still eating and looks healthy so far.

Whether the diagnosis and treatment was correct, I don't know. I have never come across anything like this before. It was very worrying to watch the snake getting worse without being able to cure it. I would be very interested to hear from anyone who has experienced the same problem or who knows what caused the death of the snake.

Bernard Forshaw, 629, Borough Road, Birkenhead, Wirral, Merseyside, L42 9QA

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LETTERS

Dear Snake Keeper,
I recently bought a pair of Hogs Island Boas. I didn't know anything about them when I bought them but I have discovered some information from other people and from my own observations. This subspecies of the Common Boa are sometimes aggressive. They appear to change colour from light to dark; sometimes they may be greyish-blue and at other times they may be brown washed with pink. They spend a lot of time in the branches but also like to hide in a box placed on the vivarium floor.

They both prefer to eat birds but will sometimes take mice and gerbils. They seem to prefer a temperture of 30 to 32 degrees C. The snakes become very active at night so if a light bulb is used as a heat source I suggest that a green bulb is used.

I am interested in having a penpal so I think the idea of a penpal list is great. I would also like hear from anyone with information on the Garden Tree Boa (Corallus enhydris). I would like to know about heating, feeding and caring for this species.

Yours sincerely, Darren Fox.

Part 3

The African Egg-Eating Snake, Dasypeltis scabra

by Dietmar Emmrich

This article was originally published in 1986 in the magazine 'Aquarien-Terrarien' in the German Democratic Republic. It is reprinted by kind permission of the author.

Translated by John Hackworth

Feeding (continued)

Photographic evidence of egg-eating has already been provided for, for example, Elaphe schrencki (Schimdt, Englemann & Obst 1981) and Elaphe longissima (Ponec 1978). Elaphe quatuorlineata also eats eggs. Heyden (mdl Mitt. 1984) observed with interest that it is only females which eat eggs and even then only after they have been punctured. It is worth noting that rattlesnakes are also supposed to eat eggs should the opportunity arise (Klauber 1972). Sochurek (1982) also thinks it possible that Saw-scaled Vipers (Echis) eat eggs. All of the above species and certainly some others we are not yet aware of are opportunist eaters of birds' eggs. The egg-nourishment is thus optional and only amounts to 1% of the total nourishment spectrum of these animals.

The Egg-eating Snakes in comparison feed exclusively on birds' eggs. Hard-shelled gecko eggs (Tarentola mauritanica, Gymnodactylus k. kotschyi) are never eaten (Stemmler 1971). Whilst the above mentioned species take the hard chalk-shelled eggs into their digestive tract where they are broken up, the genus Dasypeltis has developed a much more effective method of absorbing nourishment. The eggs are crushed at the front of the digestive tract and the liquid contents pass into the stomach. After a few minutes, the superfluous shell is regurgitated.

This method makes it possible for the Egg-eating Snake to absorb a greater amount of nutrition and to optimally utilize the short period of time between fresh and brooded eggs. I have been in the position to prove that D. scabra does just that when my adult female greedily devoured up to 12 quail eggs (Coturnix coturnix) or two chicken eggs one after the other, shortly after laying her own clutch of eggs. After each egg however, the shell had to regurgitated before another one could be swallowed. Ditmars however wrote (in Jurgens article of 1939) that the crumpled shell was sometimes not regurgitated but swallowed. Kulmus (1984) also observed that D. scabra could swallow several eggs in succession without the empty and crushed shells first having to be regurgitated. Nevertheless, after having watched around 300 eggs being devoured, I have not seen this happen once. In an attempt to get my adult female to swallow an egg shell I offered her Ribbon Finch eggs (Amadina fasciata). With a size of around 13mm x 10mm these were the smallest eggs I was able to obtain. These were eaten individually, but each time the shell was discarded before the next egg was eaten.

In my opinion, the Egg-eating Snake has the greatest mouth-expansion capacity of any type of snake. This is proved by the photographic evidence of Schmidt-Schaumberg (1957) and Niewenhuizen (1972,1978). A female of some 80cm easily coped with 'prey' the size of chicken eggs. At Brookfield Zoo in Chicago, the swallowing capability of D. scabra was tested up to the limit situation by offering 'outsized' eggs (58mm x 41mm). The snake in question was some 85mm long. Here a special and previously undescribed test method with totally characteristic reactions was discovered; "measuring the eggs by repeatedly surrounding them with its head and the forepart of its body then test-stretching of the mouth before the egg was swallowed" (Rabb & Snediger, quoted by Petzold 1982, page 674). I have also been able to occasionally observe this behaviour in my own animals. In these cases the snake approaches the large egg very hesitantly and only when extremely hungry, because swallowing an egg of such proportions causes enormous strain. I have often observed that small or medium sized chicken eggs would lie untouched in the vivarium for days and as soon as newly-laid quail or pigeon eggs were introduced they were immediately eaten. If possible the Egg-eating Snake will also try to avoid this strain. It is interesting however that they prefer slightly larger pigeon eggs to the quail eggs. It is possible that this can be

explained by the greater chalk-shell thickness and the strong internal skin of the quail eggs.

Special anatomical adaptations make the breaking of the egg shell possible. The 14th - 23rd ribs are reinforced and slope backwards. From the 24th - 30th rib pairs, spinal appendices project forwards (hypapophyses) into the digestive tract. These are covered with a rigid enamel. By using X-rays of excellent quality, Mittelholzer (1970) proved that the egg is already broken before it reaches the 24th rib. It is pressed against the spine between the 14th and 23rd ribs using very strong muscular contractions. What purpose do the following spinal appendices therefore have? According to Mittelholzer they serve as 'rakes' which retain the broken pieces of the egg shell. He was able to show that only small individual pieces of egg shell penetrate into the intestinal canal where they are dissolved. The breaking of the egg shell can be plainly heard as a prolonged cracking noise. The marks from the dorsal cuts on the later regurgitated egg shell - which is only held together by the internal skin - can be clearly seen.

Do the Egg-eating snakes know the quality of the contents of the egg? Yes and no! The eggs are first touched all over intensely with the tongue, which also gives the animal an idea of the size of the egg. Rotten eggs are never eaten. This can also be determined with great certainty by the snakes. The Director of Jihlava Zoo (Czechoslavakia) Mr. V. Jirousek kept an Egg-eating Snake for ten years. He marked eggs of various lay-dates and the snake always sought out the freshest egg. I am unable to prove so generally the ideas of several authors (Fitzsimons 1962, Niewenhuizen 1978, Reinhard & Vogel 1980) that Egg-eating Snakes are able to determine the extent of brooding and do not eat eggs which have started to hatch. The following facts speak against these ideas:

1. A D. scabra (caught on 7.4.1982 near Meki) was taken back to Addis Abbaba, where on arrival at 1.00am on 20.4.1982 it was offered two Weaver Bird eggs. Although it was soon determined after swallowing the egg, that it contained a fairly well-developed embryo chick, the snake regurgitated the half-crushed shell and promptly started to swallow the second egg which was in exactly the same condition. By morning the freshly-laid chicken egg which had been finally offered had been eaten.

2. On 2.5.1984 during the night, each of three juvenile Egg-eating Snakes (born between 14-16.6.1983) swallowed a Blackbird's egg taken from a nest which had been blown down by the wind. The eggs were almost ready to hatch. Previously these young snakes had been force-fed with the yolk from chicken eggs. They had several times been given Budgerigar eggs, and those of various finches, but these were always refused. These Blackbird eggs must have caused considerable strain. When the regurgitated eggs were found the next morning it was discovered that because of the almost fully developed embryo chicks only around 20% of each egg was crushed. Although two of the animals ate voluntarily two weeks later, the third animal refused until 10.12.1984 to take any nourishment voluntarily (a result of a bad experience with the first egg?) and had to be force-fed until then.

The two examples mentioned show that Egg-eating Snakes will also attempt to swallow eggs which have been brooding. In the first case mentioned, an explanation could possibly be that the newly captured animal had possibly not eaten for some time. A second reason could be that I offered the eggs in a bird's nest. The snakes are very stimulated by the smell of the nest. Everything is excitedly and intensively "tongued" and they feed much more greedily than when the eggs are simply placed on the substrate of the vivarium. This is also a good way to get snakes which refuse food to eat voluntarily.

In the second case the inexperience of the young animals could have been important as well as the fresh "wild smell" because the eggs were brought to me in the nest and from there were placed in the vivarium. After observing 770 eggs being swallowed Kulmus (1984) saw six being regurgitated because they already contained well-developed embryos. Fitzsimons (1962) describes how in South Africa the Egg-eating Snakes often entered chicken sheds to get food, and even swallowed a false plaster egg. It would appear that here too the smell of the nest misled them sufficiently to cause them to swallow the false egg. In this case the animal must have been able to regurgitate the egg or would have died.

To return to the original question - that the state of brooding of the egg cannot always be determined, but a rotten egg is always ignored, it is something of a miracle that the false plaster egg was eaten!

From my knowledge of various places where I found young animals, I was convinced that even newly hatched snakes fed exclusively on birds' eggs. However, these can only take the eggs of very small birds e.g. Lagonosticta, Estrilda etc. which do not breed the whole year round, but which time their breeding to coincide with the two rainy seasons.

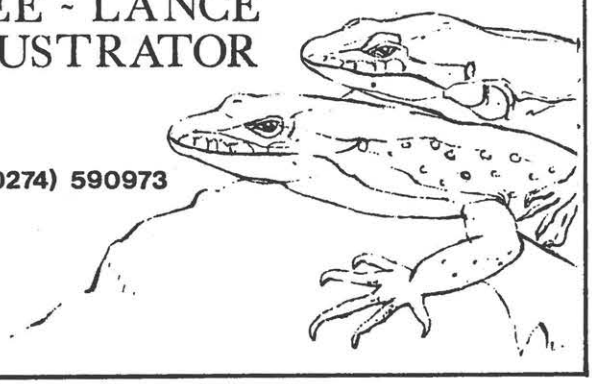
I was also curious to know whether invertebrates were initially taken as first food. Five snakes which were born on 5.10.1984 were not given any birds' eggs. Instead they were offered earthworms and slugs. These however were totally ignored. They also ignored moth larvae (similar to termite larvae) and cricket larvae of suitable size. After three and a half months on 21.1.1985 I stopped the experiment. During this time the animals had no food whatsoever. The average weight loss was around 29% (from 3.8g to 2.7g). Perhaps this ability to go without food for a considerable length of time is also associated with their special adaptation to egg-eating.

In a further experiment I tested how long a newly hatched snake could survive without food. A snake which hatched on 5.10.1984 was given water but no food whatsoever. After five months the weight loss was measured at 25% (from 4g to 3g). By the middle of July, i.e. after nine and a half months without food the snake had lost 31% of its birth weight. Its reactions and retreating behaviour had however developed normally. When I returned home on 31.7.1985 after a 14 day holiday I found the snake dead. Because it was occasionally very hot in Berlin during this time, overheating can not be ruled out as the cause of death. It can only be stated that the newly hatched animal which was kept at an average temperature of around 25 degrees C, was able to survive for 10 months without any kind of food. Because the temperatures in their natural habitat frequently drop below the average 25 degrees C especially at ground level, a newly hatched snake would be in a position to survive for a year without food, but during this time it would certainly be possible for the animal to find eggs to eat.

In herpetological literature, opinions are unanimous: The Egg-eating Snake is an obligatory birds' egg specialist. Two exceptions are worth mentioning: Broadley (1962) quotes Cansdale (1948, 1955) that Dasypeltis is supposed to have eaten eggs which she laid herself. Rose (quoted by Broadley 1962) watched as a medium-sized Egg-eating Snake swallowed the egg of a tortoise (Chersina angulata). From the anatomical construction of the feeding apparatus Gans (1952) concludes that Dasypeltis is only capable of crushing hard-shelled eggs but because in nature it rarely comes into contact with lizard or tortoise eggs it is thus forced to eat only birds' eggs. Ditmars (quoted by Jurgens 1939) reports that reptile eggs with a soft leathery shell were eaten by Dasypeltis and then the shells were regurgitated. I offered a very hungry Egg-eating Snake the freshly laid eggs of an African House Snake (Boaedon fuliginosus). These were refused but the pigeon eggs which were finally presented were eaten immediately.

Part Four of The African Egg-eating Snake will appear in December's Snake Keeper.

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Great Escapes

by Dr. G. M. Evans

The snake must, of all animals, have the greatest reputation for escapology. Many serpents pull off exploits that would have made Houdini wonder, persuing their chosen career with enormous dedication, and no little measure of skill. There can surely be few snake keepers without some experience of the ingenuity of these reptiles, and without a favourite anecdote (or several) on the subject. The following are three of mine.

Towards the end of my final term at school, the Biology, Physics and Chemistry departments jointly agreed to run a 'Science Fair' for the children of the local primary schools. While the physicists produced high-tech wizardry and laser effects, and the chemists played the eventful pyrotechnics game, the animal and plant brigade did all it could with living displays, in a spirit of friendly competition. At that time I was heavily into axolotls having recently produced two of the metamorphosed adult form under the effect of thyroxine; these formed my own contribution to the success of the venture. The Head of Biology had been building a collection of exotic laboratory animals (with a bit of encouragement from myself and a few like-minded friends) and his pride and joy was a 4.5' (1.35m) female Grass Snake (Natrix natrix).

All the preparations were proceeding according to plan - the Grass Snake had not been fed to avoid unsightly bulges - and everything looked set for the first day. Arriving at the lab after assembly, I found a scene of consternation and incipient chaos - somehow she had escaped! With only half an hour before the first party arrived masters, fellow pupils and I checked every radiator, every window box, every dark inviting place, to no avail.

Too late to continue the search, the first day came and went, with no sign of the absent ophidian. Despite a further search that evening - more to make us feel better than anything else - she remained firmly and definitely lost. The next day, as predictable as if it had been scripted, out she popped, into the middle of the floor, and a visit from the local girls school! Now, if you have never seen 20 eight year-olds and their mistresses suddenly discover a snake in their midst, I assure you imagination will not do credit to the speed at which they move! The effect was electrifying: the room cleared in seconds, leaving the simple job of arresting our errant reptile, who gained little traction on the polished floor. We never did discover how she escaped, nor where she had hidden, but none of us (nor, I suspect, any of the visitors that day) forgot the incident.

Some years later, when the focus of my herptile keeping activities had centred on snakes of the genus Python, I had a worrying few moments with one of my prized specimens - a then 5' (1.5m) Reticulated Python, Python reticulatus. Before retiring one summer's evening, I wandered into my reptile room to check my beasts, as is my habit. The tank that had, until then, housed my beautiful Reticulated Python was conspicuously devoid of its snaky inhabitant. Rushing to the bedroom, I quizzed my wife regarding a possible practical joke, which she sleepily denied. My long-suffering other half, I should point out, is a veterinary nurse and, as such, tackles anything with fur, feathers, or scales with few qualms - though even she is not overly keen on a Retic whose temperament could, most charitably, be described as uncertain. However, as in all moments of perceived crisis, rational thought had long since fled to the far horizons. On re-examination, the snake's escape route was obvious enough. Having successfully kept my snake in the same tank for several months with no mishaps, I had foolishly neglected to allow for the increase in stength concommitant with his increase in size. Evidently he had pushed up the lid, and simply slipped out. The pot plant that had weighed it down for all that time was clearly no longer sufficient.

Quickly surveying the room for likely hiding places, I discovered inummerable snake havens that I had previously never even considered. Worse than that, for the life of me I could not remember whether the door to the room was shut on my first arrival, nor whether I had subsequently closed it while talking to my wife (who had now joined in the hunt).

You might reasonably think that searching for a 5' (1.52m) snake in an area little more than 12' x 6' (3.65m x 1.82m) would pose no great problem. However, when you

consider that the room was at that time in a state which, even allowing for my usual standard of phenomenol untidiness, could best be described as shambolic, the whole thing takes on entirely new dimensions. Books and papers were strewn across every horizontal surface - the background work to some project or other offering a regular adventure playground to a Python with an explorative spirit. After checking behind the tanks with no success, the only hope lay in a careful inch by inch search. Having seemingly moved enough books to furnish a small library, I eventually discovered him under a file containing long forgotten essays on dietary requirements - a hint perhaps? Fortunately, since his temperature had dropped to around the ambient 65 degrees F (18 degrees C), he was too placid to object to unceremonious recapture. To this day, I still blush slightly at the thought of how complacent I had become with my tank set-up and how close I came to the loss of a fine snake.

The third story concerns a Common Garter Snake (Thamnophis sirtalis) with so much "get up and go" that it made Indiana Jones seem positively a stay-at-home type! I had purchased this animal quite by chance on a routine visit to my local aquarium/reptile shop, and installed it in the lab. Throughout the summer it lived in its tank, feeding well and thriving, until one morning I arrived to find the tank quite empty - escape route unknown. Considering the construction of the building, it seemed likely that it has escaped to the great outdoors.

Some months later, I received a report from the neighbouring farm of a snake lying in their garden, basking in the autumn sun. When I arrived, the beast was nowhere to be seen, and although the description of the animal ("green with yellow on it") was consistent with the local Grass Snakes, I harboured a slight suspicion that my Garter Snake could have been the cause of the report. However, it is difficult to get accurate information from people who believe all snakes to be not only horrendously venomous, but also possessed of an instinctive desire to do their bit towards the demise of the human race. Despite a lengthy attempt at education, and many assurances that the serpent would not return with all its kith and kin in revenge for being disturbed, I still could not reliably establish the identity of the ophidian intruder.

That was pretty much that - I had almost forgotten about the whole story until one day early in June of this year, when walking along a hedgerow, up the school back drive. As is my habit when in no particular hurry, I ambled along, looking at the ground as I went. I had almost reached the end of the hedge when I spotted a green scaly body. As I bent down to investigate, it suddenly dawned on me that this was none other than my own missing Garter Snake which, now having reverted to the wild, struck violently as I recaptured it. Placing the reptile in a very secure tank in the lab, I could not help but feel pleased by the eventual outcome of its ten month leave of absence - particularly since it had overwintered in some of the most dreadful weather in local living memory. It remains to the time of writng in the best of health, and seemingly none the worse for its escapade.

I am sure many readers will have stories to beat these, but it remains clear that snakes, given time and opportunity, are capable of quite remarkable feats of evasion. Moreover, over familiarity with our charges, leading to complacency with our arrangements, can prove a dangerous fault. We can all be wise after the event, but compared with searching for a snake at large, the old adage about stable doors and horses pales into insignificence.

Indian Pythons - Devoted Mothers

by Paul Thompson

I have been keeping reptiles for almost 13 years, and as I am 23 years old, that means I was only 10 when I got my first reptiles. These consisted of a dozen Common Lizards which I caught myself. I kept these for several years, during which time I bred them. When I released them back into the wild there were 52 of them. After this, over the next two or three years I had several other types of lizard, including monitors, skinks and green lizards. I have also had an alligator which I didn't keep for very long as I wanted to try my hand at keeping snakes.

The first snakes I had were Garter Snakes.

I then kept Grass Snakes and King Snakes, before moving on to Indian Pythons. I have had six of this species but have now cut this down to three. These are two females and one male. The male is 11' (3.35m) long and weighs about 45lbs (20.4kg), the females are 15' (4.57m) and 14' (4.26m) and weigh 90lbs (40.8kg) and 72lbs (32.6kg). They all live in a large tank 8' x 6' x 5' (2.4m x 1.82m x 1.52m) which is in a heated room. The light is provided by a spot light and the tank is heated to a daytime temperature of 86 degrees F (30 degrees C) which drops down to 75 degrees F (24 degrees C) at night. They are kept on a substrate of newspaper with brown wrapping paper on top. They are fed on one 6lb (2.72kg) chicken every three weeks, with the largest female having two.

The largest female has laid several clutches of infertile eggs, but, between the 1st and the 20th of January this year matings were observed, and on the 24th January the female refused food and again did so on the 3rd of February. On the 28th February, the male was removed from the tank and put in to another, along with the other female. Over the next few weeks we could see a rapid gain in her girth and on the 30th March she weighed 132lbs (59.8kg). At this time a large box was placed in the tank and this was filled up to about six inches (15cm) deep with cloth, paper and leaves. On the 12th April the female became very restless and at about 3.40am on the 14th April she started to lay her eggs. This continued until 10.40am when she finally started to take up the pyramid shape about her eggs. She had laid a clutch of 52 eggs.

During the incubation period the tank and the female were sprayed twice a day to keep the humidity at around 80 to 85%. Towards the end of the incubation period there could be seen on the female several large blisters, which after consulting my vet we decided to leave until after she had finished incubating her clutch.

After about 50 days the female started to come off the eggs and I could see some of them were slightly damaged but I made no attempt at this point to remove them. After 55 days the first eggs started to hatch and by 62 days 32 had hatched. The hatchlings were removed to a warm dry tank with fresh water. The rest of the undamaged eggs were removed and opened up to find fully formed snakes which were dead. We then took the female to the vet and he performed an operation on her as some muscle tissue had been infected. He cut this away and put four stitches in her which were taken out 2 days before she sloughed her skin, as the skin only heals as the old skin is sloughed. After two weeks all the hatchlings had sloughed and had started to feed on mice and the female was healing from the scars due to her motherly devotion shown towards her young. Within seven weeks all the hatchlings had been sold to many parts of the country.

The Dangers of Incorrect Heating

by P.J. Quenet

I have been keeping snakes now for about seven years and have tried various kinds of heating and on two occasions have had near fatal accidents. The article that follows just goes to prove that it is safer and cheaper in the long run to invest in safe, good quality heating equipment.

My first experience occurred when I purchased my first snake, a Royal Python (Python regius), and vivarium. The tank was heated by three 60 watt light bulbs which were positioned in the lid. As it was my first snake I was a complete beginner, I did not know anyone locally on whom I could call for advice so all my information came from books. Nearly all of the books suggested that underfloor heating was the most advisable method for keeping snakes at the correct temperature.

I went to the nearest pet shop which sold snakes and purchased a heating pad and thermostat. I received direct instructions that the pad must go between the bottom of the tank and whatever the tank stood on which, in my case, was a chipboard desk.

I followed the instructions carefully and installed the heater and thermostat. After a short time I smelt something burning and, upon investigation, I found flames coming from the bottom of my tank. I immediately turned off the electricity supply and extinguished the fire. My first priority was to check the snakes which, fortunately, had only received minor burns. The equipment was not faulty but the thermostat worked on air temperature and not base temperature; before the air temperature was correct, the pad had overheated and caught fire.

After many months of using light bulbs I finally met someone who kept snakes and they invited me to see their collection. They were using underground propagating wire rated at 75 watts. This was used without a thermostat in a substrate of pebbles. At last I thought I had found the perfect set-up. I purchased some propagating wire and 1cwt (50kg) of aquarium stones. In time, I built a new vivarium and progressed to large Burmese Pythons, Python molorus bivittatus, which I hope to breed eventually.

About three months ago I visited some friends who have a large collection of snakes. Upon returning home I noticed that my flat was in complete darkness; after finding a torch, I saw that my three Pythons were no longer in the vivarium and that the inside of the tank was scorched and burnt. I immediately disconnected the heating equipment and replaced the mains fuse. I found my snakes and, upon checking the equipment, discovered that the cable had become brittle and cracked. Obviously one of my snakes had relieved itself on the damaged cable and this had shorted the mains supply. Once again I was without heating. I phoned my friends, explaining what had happened, and they kindly offered to provide a temporary home for my snakes.

Next day I repaired the damaged tank and bought a 250 watt infra-red heater and Nova thermostat from Chris and Marcia Martin in Cheltenham. I have found this equipment to be more efficient and a lot cheaper to run than previous purchases. So, newcomers to the hobby, be advised. Make sure you get it right the first time; whereas I was very lucky on two occasions, YOU might not be!

Non-venomous Snake-bite

by Cassandra Oakes

I recently received a bite on my index finger from my juvenile Indian Python (Python molorus bivittatus). Whilst being a minor bite with only one definite puncture of the skin but a full set of teeth marks, the after-effects were rather more drastic. First of all there was localised swelling, bruising and acute stiffness. I went to my doctor who, whilst being sympathetic, knew nothing about snakes or bites, venomous or otherwise. By now a sharp pain had begun to shoot up to my elbow, shock had set in and I was feeling very 'ropey'.

At this point, the Poisons Unit at Guys Hospital, London, was contacted and I was sent to the nearest hospital in Leicester. On the advice received from the Poisons Unit, I had a blood test for clotting. I was also given an anti-tetanus injection, treated for shock, prescribed Magnapen - a painkiller - and Sodium Naproxen - an antibiotic - for two weeks The pain had now become similar to that of a very bad sprain. This persisted for about three weeks, and my arm was virtually out of action for this time. I must add that I was sent to a crowded Out-patients department and received immediate treatment to the horror of the rest of the long queue!

While lying on a hospital bed, my curiosity about non-venomous snake-bites took over. I wanted to find out why I had reacted to a small bite in such a way, why others may not be affected, what is in snake saliva and also about bites from rodents. I contacted the National Poisons Unit, talked to the vet who treats my snakes, and delved into endless books where I discovered that only one author sees fit to mention, although briefly, non-venomous snake-bite.

Tony Phelps (Poisonous Snakes, 1981, p40) considers the distinction between Caenophidia (venomous) and Aglypha (non-venomous) snakes ill-defined since the saliva of a Garter Snake (Thamnophis spp.) and a semi-aquatic snake (Natrix spp.) is believed to have a paralysing effect on its prey adminstered via the puncture wounds made by the teeth of the snake. Mr Phelps also mentions that Python bites tend to make the wound bleed a lot, suggesting an anti-coagulant factor in the Python saliva. Knowing that a Boa can totally digest an adult mouse in five days (The Life Of Vertebrates, J.Z. Young, 1981) makes one far more aware of a snake's hidden strengths. It is easy to see that snake saliva and a snake's digestive juice is potent stuff.

Snake saliva is a complex mixture of small amounts of carbohydrates, salt, water and proteins. These proteins are responsible for the venomous factor, most of which are enzymes which cause a chemical reaction in the bitten prey. The effect of the bite

depends on the action on the body of the prey.

The main problem I had when I was bitten is that of an anaphylactic (allergic) reaction to the saliva injected into my skin. People with a history of allergies, like myself, may be affected. These people should be extra cautious although there is no reliable way of predicting who will react to snake saliva. This is because a substance injected into the body tissues has the ability to cause an allergic reaction as the body may recognise the substance as foreign - the proteins in the saliva are potent stimulators of an allergic reaction. An individual's reaction to wasp- or bee-stings as well as non-venomous snake-bites will vary. Some people will react as I did to the Python bite, others will barely notice.

My mother was nearly (she thinks) bitten by the same Python while "snake sitting" for me. Although she feels sure that the snake only struck rather than bit, my mother still had a pain in her arm, and after thinking about it all felt slightly shocked. We both feel that this could be psychosomatic, brought about by a combination of actually being struck at by a snake rather than any other type of animal, and because of my own experience with this snake.

It seems unlikely that disease can be transmitted to a human via a snake-bite. The only real effect on the body is the result of that of a venomous snake - unless the allergic reaction mentioned takes place. Localised infection of the bite wound given by a non-venomous snake, although rare, can occur. This is caused by organisms in the snake's mouth such as Pasteurella. Pasteurella is a group of bacilli which are essentially parasites of animals that under certain conditions are transmitted to man. The bacilli include the micro-organisms for plague and tularaemia - a rodent disease. There is a risk of this type of wound becoming infected with an organism causing tetanus. Here tetanus prophylaxis and other prophylactic anti-biotics are given. Rabies precautions are unnecessary.

Because rats and mice are frequently kept, it would be advisable to check that ones tetanus jabs are up to date. Mice, and especially rat bites, can be extremely dangerous. There is no real danger from laboratory bred animals, although there is a fairly small risk of these animals becoming infected with Leptospira, the organism that causes rat jaundice. Leptospira is normally found harmlesly in rodents and other small mammals. When it is transmitted to man via these animals, whether it be from a bite or through eating meat from a cow with this organism, it can cause various acute illnesses.

There is an element of risk of localised infection from a rodent bite caused by organisms such as Pasteurella and E. coli (Escherichia coli) of which certain strains are responsible for summer diarrhoea. These organisms may contaminate the rat's saliva. Antibiotic treatment is given for this. For bad rat bites, tetanus prophylaxis is recommended but anti-rabies prophylaxis is rarely needed.

It is obvious that every care should be taken when handling both snakes and rodents. Proper handling techniques should be used at all times. The National Poisons Unit recommends the use of gloves when handling all these animals.

References:
Poisonous Snakes, Tony Phelps, 1981.
Black's Medical Dictionary
The Life Of Vertebrates, J.Z.Young, 1981

Many thanks to veterinary surgeon, Chris Williamson and Eric Louw BSc., of the National Poisons Unit.

The Bullsnake: An Unknown Quantity

by Chris Hunt

Much has been written about North American snakes of the genus Lampropeltis (Kingsnakes) and Elaphe (Rat Snakes) but you don't see a lot of information about snakes of the genus Pituophis (Bullsnakes)

The Bullsnakes occur in most states of North America as far south as New Mexico and northern Central Mexico.

The Bullsnakes have always had a reputation for giving aggressive hissing displays when they are disturbed and as they reach a length of about 8' (2.43m) this can be very off-putting for someone who wishes to keep them. However, if you persevere with them, they will settle down and do exceptionally well in captivity.

I have three captive-bred hatchlings, at present, which are all doing very well. They are housed in a 4' x 2' x 2' (1.2m x .6m x.6m) wooden vivarium with a sliding glass front. As a substrate I use bark chippings with various pieces of cork bark as decoration.

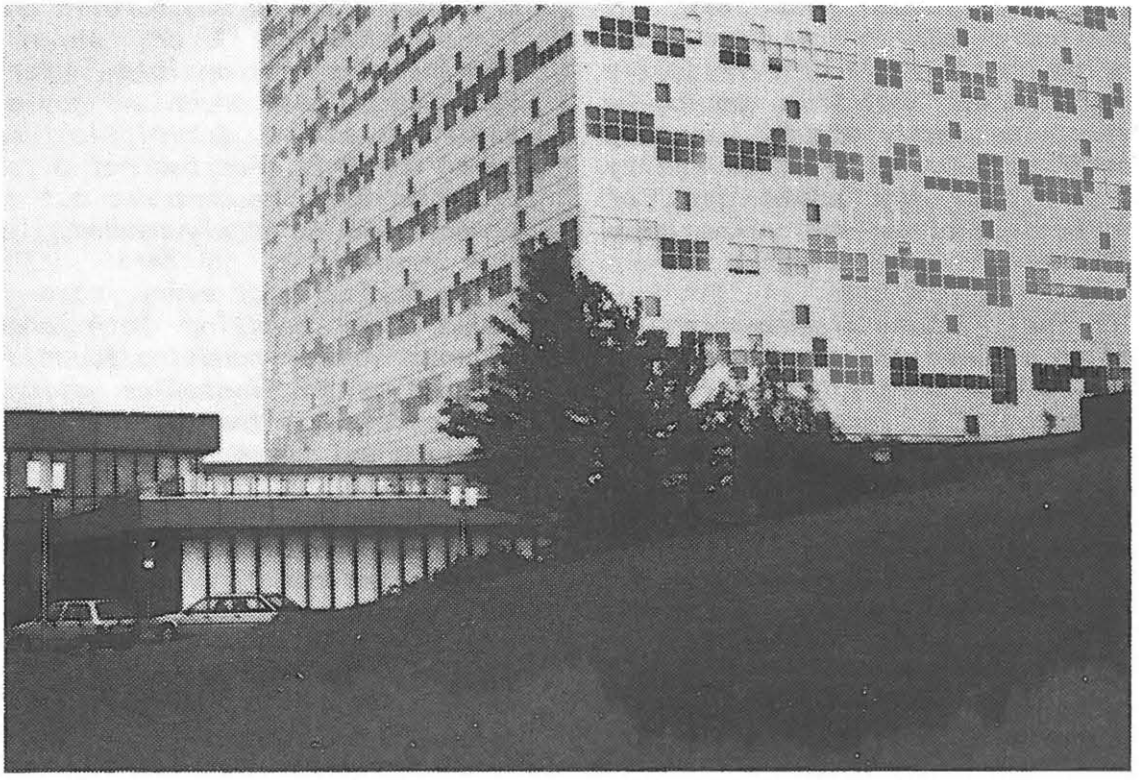
Heating is provided by a 150 watt ceramic heater controlled by a central heating thermostat. Lighting is provided by a True-lite tube which is on for approximately 10 hours a day.

I find that Bullsnakes do best kept at a temperature of 29 degrees C dropping to 26 degrees C at night. The snakes are very active and boisterous by nature. My three specimens are always found at the front of the vivarium, basking in the heat. They take no notice of activity outside their vivarium except at feeding time when they go absolutely mad and start whizzing around the vivarium as fast as they can.

My snakes all feed readily on frozen mice which they took during the first week I owned them. I don't know of anyone who has had serious problems in feeding these snakes; they all seem to be good feeders.

All in all, the Bullsnake makes an ideal pet which soon settles down to become an active, friendly addition to any herpetologist's collection.

Dutch Snake Society
Snake Day



The Dutch Snake Society held their annual Snake Day on Saturday October 17th. Despite a last minute change of venue to the University Centre in Utrecht (see photo above), about 400 people were present from 11 countries including France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Denmark and Sweden.

Five lectures were given during the day. These were 'Problems with keeping venomous snakes, especially the genus Viperidae' by Robert Jooris from Wetteren in Belgium, 'Drug administration in snakes' by Dr. Gerrie Dorrestein from the Department of Pathology, State University of Utrecht, 'The Pacific Boas of the genus Candoia' and 'Costa Rica - herpetological treasure' by Henri Kratzer from Zurich, Switzerland and 'Southeast Asian snakes of the genus Elaphe' by Klaus Dieter Schulz from Alsdorf, West Germany.



Right
The Dutch Snake Society table selling past and present copies of their magazine, stickers, sweatshirts etc.

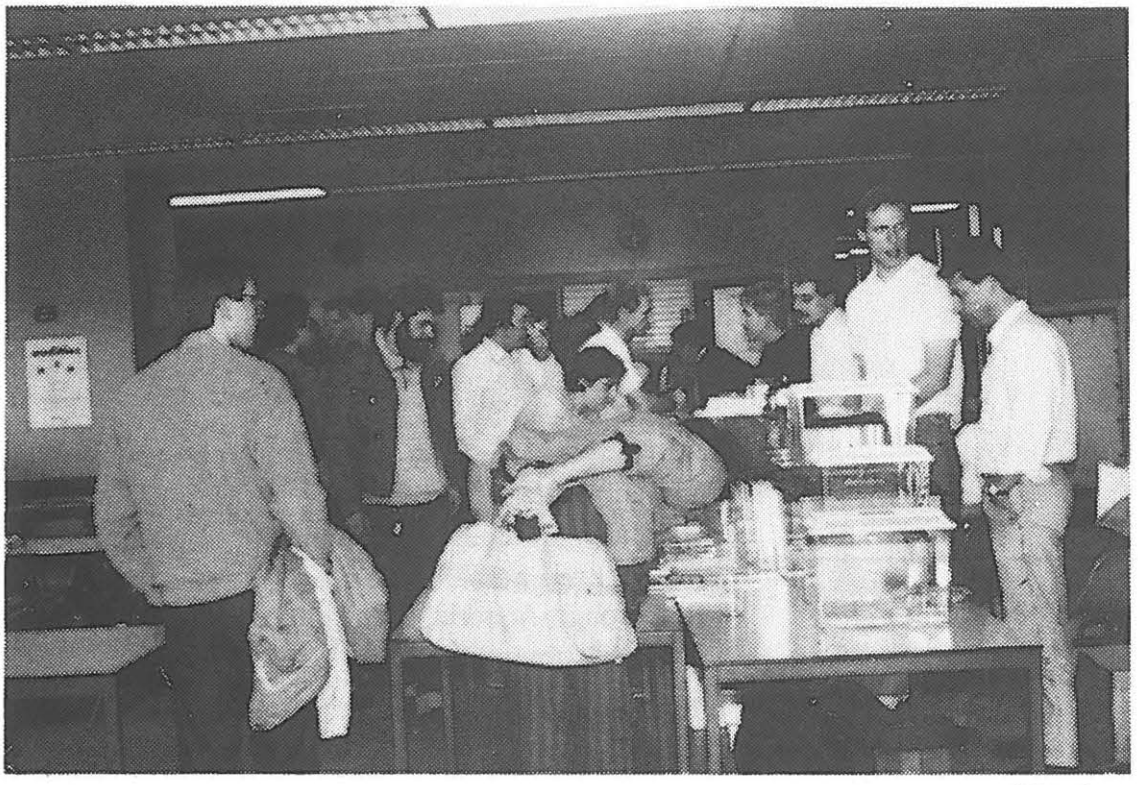
(For further information on the D.S.S. write to the address on page two)

A wide variety of snakes were on offer from both private individuals and dealers. A separate room was provided for the sale of venomous species. Various books and equipment were also on sale. The Dutch Snake Society had a table selling items such as stickers, posters, sweatshirts and back copies of their magazine, Litteratura Serpentium.

The day was a very enjoyable cosmopolitan event and the meal afterwards, at the 'Zorba de Griek' restaurant in Utrecht, was great fun.

We would like to extend our thanks to to the Dutch Snake Society for their warm welcome and, in particular, to Anton van Woerkom for his kindness and hospitality during our all-too-brief stay in the lovely city of Utrecht.

Lesley Close



Left

Trade stand run by Interrep from The Hague selling snakes books and accessories.

(Photographs: Lesley Close)

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