SNAKE KEEPER

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INFORMATION

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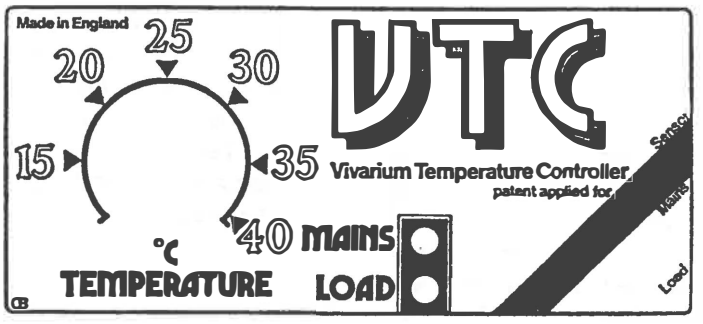
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Technically Speaking!

by Kevin J. Hingley

The purpose of this article is to outline the need for, as well as the use of, the scientific names in aspects of natural history studies and, in particular, herpetology.

Most novices entering a field of study for either professional or amateur reasons are faced with the daunting task of learning the scientific names of the flora or fauna that they are preparing to study, and then being able to recognise them when they are encountered in both literature and conversation. Just one look at some of these names can be off-putting, especially the lengthier ones that appear to be unpronounceable. However, as time wears on, some of the shorter names that label the more commonly encountered species and subspecies are quickly learned and remembered and when someone starts talking about Elaphe this and Natrix that at a herpetological meeting, one instantly thinks of Ratsnakes and Grass or European water snakes respectively. Matters are simplified when the scientific and commonly applied names are the same, as in the case of Python and Boa species, but these instances are in the minority.

So, why do we need the tongue-twisting terms? The simplest way of explaining them is the fact that they are a universally accepted language whereas common names vary from country to country. Take, for example, the Indian Python. For years this common name has been applied to what we now call the Burmese Python (Python molurus bivittatus) and, to differentiate between it and the true Indian Python (P.m. molurus), we called them 'dark phase' and 'light phase' respectively. There are many other examples I could mention although the example above should be sufficient to prove the need for scientific names.

I was lucky enough to have been taught Latin for the first three years of my senior education before it was declared a dead language! This has helped me to come to grips with the technical terms that abound in natural history studies. However I am by no means a scholar of taxonomy and even I have have to look long and hard at some of these generic, specific and subspecific names before making an attempt to pronounce them, so I can appreciate the dilemma facing the reader. Some generic and specific names are easy to understand as far as their origins are concerned. The generic name for King and Milk snakes, Lampropeltis sp., brings together two words that describe their appearance, 'Lampro' meaning smooth and 'peltis' meaning skin. This refers to the fact that King and Milk snakes have scales without keels or ridges giving them a smooth, polished feel and appearance. The African House Snake, Lamprophis sp., is another easily deciphered name; 'Lampro' meaning smooth and 'ophis' meaning snake. Most scientific names say something about the physical appearance, colour, pattern or regional distribution of whatever it is attached to and, occasionally, a name is attached in honour of a naturalist.

When using scientific names there is a code of practice which should be followed if only to satisfy the stalwarts. I must confess that I prefer to see them used correctly and I object to seeing scientific names reduced to initials and this is happening quite often nowadays. When using a scientific name in an article or an advert it should be written in full the first time it is used. After that, if it is referred to again, the generic name can be initialised; Python regius may be written as P. regius on the second occasion and thereafter in the same article. The same method applies to sub-species and Python molurus bivittatus can be reduced to P.m. bivittatus on subsequent occurrences. Recently, I have seen this subspecies advertised as P.m.b. or even P.M.B. Capitals should not be used for specific and subspecific names. Whilst the more experienced may realise that it refers to the Burmese Python the novice may imagine it means Poor Miserable Blighter for all we know. It has been suggested that if the author fails to use the technical nomenclature then the editor should make good the error but this boils down to the willingness of the editor in the end.

If you are going to use Latin 'gobbledegook' try to use it properly and make someone, somewhere happy.

———

Snake Spotting in Europe

by Dr. G.M. Evans

With the excellent and frequent television programmes which bring the tropics into our living rooms, not even the most house-bound of armchair explorers can fail to appreciate the splendour and diversity of herptile species in such regions. A trip to specialist dealers, or an increasing number of local pet shops, reinforces the allure of such far-flung exotics as boas and house snakes, iguanas and monitors. There is almost a feeling (if not actually stated per se) that European animals in general (and British in particular) are rather dull and unworthy subjects. True, many of them are outsized and outshone by their bulkier and more colourful relatives and successful captive husbandry does seem to be more dependent on if not green fingers then at least the herpetologists' equivalent. It is not my intention to advance the case for European snake keeping - my obsession with the genus Python would render that somewhat hypocritical but rather for European snake spotting, a fascinating and in many ways, less demanding exercise.

Let's get one thing straight from the start; you don't have to pack your fedora and bullwhip and catch the first flight to somewhere hot, sticky and enormously expensive to see snakes in the wild. (Unless you happen to be travelling at someone else's expense, in which case ignore the last sentence, and can I come too?) Even the most mundane of European family holidays can offer opportunities for a beast hunt. Nor is it always necessary to leave these shores for, once beyond the urban sprawl, Britain still has her unspoilt snake havens. Being realistic however, it is obviously less of a spectator sport than sitting back, sipping cocktails on a boat up the Amazon, looking at all the funny animals from your deckchair. Putting it bluntly, in order to see anything you must be much more of an active participant - and above all else, think snake!

There is no substitute for being in the right place at the right time. The south of Europe is more forgiving in this respect - reptiles here are more active, more numerous and more widespread. In the cooler, northerly climes, (Yes Brits, this means us!) species are often far more restricted in geographical range, more habitat based and usually more secretive in their habits too! However, before you smash the piggy-bank, sell your partner to a white slaver and head off to the Congo, there are ways which can help to give you the edge and enable many hours of successful snake spotting.

Like all good expeditions, good forward planning can save hours and much frustration on the ground. Firstly, get a good field guide, identify the species to be found in the area you intend to visit and read up all you can regarding their habits and especially their habitat. You will thus gain an idea of the sorts of places likely to produce results. Secondly, obtain a suitable map and find out in advance where such places occur. Two obvious pieces of advice but ones easily overlooked in all the excitement and don't forget to take the items along with you.

The season and the time of the day both play a part in finding snakes in the wild. Some southern snakes, for example, may be active whilst their northern brethren are hibernating. For most diurnal snakes a sunny day in the warmer months of the year is ideal for snake hunting. Such animals are usually active in the morning and often again in the late afternoon/early evening. Adders (Vipera berus) for example are most frequently encountered between dawn and 8a.m. and from around 8p.m. to 10p.m.

When searching for snakes in likely countryside it is well worth moving slowly and quietly, pausing every so often to scan the ground carefully. Snakes can be hard to find at the best of times but in their natural environment their cryptic colouration often affords them impossibly good camouflage. Coupled with this is their habitual tendency to immobility when sensing danger, the sum total of which factors makes passing unknowingly within a few feet of a static serpent a very real possiblity. By moving as silently as possible you allow yourself to hear any rustling in the ground vegetation, often the indication of your quarry's presence. Crepuscular or fossorial snakes are often to be found in their daytime hiding spots, necessitating the turning over of any suitable looking stones, logs, bits of

discarded sheet metal etc. and the CAUTIOUS investigation of any holes. (It is imperative, however, that any disturbed log or stone is replaced as it was found.)

If space in the kit-bag permits, a good pair of binoculars can be a useful accessory. More often employed to observe the more active lizard species, binoculars may be helpful in observing snakes in inaccessible places or watching the larger serpents (which like lizards and terrapins, tend to be more wary of the antics of itinerant herpetologists). If you intend photographing your finds, a good quality, close-focusing telephoto or zoom lens on your SLR will double for this usage.

Having researched the animals likely to be encountered you will have a fairly good idea of both what forms the diet of each snake and what is likely to make a meal of it. These can also help point you in the right direction. European water snakes (Natrix genus) which feature amphibians amongst their food are likely to be found where frogs congregate - and frogs being (at least in the breeding season) more vocal than snakes can be easier to locate. Although most European predatory mammals and birds will take reptiles, the Short-toed Eagle (Circaetus gallicus) found south of the Loire, throughout Spain and Italy and eastwards into Asia, is the only creature with any claim to being a specialist snake-eater. To find one of these uncommon but striking birds is almost to be signposted into snake country.

As many of the major film maufacturers are at pains to inform us, photographs are not just pretty pictures - they encapsulate memories. The photograph of that superb Asp Viper (or whatever) will forever remind you of the hours of walking and searching that eventually let you find it. Photography of snakes has much to recommend it - for one thing provided, having once found your snake, you do nothing to disturb or alarm it, these reptiles are relatively easy to photograph. Basking in direct sunlight and allowing the photographer to approach fairly closely, serpents are probably one of the most amenable of wildlife subjects. Armed with a good camera, a 135 or 200mm telephoto lens and patience, reasonable results can well be expected. One word of warning to would-be photographers; within Britain, the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 prohibits the photography or disturbance of certain herptile species (notably the Smooth Snake, Coronella austriaca) without a suitable licence. The Nature Conservancy Council should be contacted for full details and it is best to check the foreign situation, either with the appropriate embassy, or locally once arrived. One thing is certain, it is a good deal easier to carry photographs through foreign customs than the animals themselves - especially if your grasp of the required tongue is not quite up to such niceties.

It should, obviously, go without saying that venomous and unidentified snakes should be treated with the very greatest of caution. No holiday should turn into a consumer test of foreign medical facilities or proprietary brands of antivenin. Happy spotting!

Elaphe schrenckii
Maintenance and Breeding in Captivity

by Andrzej Kowalew

Introduction

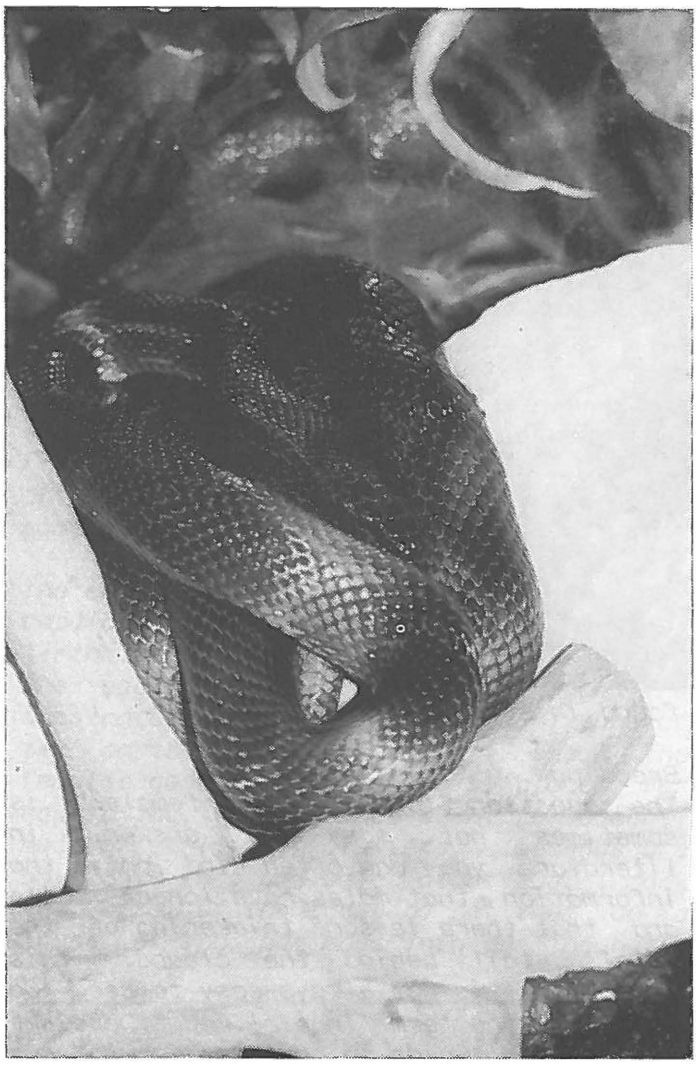
There are two subspecies of E. schrenckii: E.s. schrenckii and E.s. anomala. I will describe E.s. schrenckii as I have never kept the other subspecies. The subspecies do not differ greatly so I suppose that my remarks about maintenance and breeding are also valid for E.s. anomala.

Description

Amur Ratsnakes are rather large animals. Trutnau states in 'Schlangen 1' that E. schrenckii can reach 170cm. However a seven year old male snake kept by a friend of mine was 184cm long when it died. Most three year old Amur Ratsnakes kept in captivity exceed 150cm. I have never seen a 2m long snake of this species though I suppose that older animals can probably reach lengths of more than 200cm.

Apart from the head and the neck, the Amur Ratsnake is similar in shape to E. obsoleta. E. schrenckii's neck seems to be thicker and stronger so the head is not separated distinctly from the rest of the body.

The snakes are usually brown or dark-grey. The body is banded over its length with



Elaphe schrenckii Photo: Andrzej Kowalew

spaced markings of cream or white. The markings fork on the sides. The belly is white, cream or yellow with black spots. There is also a rare black-bellied form. I deliberately do not use the word melanistic because I have not found any information about melanistic forms of *E. schrenckii*. The black-bellied snakes are black and their white or grey markings are thin and faint. Sometimes there are no markings. The eyes are black. The belly is not actually black but dark-grey. I had a pair of these snakes; from the 11 young they produced only two were black-bellied.

Young Amur Ratsnakes are very similar to the adult in shape but different in colour. They are brighter, sometimes greenish. The markings are broader and distinct. Their bellies are usually white, sometimes cream or grey and almost never yellow.

Distribution and Biotope

The distribution range covers North-East China (there *E.s anomala* can be found), broad areas along both banks of the Amur River and Korea. The snakes are found in clearings with low vegetation, at the edges of forests, in gardens, near human dwellings. A frequent habitat is also the environs of sheds and abandoned buildings.

Vivarium

Amur Ratsnakes are not only large but also very active. They are often on the go and always interested in what is going on around them so the vivarium cannot be small. A vivarium which measures 1.5 x 1 x 0.8m (l x h x d) could house some six adult snakes. The base can be covered with a mixture of soil and sand. There should also be some heavy and steady rocks. A medium-sized water container and strong climbing branches are necessary. A hiding place can be provided but it is not necessary as the snakes are courageous and very seldom hide. Light can be supplied by one or two 40w fluorescent tubes. Infra-red heaters controlled by a thermostat should be provided. There is no need for additional heating of the base as the snakes are seldom found on the ground. Decorating the vivarium with plants is useless because an adult Amur Ratsnake would ruin any plant which was not a tree.

Temperature

There should be some places warm and some cooler so the infra-red heater must not be placed above the centre of the vivarium. The temperature should be between 24 to 29 degrees C. At night it can and should fall to 21 - 23 degrees C.

Humidity

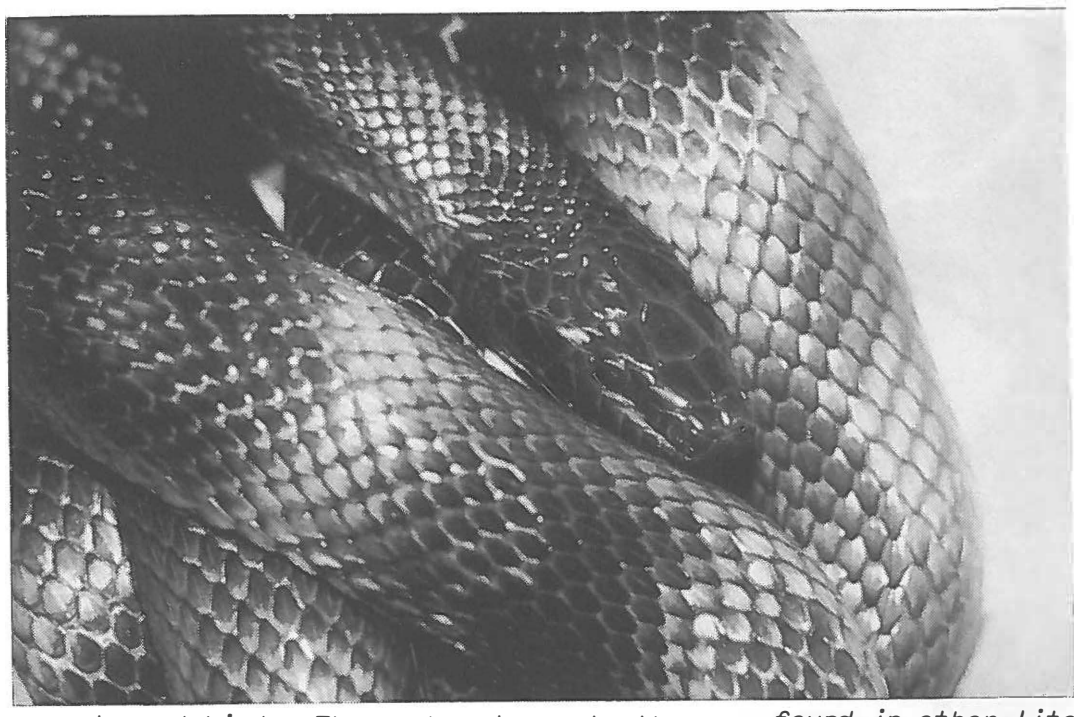
In rooms with central heating the relative humidity can fall below 40%. In nature, such low humidity can only occur in deserts. Inside the vivarium the humidity must vary from 60% to 80%. I simply spray the substrate with water each morning. The substrate should be moist but not wet.

Taming

There is no need for special methods to tame these snakes. Both young and old Amur Ratsnakes become accustomed to new conditions and their keeper very quickly. An aggressive *E. schrenckii* occurs only very occasionally. Amur Ratsnakes do not resist being removed from their vivarium. Quite the opposite, they seem to be pleased with the opportunity to see something new.

Feeding

In the wild, *E. schrenckii* feeds on small



Elaphe schrenckii

Photo: Andrzej Kowalew

mammals and birds. The snake also eats the eggs of birds. In captivity these snakes are extremely good feeders. During the first two months of their life the snakes grow from 30 to 60cm and during this time they eat up to 120 new-born mice. The adults will feed on adult mice and young rats. It is worthwhile however to provide the snakes with half-grown or even new-born mice once a month so that we can be sure that the snakes have no shortage of vitamins. Adding vitamins to food or water is dangerous as it is difficult to calculate the dosage. E. schrenckii is a constrictor but it only constricts larger prey. Several times I have tried to feed my snakes on eggs. Only a few were interested and only one would eat the eggs. They probably feed on eggs in the wild more frequently but there is nobody in the wild to feed them on mice each week.

Hibernation

In winter the temperature in Korea falls below freezing point (often below -15 degrees C). In the Amur region the temperature even falls below -25 degrees C. In the wild E. schrenckii hibernates for four to five months. In captivity Amur Ratsnakes can live and breed without hibernating. Hibernating, however, results in the snakes being healthier, stronger and longer-lived. For this reason they should have a 'cool' rest. I prepare my snakes for hibernation for a month, hibernate them in a refrigerator at 8 - 10 degrees C for two months and then for three weeks I slowly raise the temperature and the period of lighting. More detailed descriptions of hibernating methods can be found in other literature.

Breeding

The question "is it male or female?" is sometimes not easy to answer. In literature you can often find only the information that males have longer tails and that there is some thickening of the male's tail behind the cloaca. This 'thickness' is not always easy to see. So what does the term 'longer' mean? Derevski states in 'Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of the USSR' that males have tails which measure 18 - 21% of the snake's whole length. In female E.schrenckii this measurement is 16 - 18%. With some patience and skill you can measure your snakes. Listed below I have given data obtained from the measurement of 13 adult Amur Ratsnakes.

Females			Males		
L	Lt	Lt/L	L	Lt	Lt/L
109	20	18%	120	22	18%
124	21	17%	122	23	19%
124	20	16%	148	30	20%
136	22	16%	158	32	20%
140	23	16%	170	34	20%
152	26	17%	174	33	19%
			174	36	21%

L = Length of snake
Lt = Length of snake's tail
Lt/L = Length of the tail expressed as a percentage of the total length of the snake.

Most Elaphe species breed best when males and females are separated for some time and then only one male and one female are placed together. Experience gained by specialists at Warsaw Zoo and by some herpetologists leads to the conclusion that Amur Ratsnakes breed better when there is a group of six to eight snakes (three to four males and four to five females). One condition must be fulfilled: the hibernation should last at least two months so that the sexual cycles of males and females are co-ordinated. The copulations which I have observed took from 10 minutes to several hours. Females often stop feeding after copulation but sometimes they continue to feed.

The eggs are laid four to five weeks after copulation. The increase in the female's girth is not significant. Two weeks before the eggs are due to be laid I change the substrate for a new, sterilised mixture of two parts soil and one part sand. The females generally choose moist places for egg laying. They produce eight to 30 eggs, most often laid in clusters. The eggs are 55 - 65mm long and weigh about 20g. I mark the tops of the eggs and put them on a layer of sphagnum moss into an incubator in the same position in which they were laid. Some herpetologists keep the incubation temperature constant but I vary the temperature. During the day I set the thermostat to 28 - 29 degrees C and at night to 26 degrees C. The incubation time is thus a few days longer but the hatchlings are stronger.

The relative humidity should be around 70 - 90%. Young snakes begin to hatch after 30 - 45 days. They are 28 - 34cm long with a hatching rate of, or very near to, 100%. If you have enough food there should be no problems rearing young Amur Ratsnakes as they are very good feeders and grow quickly.

Andrzej is a computer programmer and has been keeping snakes for five years. In addition to his success with E. schrenckii he has also bred Lamprophis fuliginosus. Andrzej wishes to specialise in snakes of the genus Elaphe in the future.

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Asian Rat Snakes of the Elaphe Genus
Part VI Elaphe hodgsoni (Gunther, 1860)

by Klaus-Dieter Schulz

This series of articles was originally published (beginning in 1985) in the magazine 'Sauria' and is reproduced here by kind permission of the author.

Translation from the original German by John Hackworth.

Introduction

When I first saw a photograph of this Rat Snake I was certain that it was an Aesculapian Snake (Elaphe longissima). It is unbelievable how confusingly similar these two snakes are. When examined more closely however several differences are apparent. In Elaphe hodgsoni the snout is much more pointed than that of E. longissima and the eyes look quite different. A very obvious distinguishing characteristic is the black stripe on the centre of the head. The body colour and other markings are nevertheless very similar to those of the Aesculapian Snake. Young animals have dark transverse bands (Boulanger 1893).

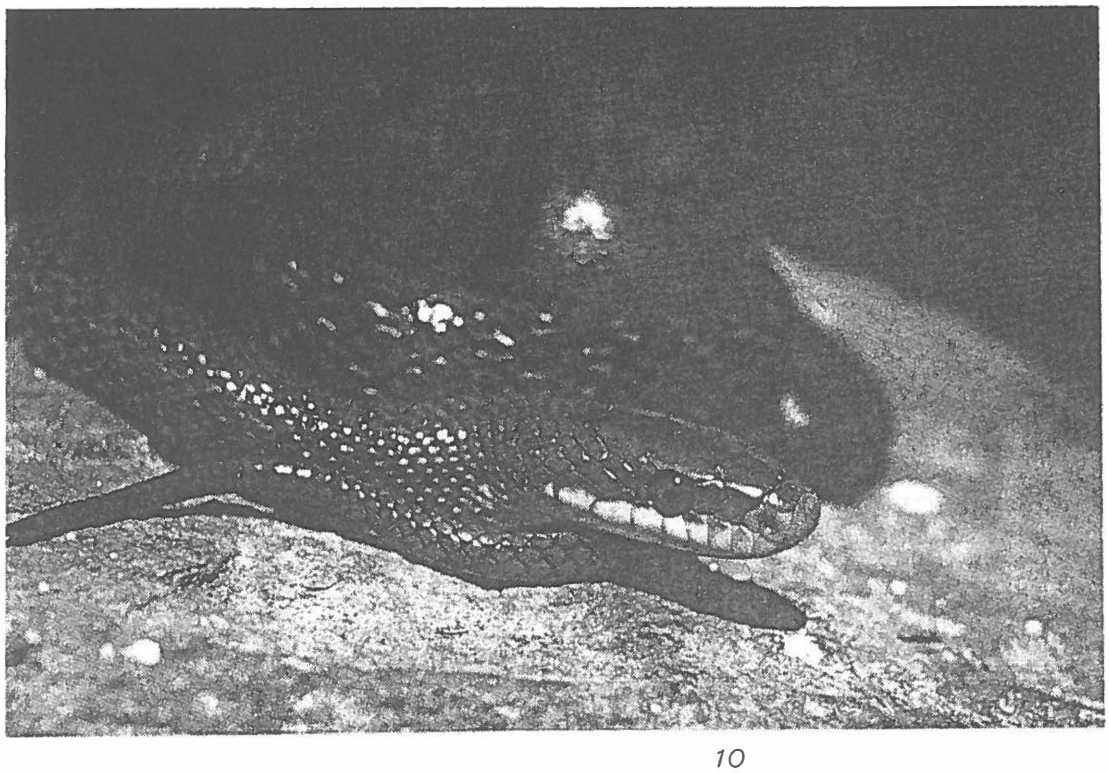
Distribution

The occurrence of Elaphe hodgsoni is limited to the Himalayan Regions of Kashmir (Srinagar) to Kissim and Assam (Garo Hills). In Nepal they have been found in several regions: Katmandu (Sclater 1891), Tarakot at 3000m (Smith and Battersby 1953), Gruber (of Munich) found a specimen of Elaphe hodgsoni in Western Central Nepal at Sikha above the Kali Gandaki at 1800m (verbal information 1985). According to his information, this snake is extremely rare in Nepal because successive quests to find a second animal for the past fourteen years have been unsuccessful. Li-Shengan (1982) first found Elaphe hodgsoni in China. Because I have no further information I can only assume that in China, E. hodgsoni is also limited to the Himalayan Region. Because of the height above sea level at which these snakes are found (never below 1500m), E. hodgsoni can positively be described as a mountain snake. Nothing is known about their lifestyle in the wild. Gruber found his snake in a very damp and sparse deciduous forest.

Maintenance in the Vivarium

Because to my knowledge only one living specimen of this snake has been brought to Germany and has been kept in captivity by Dr. Gruber for the past 14 years, not a great deal can be written about their maintenance in the vivarium.

Dr Gruber keeps his E. hodgsoni (in contrast to where he found it) in a very



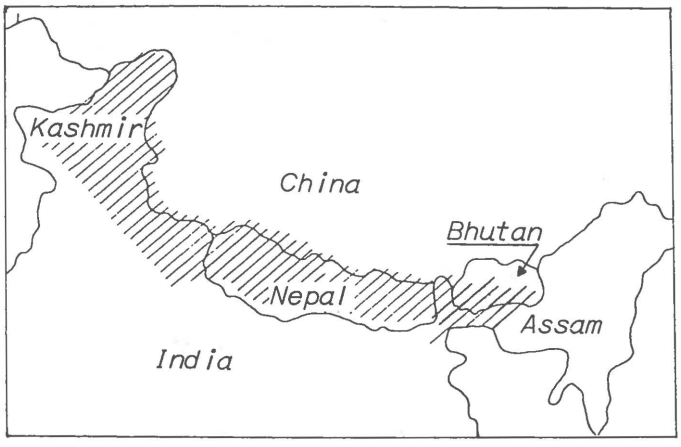
Elaphe hodgsoni

(Editor's note. Unfortunately we were unable to obtain the original photograph as supplied to the author and can only reproduce the printed version.)

dry and unheated vivarium which stands near a window. The single animal, which at present measures some 180cm, loves basking, especially in the rays of the sun in the early hours of the morning. Most of the time this extremely shy snake remains hidden and when angry it will bite readily. It feeds willingly on laboratory mice. E. hodgsoni fasts from the end of October until April. This in all certainty is determined by the low temperatures prevalent at that time in its natural habitat.

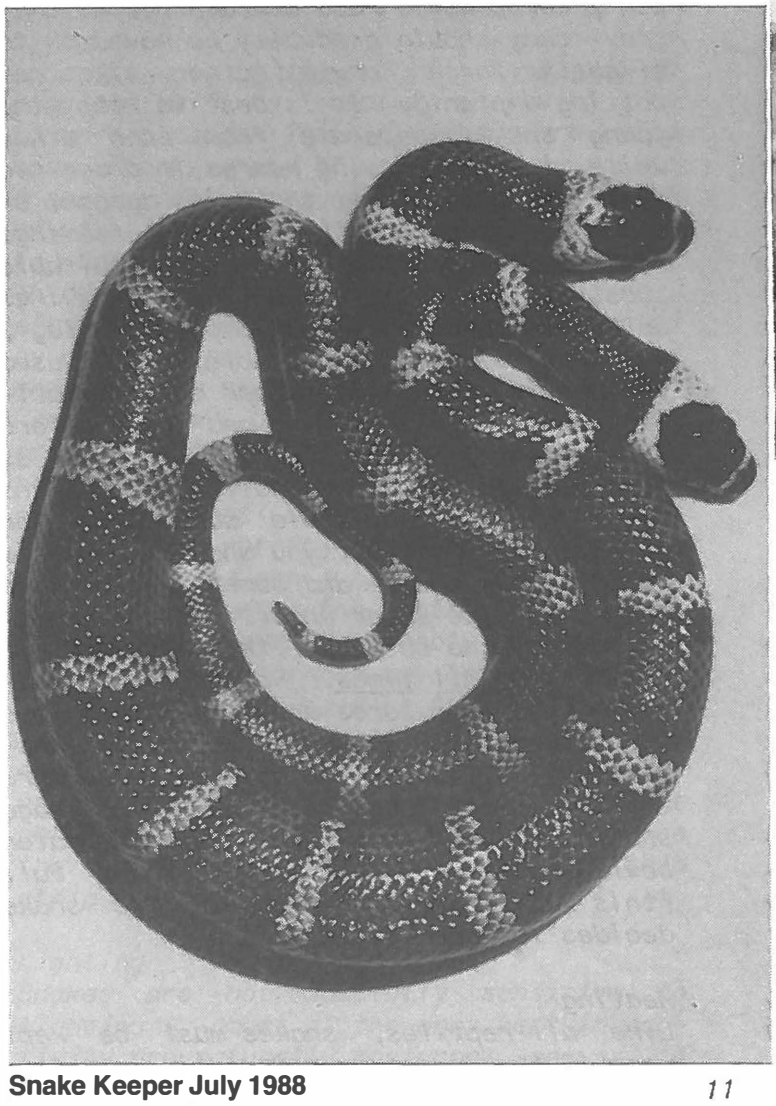
It is difficult to imagine that in the immediate future E. hodgsoni will be imported from its country of origin therefore the present article is only a short impression basically to introduce this very rare snake to those herpetologists who had previously been unaware of its existence.

Finally at this point I wish to express my grateful thanks to Dr. Ulrich Gruber. He kindly sent me the unique photograph and gave me details of origin, maintenance and care of his animal.



Asian Rat Snakes of the Elaphe Genus, Part VII, Elaphe radiata, will appear in next month's issue.

'Eddy'
The Two-headed Honduran Milk Snake





On the 9th June this year a female Honduran Milk Snake (Lampropeltis triangulum hondurensis) owned by Luke Yeomans laid four eggs. When the eggs hatched on the 4th August Luke was surprised to find that one of the hatchlings had two heads. Despite a near fatal accident in his first few days of life 'Eddy' is thriving and can be seen at the Derby Petfood Centre, 142 Ashbourne Road, Derby.

For further information see Luke's article, 'The care and breeding of the Honduran Milk Snake (L.t. hondurensis) and a case of dicephalism', in the IHS Journal, Volume 13, Number 1, Page 5.

(Photographs supplied by Luke Yeomans.)

Raising Baby Colubrid Snakes

by Chris Mattison

Introduction

This article is an introduction to raising captive-bred snakes from hatching to adult. Many species of snakes are now being bred in captivity, especially in the United States but, increasingly, also in Britain. This trend began in the 1970's when it was realised that many species were becoming rare in the wild and were therefore legally protected. Amateur snake-keepers began to experiment with the conditions under which they kept their animals until, eventually, the requirements necessary to induce them to breed became better understood. At present, a number of people make a reasonable living entirely from breeding snakes and many more supplement their income breeding snakes in their spare time. The outcome of this activity is that most of the more desireable species of snakes are now available without the need to deplete wild stocks, except for occasional additions of fresh animals which are necessary to prevent inbreeding.

A further aspect of this trend is the appearance of several unusual strains of snakes, either having arisen as mutations from breeding stock, or started from a wild mutant individual. These include albinos, animals lacking one or more of their normal pigments, or animals with markings which differ in some other respect from their wild ancestors. This has enabled selective breeding to take place and, although opinions vary as to whether or not some of these strains are more attractive than normal ones, they have added greatly to the variety of snakes which are available to the snake-keeper.

Captive-bred snakes have several other advantages over wild caught ones:

* *They are free from disease or parasites.*
* *They are more likely to adapt quickly and successfully to captivity.*
* *Many species which are rare in the wild, and therefore formerly expensive, are now available at very reasonable prices due to the fact that they are bred in large numbers.*
* *The breeder or supplier will usually be able to guarantee their sexes, and may be able to supply unrelated young.*

The species which are bred in the largest numbers come from North and Central America and belong to the family Colubridae, i.e. they are colubrids, and are harmless. They can be divided into four main groups. These are:

Kingsnakes - genus Lampropeltis (except L. triangulum)
Milk Snakes - subspecies of Lampropeltis triangulum
Ratsnakes - genus Elaphe
Gopher, Pine and Bull Snakes - genus Pituophis

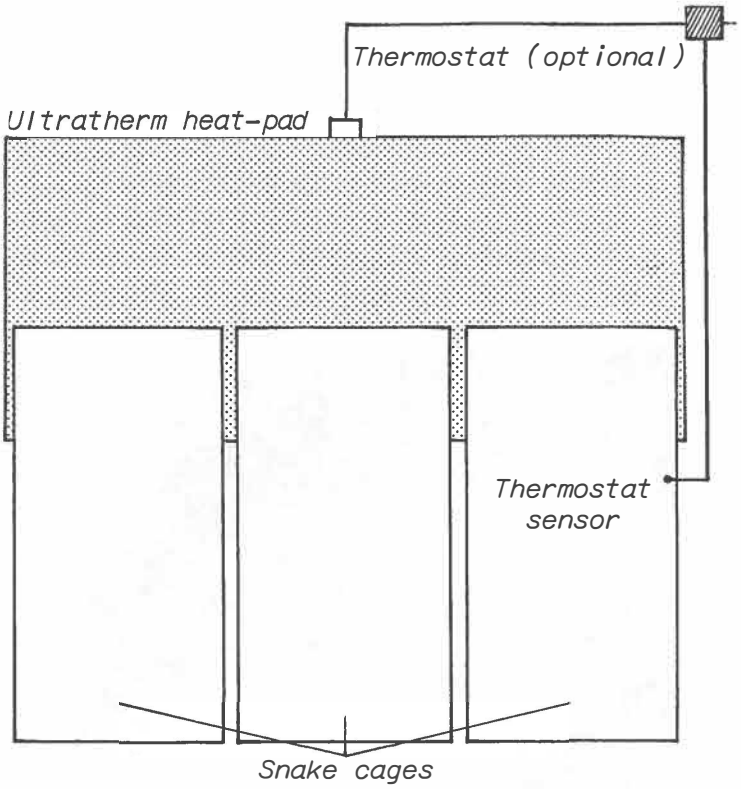
These snakes differ mainly in their colour and markings: their basic care is very similar, although some are rather less easy to keep than others.

Housing

Baby snakes prefer small containers. These can be small plastic or glass aquaria, for example, the smallest size of 'critter pen', or plastic food containers. As they grow they should gradually be moved on to slightly larger cages (rather like re-potting a plant). It is best to keep the young snakes separate from each other while they are being reared in order to avoid the possibility they will damage, or even eat, one another during feeding. Their container should contain a suitable substrate, which may be soft wood shavings or two or three layers of paper. 'Hortag', which consists of small clay beads used in horticulture, is rather more attractive, but should be rinsed and dried before use to get rid of any dust, and changed as soon as it is soiled. Soil, peat, sand etc. are not suitable substrates for snakes. In addition, you should provide a small water bowl, and something for the snakes to hide in or under. It is important that the bottom of the container is kept dry at all times. Failure to do this will result in sores and blisters on the underside of the snake and possibly respiratory diseases. In order to make sure that dampness does not occur, the cage should be well ventilated, and the water bowl should only be about one-third full (this will avoid spillage if the snake decides to soak itself).

Heating

Like all reptiles, snakes must be kept warm if they are to remain active and feed



properly. The best temperature is about 25 - 30 degrees C, but varies from species to species and so the ideal arrangement is to give the snake a choice. This is achieved by providing gentle heat from below the cage <u>at one end only.</u> In this way a gradient will be created, allowing the snake to choose its own temperature. The most effective way of doing this is to use a small, low wattage heat pad such as one of the 'Ultratherm' vivarium heaters and to arrange the cage so that about one-third of it is over the pad. Several plastic containers can usually be heated by a single pad, and this provides a cheap and easy way of heating a small collection (see diagram). Using this system a thermostat is often unecessary but, if one is to be used, the 'Nova Uno A700' is recommended. The snakes' behaviour should indicate whether or not the correct temperature range has been achieved: if they spend all of their time at the heated end of the containers, they are probably too cold - a more powerful heat-pad may be required, or the thermostat should be adjusted accordingly: if they spend all their time at the opposite end of the containers then they are too warm - either use a smaller heat pad, turn the thermostat down, or raise the containers off the pad by using thin strips of wood, plastic etc.

Lighting

Snakes are not especially sensitive to lighting - most of the ones kept in captivity are naturally nocturnal anyway. A good arrangement is to keep them in a room which receives some natural daylight, but not direct sunlight. If this is not possible, the containers may be lit by mounting a fluorescent tube above them, but avoid excessive brightness.

Food

All of the snakes described below eat rodents. Baby snakes therefore require a constant supply of baby mice and as they grow they will gradually move on to larger mice. Snakes vary in the amount of food they require but, on average, two mice each week is a good starting point. Snakes often refuse to feed if they are about to shed their skin, a state which can be recognised by an opaque, blue cast to the scales, especially noticeable over the eyes. The mice do not need to be fed live to the snakes; in fact it is preferable to accustom the snakes to eating dead prey because food can then be purchased in quantity and frozen until needed (but make sure that it is thoroughly thawed before being offered to the snake). <u>If there is any doubt about obtaining a regular supply of food, keeping snakes should not be considered.</u> Babies of some species are lizard-eaters in the wild and it may be difficult to persuade them to accept mice at first. There are ways round this problem, but beginners are advised to stick to those species which take baby mice readily.

Diseases

In general, captive-bred snakes rarely suffer from diseases. When they do, the cause can usually be traced to an unsuitable environment, eg. too cold, too damp etc. Refusal to feed is usually the first sign of trouble. If a snake refuses food twice in a row check the temperature, make sure that it has fresh water and clean substrate, and that it is not about to shed its skin. If these factors are not the cause of the problem (and nine times out of ten they will be), consult a vet.

Choice of species

The following list of species should be enough to satisfy most people's preferences and pocket. If not, try to find a breeder or supplier who can offer alternatives, but do not be tempted to buy wild-caught snakes or other people's 'cast-offs'.

The following are species which should appeal to beginners as well as to more experienced snake-keepers. They are

roughly divided into three groups.

Kingsnakes
The Kingsnakes are among the easiest of snakes to raise and breed. The most attractive and readily-available species are as follows:

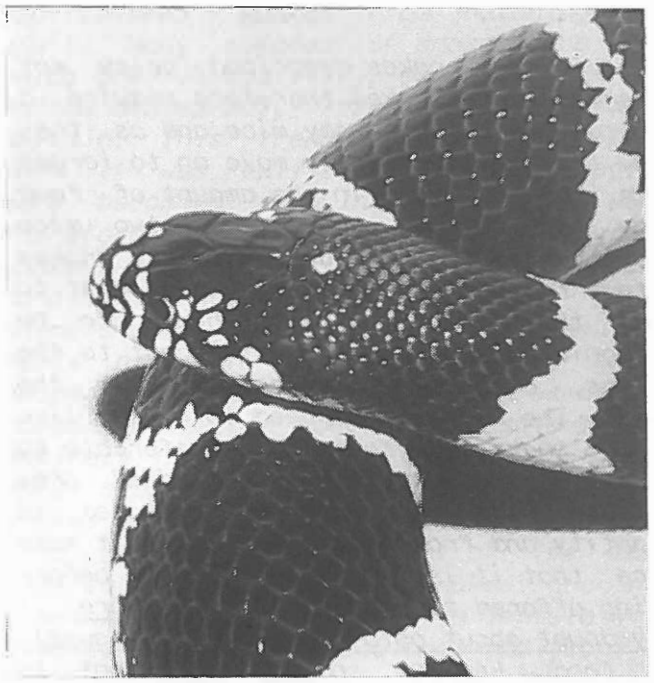


Photo: Lampropeltis getulus californiae

Lampropeltis calligaster: Prairie Kingsnake
Lampropeltis getulus - several subspecies are available:
California Kingsnake (L.g. californiae).
(Two forms exist - 'striped' & 'banded')
Mexican Black Kingsnake (L.g. nigritus).
Desert Kingsnake (L.g. splendida).
Speckled Kingsnake (L.g. holbrooki).
Eastern, or Chain Kingsnake (L.g. getulus).
Florida Kingsnake (L.g. floridana).

Tri-coloured Kingsnakes and Milk snakes
In these species, alternating rings of red, black and white (or yellow) - called 'triads' - encircle the body from head to tail. Several species and many subspecies are included in this group, all of them attractive, but some easier to keep than others. The most popular species are:

Lampropeltis pyromelana: Arizona Mountain Kingsnake.
Lampropeltis mexicana: several subspecies are available, e.g.
San Luis Potosi Kingsnake (L.m. mexicana).
Lampropeltis alterna: Grey-banded Kingsnake, (NB - young of this species do not always take mice readily)
Lampropeltis triangulum (Milk Snakes):
Sinaloan Milk Snake (L.t. sinaloae).
Honduran Milk Snake (L.t. hondurensis).
Mexican Milk Snake (L.t. annualata).
Pueblan Milk Snake (L.t. campbelli).

Ratsnakes
This group consists of four commonly-available species, one of which occurs as several subspecies. All are very easy snakes to keep, and grow quickly.

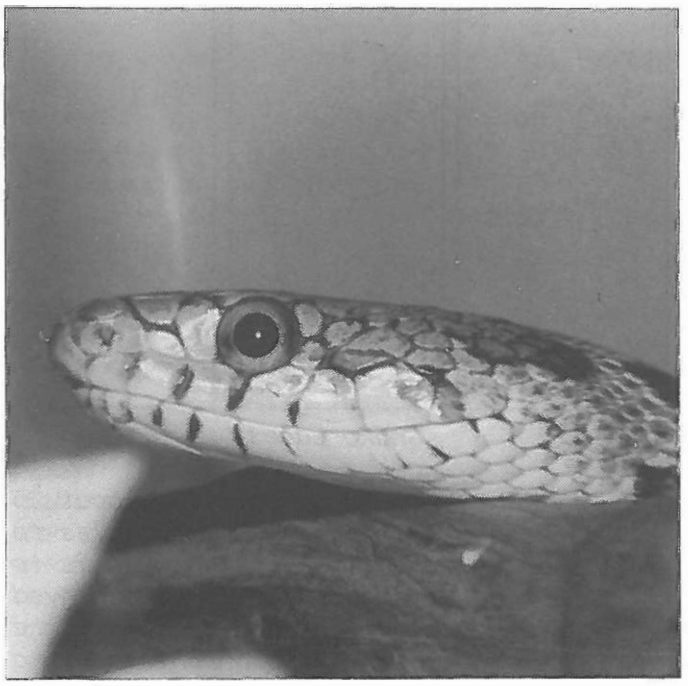


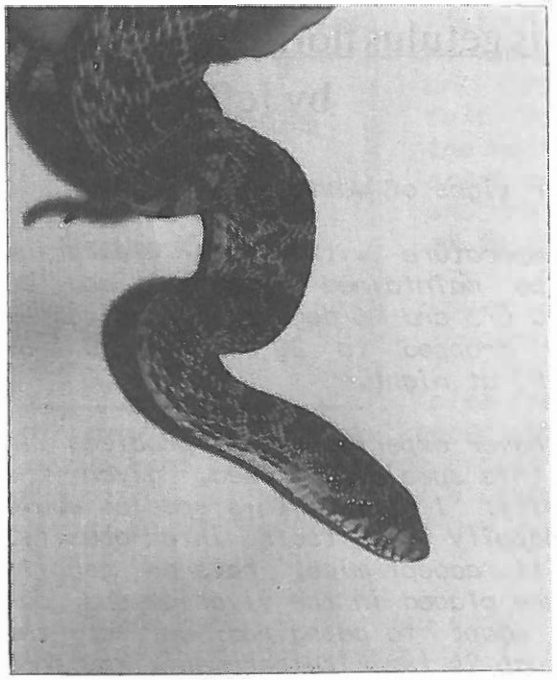
Photo: Elaphe obsoleta spiloides

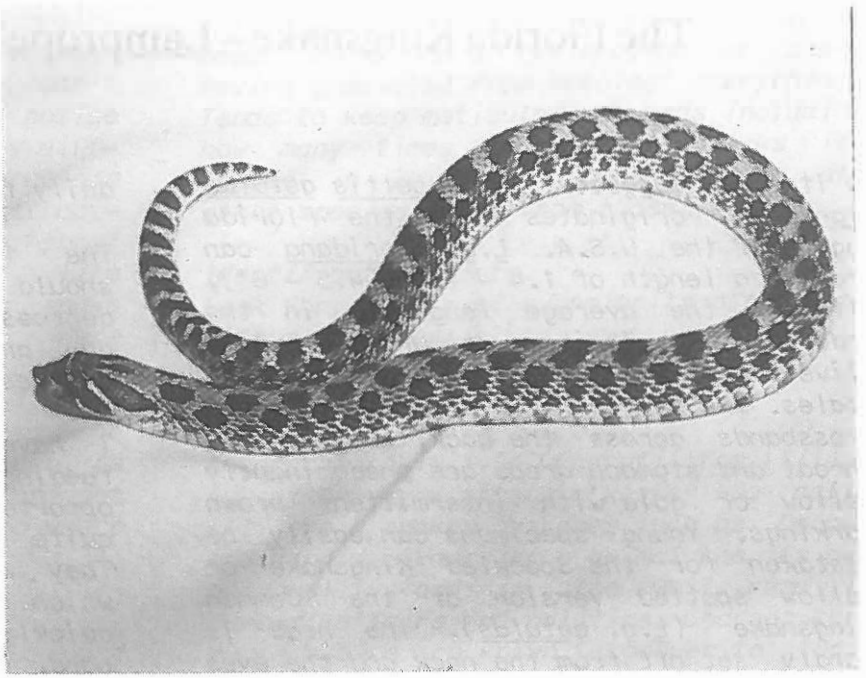
Elaphe obsoleta: several subspecies are available, e.g.
Black Ratsnake (E.o. obsoleta).
Yellow Ratsnake (E.o. quadrivittata).
Everglades Ratsnake (E.o. rossalleni).
Grey Ratsnake (E.o. spiloides).
Elaphe guttata: Corn Snake or Red Ratsnake.
Elaphe subocularis: Trans-Pecos Ratsnake.
Elaphe bairdi: Baird's Ratsnake.

Gopher, Pine and Bull Snakes
All of these are subspecies of Pituophis melanoleucus. They grow rather larger than most kingsnakes and ratsnakes, but are equally easy to care for. The most commonly available are:

Northern Pine Snake (P.m. melanoleucus).
Black Pine Snake (P.m. lodingi).
Southern Pine Snake (P.m. mugitus).
Bull Snake (P.m. sayi).
San Diego Gopher Snake (P.m. annectans).
Sonoran Gopher Snake (P.m. affinis).

Hognose Snakes
A single species, the Western Hognose Snake, Heterodon nasicus, is suitable for





Pituophis melanoleucus sayi *Heterodon nasicus* (All photographs: Lesley Close)

raising in captivity, and is an ideal beginner's snake. This snake differs from those described in being much more heavily built, with an upturned snout. Hatchlings are very short, but take newborn mice readily. Three subspecies are recognised:

Plains Hognose Snake (H.n. nasicus).
Dusty Hognose Snake (H.n. gloydi).
Mexican Hognose Snake (H.n. kennerlyi).

Boas and Pythons

Boas and Pythons are not good choices for beginners. The commonest species get much too big to be kept easily, and most of the smaller species are either rare or difficult to look after. Possible exceptions are the Sand Boas, such as Eryx colubrinus, Rosy Boas, Lichanura trivirgata and Children's Python, Liasis childreni. Other than these, keeping boas and pythons should be left to zoological gardens or experienced snake-keepers.

Prices

Prices rapidly become out of date, and so there is no point in trying to give accurate guidelines. Basically, the more commonly-available species, e.g. the Corn Snake, Californian Kingsnake, Hognose Snake, are the least expensive. Bear in mind that producing good healthy snakes can be costly - few species sell at less than £20 - £25: some cost £100 or more. These prices are not excessive for animals which are strong, healthy and have a potential life-span of ten years or more. On the other hand, even £5 is expensive for a nervous or diseased snake which is likely to die within a few months.

Books

This article is only a brief introduction to raising young snakes. More details, and information on other species of reptiles and amphibians, can be obtained from 'The Care of Reptiles and Amphibians in Captivity' and 'Keeping and Breeding Snakes' (due late 1988/early 1989), both published by Blandford.

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The Florida Kingsnake – Lampropeltis getulus floridana

by Jeff Protheroe

As its name suggests, Lampropeltis getulus floridana originates from the Florida region of the U.S.A. L.g. floridana can grow to a length of 1.4 - 1.8m (4.5 - 6'), although the average length is in the order of 1.6m. The base colour is brown to olive-brown with yellow markings on the scales. The yellow forms a series of rough crossbands across the back, whilst the throat and stomach areas are predominantly yellow or gold with intermittent brown markings. Young specimens can easily be mistaken for the Speckled Kingsnake or yellow spotted version of the Common Kingsnake (L.g. getulus). The head is hardly set off from the neck and the eyes could be regarded as relatively large with round pupils.

L.g. floridana, like its many cousins, is quite harmless; indeed I have never come across nor heard of an individual that has actively bitten.

Husbandry

L.g. floridana is undemanding and should be housed in a vivarium of up to 120 x 45 x 45cm. The substrate can be newspaper, paper roll or chipped bark etc. However, due to the fact that this species frequently excretes a rather smelly fluid waste, I tend to use paper. Furnishings should consist of a hollow piece of decorative cork bark or some other form of hide box along with a small branch although this species tends not to climb in my experience. Localized bottom heating seems to be beneficial but not absolutely necessary. A water dish should be provided in which L.g. floridana will deposit waste provided the water is warm. This species frequently drinks water, thus one must inspect the water dish at least twice daily for signs of waste.

The temperature within the terrarium should be maintained between 23 and 30 degrees C (75 and 86 degrees F) during the day and dropped to 20 degrees C (68 degrees F) at night.

I have never experienced any problems in feeding this species; indeed, given the opportunity, I believe this species would quite happily eat itself into obesity. They will accept mice, rats or gerbils which are placed in the vivarium and can quickly adapt to being fed out of the hand, such is their temperament. Any food placed in the vivarium is quickly located through eyesight and the snake's remarkable sense of smell. The prey is located, seized and constricted before it is eaten. Because of the snakes' cannabalistic nature this species must never be housed with any species of a smaller (or even equivalent) size. L.g. floridana should be hibernated for between two and four months at a temperature around 8 to 15 degrees C (47 to 59 degrees F).

Breeding

Breeding is not very difficult. Mating takes place soon after hibernation between February and April. Three to thirty longish eggs are laid between June and August. The eggs should be placed on vermiculite with a 50/50 weight ratio to water and kept at a temperature range between 22 and 30 degrees C (72 to 86 degrees F). The eggs should hatch after 60 - 70 days. The first moult occurs approximately two weeks later and the young should then be offered pinkies, which they normally accept readily.

LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS

Nature Conservancy Council
Northminster House
Peterborough PE1 1UA

Dear Sir,

David Neville's article in your May issue concerning restrictions on the commercial display and sale of snakes was most welcome. Unfortunately, the list of species he gave as covered by these controls was incomplete. To the species he listed should be added:

Argentine Boa Constrictor	Boa constrictor occidentalis
Virgin Island Tree Boa	Epicrates monensis
Orsini's Viper	Vipera ursinii

The latter listing relates only to animals from the population of Europe (except USSR).

Yours sincerely

David H W Morgan
UK CITES Scientific Authority for Animals

A Snake Keeper's Guide to Snake Keepers by Ray Hamilton

Whether a beginner or a veteran, you can't fail to notice the vastly different characters who are attracted to the hobby/way of life known as snake keeping. Here follows a concise field guide to some types of snake keeper who may be encountered when visiting places such as zoological gardens, reptile clubs and pet shops. Identification tips are given where possible.

The Macho Type (Biggus ego ego)
This type of snake keeper is to be found at most gathering places and is fairly abundant throughout the country. When approached, this person is liable to bore the unwary with tales of his collection (which usually contains nothing under six metres in length). Listen especially for the stories of his nine metre Reticulated Python (usually affectionately known as 'Maim' or 'Crush') which he feeds once a month on rabid bull terriers. Also listen for stories of being bitten by a Mamba or Cobra whilst on holiday with the lads in Majorca.

Identification hints
Look for: snake tattoos in prominent places.
Listen for: loud bragging noises.
Keeps: Anacondas or Reticulated Pythons.

The Fanatic (Devoidus sensus)
Only member of the local reptile club who attends every meeting, including the A.G.M. Easily spotted at zoological gardens as the only person who watches a sleeping snake for more than two minutes. This type has usually equipped their three bedroomed semi-detached house with two metre square heater pads and True-lite power twist tubes in every room. Look for large book collection including several works written in Urdu and Chinese.

Identification hints.
Look for: facial hair, normally beards, displayed on males. Often overpowering smell of mice or rats.
Listen for: snakes being referred to by their Latin names only.
Keeps: anything which crawls on its belly.

The Specialiser (Onetrakis mindae)
This type, closely related to the fanatic, keeps only one or two species of snake having graduated from keeping everything. Tends to keep meticulous records including how many times each snake flicks its tongue in 24 hours. Looks down on all other species apart from those it keeps.

Identification hints.
Look for: an air of superiority often worn with spectacles.
Listen for: statistics.
Keeps: anything no one else has.

Anthropomorphic Type (Partofii famillii)
A common type of snake keeper who calls all their snakes by names such as Daphne and Ronald. Swears each animal has its own personality and is also well read in current affairs and politics. Charges kept by this type are known to answer to their name and can recognise their owner in a crowded room.

Identification hints.
Look for: snakes loose in the house.
Listen for: 'click-click' or 'tut-tut' noises made when looking at snakes.
Keeps: Royal Pythons or Boa Constrictors.

Finally, a guide to the commonly encountered type seen wherever snakes are on display.

Snake Hater (Irollin shuddrin)
A good place to observe this type is at the local zoological garden reptile house. Many of this type will never be found within eight metres of a snake but the bolder specimens can be spotted by comments such as "I was bitten by one as a child" or "I was hypnotised by one as a child" and, most common of all, "What do they do?"

Identification hints.
Look for: pale faces and exaggerated shuddering movements.
Listen for: "Yuk! Yuk!"
Keeps: dogs and cats.

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The Unseen Killers

by Chris and Marcia Martin

Providing that you have set up your vivarium correctly, with dull heat emitters, a good quality thermostat (possibly with day/night temperature changes) and the correct lighting system, your vivarium should be a home from home for your pet snake. You may think that all is well but, alas, you may still have a potential killer hiding in your vivarium. This killer is hiding in its millions, in every nook and cranny, waiting for your beloved snake to fall below par. If and when your snake becomes ill these killers strike. What, you wonder, are these killers? The answer is simple - bacteria! Germs know no limits and they don't have any friends.

Because of the way bacteria breed and multiply, in nooks and crannies and old faeces, we and other herpetologists recommend that you use newspaper as a substrate and keep the vivarium as uncluttered as possible (ie. no ornaments).

It is very important that you use a disinfectant when you clean out your vivarium to keep the germs at a reasonable level. The latest thoughts of people who know about these things are that newspaper may be a very mild disinfectant as some of the chemical constituents of disinfectants are also used in newspaper ink.

Take a look at any chemist's counter and you will see numerous bottles of disinfectant. You want one that won't kill your snake but will kill the harmful bacteria. All pine disinfectant could be harmful to your snake. 'Savlon' antiseptic disinfectant is the one we use and recommend, at a 40 to 1 dilution. We mix the solution and use a small garden spray bottle to apply it to the base of the vivarium.

A lot of people are now using 'Milton Sterilising Fluid' which is a dilute bleach but we have our reservations about it. Whilst visiting our veterinary surgeon we asked his views on the subject. He told us that provided you use it in a glass or plastic vivarium that you can wash out thoroughly afterwards, there should not be any problems. However, if you have a wooden vivarium the wood will soak up a small amount of the fluid no matter how carefully you wash the cage out afterwards. Over the following months it will slowly build up in concentration, then one day your reptile will start getting skin problems. The snake will most probably be doomed by then as the tongue has also picked up the concentration of bleach and the animal's kidneys will also be in a bad state. It is important to remember that many problems concerning snakes take months or years to come to light and, by then, the damage is done!

You are welcome to write to us (please enclose an sae) or visit. As we aren't a shop, please telephone first and make an appointment. Our address is 18 Ballinode Close, Cheltenham, Glos GL50 4SQ. Telephone (0242) 573477.

Debbie's Pythons

by Stuart Gray

In my previous articles I have dwelt on my own Royal Pythons (Python regius) but I am by no means the only person to suffer from pythonic love. Another such person is Debbie, a trainee reptile keeper at Robin Hill Zoo on the Isle of Wight. Debbie, like myself, is trained by Ron Lilly, the senior reptile keeper.

I paid a visit to Debbie at her flat in Sandown and met her personal Indian Python (Python molurus bivittatus) called Lorrelli. Like all the snakes under Debbie's care, Lorrelli's manners are almost human, a gentle and affectionate soul.

The visitors to the zoological gardens are amazed by Debbie's handling of, and devotion to, her snakes. Unbeknown to the management, Debbie and I have divided up the zoological garden's snakes between us. I have to concede to Debbie a beautiful Indian Python who has the obvious stamp of Debbie's care. Many people thinking of snake keeping should remember that the snake is a living creature not an ornament in a case.

I did explain to Debbie that my 'talking snakes' in my previous articles were just fiction but, if they could talk, what might they say. As I was preparing to leave Debbie went into the other room to get my coat and I heard a voice say "Tell her the one about the three bears, She'll believe you". I called to Debbie and asked her what she said. "Nothing", she replied, "I thought you spoke". We both looked at Lorrelli's case. "It couldn't be - or could it?", said Debbie.

Fishtique

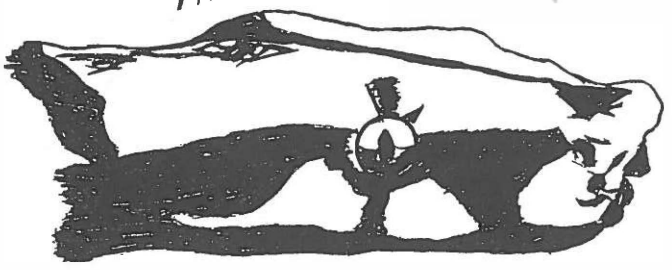
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Any information on a small Tegu called Calopistes maculatus from Chile. All replies answered. Write to Val, Box No. 6, Snake Keeper Magazine, 159 Stanley Hill, Amersham, Bucks HP7 9EY.

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISEMENTS

Rates: Private advertisements (not exceeding 40 words) are printed without charge. Trade advertisements 10p a word. Deadline 20th day of month.

FOR SALE

Pair of Indian Pythons. Approximately 6' & 7'. Very tame and in excellent condition. Plus large heat and light controlled vivarium. Telephone Dave on (0262) 603782 or 676505 (North Humberside).

Reptiles. Boas, Royals, Retics, Indian Pythons, Rats, Corns, Garter Snakes, Racers, Indigos, Lizards, Spiders etc. Stock or supplied to order. Telephone Newton Abbott (0626) 64481 (Devon).

Tiger Rat Snake, male, 7'. Feeding well on dead mice. Relatively inactive, would suit medium-sized cage. Aggressive but calm once picked up. Excellent specimen. £65. Contact Dominic on (0223) 60541 (Cambridge).

Indian Python. Female, two years old. Tame. Approximately 7' long. £70. Telephone (0494) 726044 (Amersham).

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Indian Python. 8'6" male. £150. Telephone (0709) 371708 (Rotherham).

Large luxury snake/reptile tank. Unusual design. Four sides wood, glass front. Includes light and heater. Size 60x30x24 inches. Immaculate condition. £100. Telephone (0784) 257759 (Heathrow area).

Pair of Ranch Chinchillas. Grey female (may be pregnant) and beige male. Will take £100 for pair. Telephone (0784) 257759 (Heathrow area).

Hog Island Boas for sale. Pair about four feet long. Lovely markings, feeding well £250. Would part exchange for Florida, Indigo. Telephone 01-883-5582 anytime. Also Tokay Gecko for sale - offers.

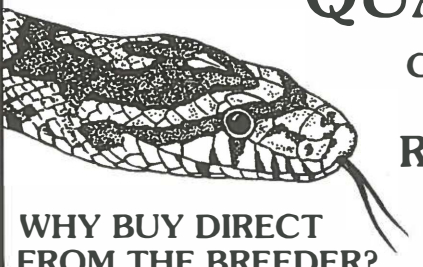
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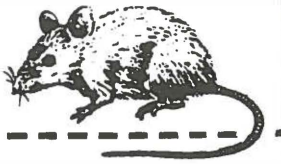
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