# SNAKE KEEPER

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# INFORMATION

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# SNAKE KEEPER

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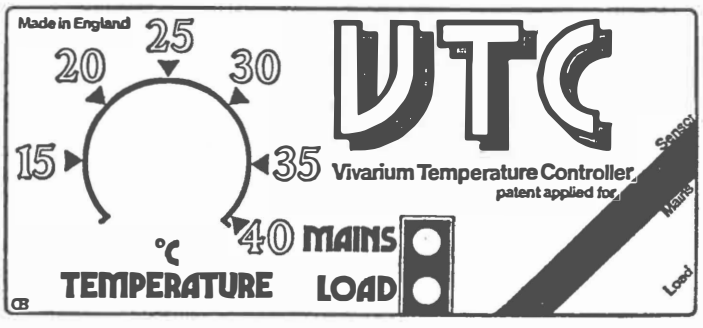
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*Front cover: Grey Rat Snake*
*Elaphe obsoleta spiloides*
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# Early Experiences with the Red Coin Ratsnake, *Elaphe bimaculata,* in the Vivarium

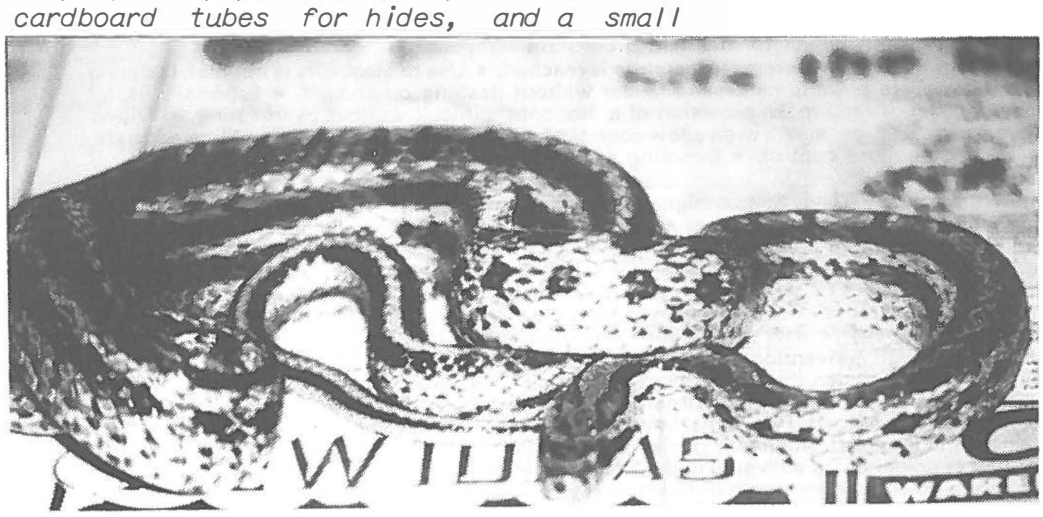
by Kevin J. Hingley

I had the opportunity to obtain a pair, or what I believed to be a pair, of these attractice snakes in early May. I did not have my sexing probes with me at the time, so all I had to go by was a fleeting comparison of tail lengths. As it now turns out both are female according to ventral and subcaudal scale counts taken from sloughed skins, although due to the difference in size between the pair it is quite easy to mistake the smaller specimen for a male at a quick glance.

Initially both snakes were housed together in a vivarium of wooden construction measuring approximately 60x50x50cms with a sliding glass front. Both fed on the day that they were obtained, the larger specimen on a large dead mouse and the smaller one on five rat pups. Over the next week the smaller snake proved to be an excellent feeder, taking a further seven rat pups. The larger specimen showed little interest in feeding for nearly three weeks, during which time the smaller snake sloughed and continued to feed steadily on rat pups and small mice. At this stage I decided to separate them, for two reasons; (i) to treat both snakes for mites and (ii) to see if the larger snake would feed if isolated. The temperature is maintained, by a single light bulb, at 25 degrees to 28 degrees C during the day, and falling to 20 degrees to 22 degrees C overnight. Both snakes were moved to small aquaria measuring 35x20x20cms and placed in a larger, heated vivarium. The furnishings were kept simple; newspaper substrate, cork bark and cardboard tubes for hides, and a small water bowl. Once separated, the larger female began to feed well again on pinkies and mice, and in early June she underwent a slough.

By this time the small female was reluctant to feed, even though pinkies, rat pups and small mice were offered. I concluded that this may be a familiar pattern for the species, as I have experienced similar feeding patterns in the Russian Ratsnake, Elaphe schrenckii schrenckii. A few weeks later the smaller snake began to feed again on pinkies, whereas the larger snake showed little interest in the mice that I offered her. It will be interesting to see if this on/off feeding pattern continues, or whether both snakes will eventually settle into a more regular feeding pattern.

At the end of June I noticed during regular cage cleaning that the larger female was increasing in girth around the mid-body. I examined the snake more closely and confirmed that she was in fact gravid, the bulges of three or four eggs being quite visible from a side view, and the eggs can also be felt as the snake passes through a gently closed hand. My first instinct was to check the smaller female; as both snakes had been imported at the same time, it appeared to be quite possible that both snakes could be gravid, and that their irregular feeding habits had been brought about by being in a gravid state. However, the smaller snake looks far from gravid, but I'm keeping my fingers crossed just in case.



Elaphe bimaculata

Photograph:
Kevin J. Hingley

The following description applies to both of my specimens of E. bimaculata. The ground colour is pale grey-brown with mid-brown coloured spots on the back and sides of the body. The spots along the centre of the dorsum are dumb-bell shaped, whereas those on the sides of the body are round. All of the spots are circled with black and all are overlaid by four dark grey-brown stripes. The labials, chin and throat region are a rich yellow, with black flecks on the chin and throat, fading into paler yellow on the belly with grey-brown checkering. There is a brown arrow-shaped marking on the top of the head that runs into two stripes down the neck and connects with the first dumb-bell shaped spot on the back. A black streak runs from the rear of the eye to the corner of the mouth.

The species is highly variable though, and Klaus-Dieter Schulz's recent article on the species lists three main forms. The name Red Coin Ratsnake comes from the Chinese name for the red spotted variant that lacks the stripes, but as there seems to be no English common name, other than Chinese Leopard snake and this is applied to E. rufodorsata and E. dione as well, I have used the Chinese name.

Both snakes are aggressive when approached or handled, giving prior warning to a forthcoming bite by vibrating the tail rapidly. The larger female also points her head downwards and flattens it in threat, a phenomenon I have witnessed with the Aesculapian snake, E. longissima, although without the 'chewing' motions displayed by the latter species. They are shy snakes that require minimal disturbance if they are to do well in the vivarium. Nevertheless they are attractive snakes and most individuals should do well under captive conditions.

I hope to be able to report at a later date that the large female has laid her clutch of eggs and that they in turn have been successfully incubated.

Reference: Schulz, K-D, 1988. Asian Rat-snakes of the genus Elaphe. Part V, Elaphe bimaculata. Re-printed in Snake Keeper, Vol.2 No. 6, from the original German article in Sauria magazine.

*Editor's note: Kevin's snake laid three eggs in the early hours of Wednesday 20th June. They appeared to be viable and were put into incubation.

# Experiences with the Kukri Snakes of the Genus *Oligodon* (Boie 1827)

## by Klaus-Dieter Schulz

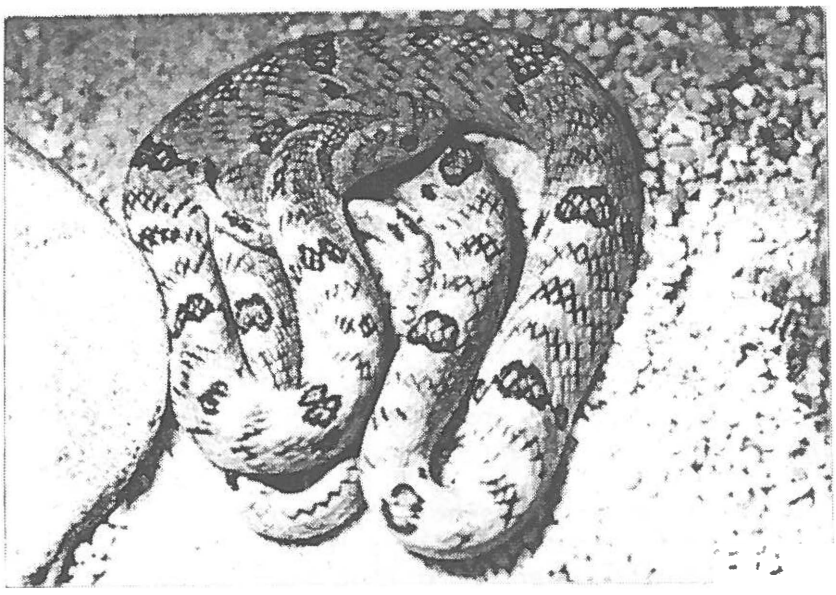
This article was originally published in the magazine 'herpetofauna' 10(52) in February 1988 and is reproduced here by kind permission of the author.

Translated from the original German by John Hackworth.

INTRODUCTION

Of the numerous small Asiatic snakes, the genus Oligodon with some 60 representatives counts as one of the richest. Most species grow to around 50-60cm in length. Their size is however quite variable and can go from 25cm in the case of Oligodon calamarius (Linnaeus, 1754) in Sri Lanka to 100cm in the case of Oligodon cyclurus (Cantor, 1839) which occurs from Assam to Thailand. Typical of the genus is the short head which is barely set-off from the body and which has a particularly wide rostral scale. The colour of most species is brown or grey with darker transverse or longitudinal stripes or spots along the back. A large number of these snakes have a dark mark on the head. This mark is usually v-shaped.

One of the most beautiful species is Oligodon bellus (Stanley, 1916) from China which has a wonderful red-black-white pattern. The common name of Kukri Snakes was given to them because of the elongated, sharp teeth at the back of their upper jaw, which are somewhat reminiscent of the knives used by the Gurkhas (Reitinger, 1978). In Thailand these small snakes are greatly feared and are mistakenly thought to be venomous. Despite their small size these snakes are always quite prepared to bite. If they are annoyed they coil the front of their



Left
Oligodon cyclurus Photo: K-D Schulz

body into an S-shape, lifting around half of their body from the ground, and strike repeatedly. Whenever they are handled these lively snakes will always bite. They make the wound even worse by a chewing and tearing action. The bite from Oligodon is therefore quite painful and the bleeding is usually profuse. Even when held directly behind the head they are capable of stretching their upper jaw to reach the nearest finger.

DISTRIBUTION AND HABITS

The range of distribution of this snake species extends from Turkmenia (U.S.S.R.) and Iran over almost the whole of South and South East Asia. Within this territory they inhabit various habitats from the edge of deserts to the rain forest regions (Koul & Murphy 1979).

Some species, e.g. Oligodon venustus (Jeredon, 1853) were even found at an altitude of 2000m (Smith, 1943). Because of their relatively hidden mode of existence these snakes are only rarely seen. Some species are found in derelict houses, termite mounds and caves. Occasionally, they are also found in low bushes (Whitaker, 1978) although they are a predominantly ground-dwelling species.

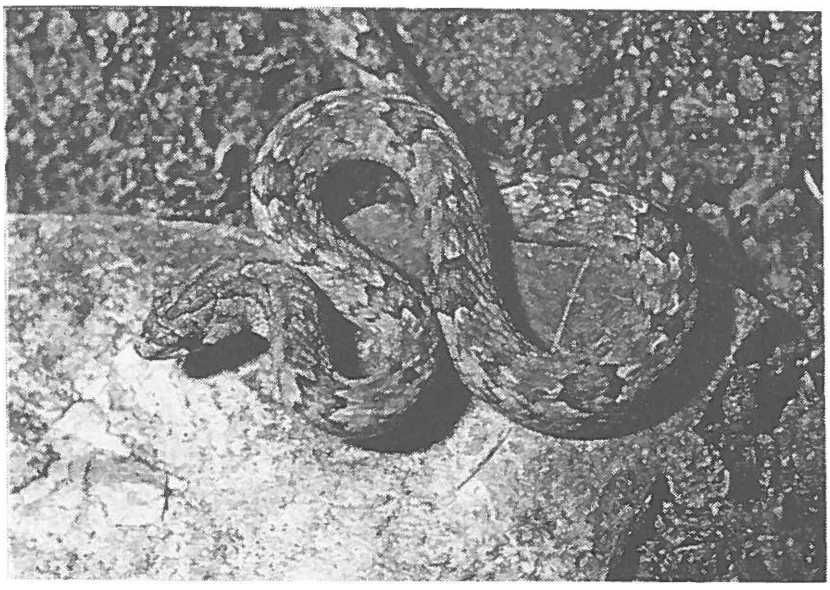
Normally in Summer some three to six eggs are laid, but with tropical species it is probable that eggs are laid throughout the year. Kukri Snakes feed on young birds, lizards and insects as well as small mammals. The young feed mainly on insects (Smith, 1943).

HUSBANDRY

A few years ago I returned from a journey to Thailand with three male Kukri Snakes. One of the animals, an Oligodon cyclurus (Cantor, 1839) was purchased from a Thai animal dealer and the other two (Oligodon purpurascens (Schlegel, 1837)) were presented to me by Dr. Wirot of Pata Zoo, Bangkok. These snakes, which are on average some 50cm long, were housed together in a vivarium of 60x40x50cm (lxbxh) which was furnished with flat rocks, several climbing branches and a water bowl. The substrate was a mixture of sand and gravel. A 40W fluorescent tube in operation for 12 hours daily provided the correct amount of light and kept the vivarium at the correct temperature which, during the day, lay between 22-28 degrees C and at night dropped to around 20 degrees C.

At first the snakes were very shy and remained hidden below the flat rocks. They only became active after the lights had been extinguished. The slightest disturbance was the cue for the snakes to flee into their hiding places or to adopt the already described threat-posture. Oligodon cyclurus was always especially ready to react. It is amazing that this small snake can throw almost its entire body through the air. To do this it inflates its body vertically whilst wildly vibrating its tail. I have observed this behaviour in other Asian snake species, e.g. Pseudoxenodon, Elaphe and Ptyas.

After a few weeks the snakes became accustomed to their new surroundings and they could be seen away from their hiding places during the day. Both species showed a great aptitude for climbing and were often to be seen amongst the branches. In both species the small eyes are very well developed. At the slightest movement within a few metres they immediately became very observant. After a short time one male Oligodon purpurascens died for unknown reasons. Any attempt to feed them with nestling mice was at first unsuccessful. Only after a month did the Oligodon cyclurus accept a young, furred mouse. The second remaining Oligodon purpurascens which at first had refused to feed was repeatedly teased with a dead and naked mouse. At first it bit the mouse and then released



*Left*
*Oligodon purpurascens* *Photo: K-D Schulz*

it. It was only after this had been repeated several times that the mouse was firmly grasped and swallowed. This procedure was however carried out for several weeks before the snake began to eat voluntarily.

Live mice were bitten anywhere on the body and pressed against a solid object by the snake's body. In most cases the unconscious mouse was swallowed whilst still alive. Once the Kukri Snakes had become accustomed to eating they were fed only dead mice. The snakes underwent a slough every one to two months. Since the animals were kept under completely dry conditions, the skin was only able to come off in pieces. Sometimes pieces of skin had to be removed by hand. Because of the problems with sloughing I placed the snakes in a different vivarium in which nothing was really changed except the substrate. The sand/gravel mixture was replaced by peat and a small area of this was kept constantly moist.

After the snakes had been placed in the new vivarium they immediately disappeared into the 5cm deep substrate. This they only left during the night. During the day they remained burrowed in the substrate, and only their heads could be seen. This semi-subterranean and burrowing life-style corresponds most probably to their life in the wild as is evidenced by the enlarged rostral scale. The following sloughs were carried out without any problems. This was most certainly as a result of the more moist environmental conditions.

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# Why Not Try Water Snakes?

## by Dr. sc. Dieter Schmidt

*This article was originally published in the German Democratic Republic in the magazine "Aquarien-Terrarien" and is reprinted here by kind permission of the Author.*

*Translated from the original German by John Hackworth.*

*Fortunately the number of herpetologists interested in keeping and breeding snakes is increasing daily. This has resulted in a 'boom' in the number of people keeping giant snakes and Rat Snakes of the Elaphe genus. If we look through older herpetological literature it can be seen that earlier far more members of the family of Water Snakes were generally kept.*

*Why is it then that nowadays Water Snakes are so seldom seen in vivaria? They are very adaptable, easy to feed - with exceptions - and very rarely bite. Could it be because when excited, newly-caught snakes of some species are quite ready to void the contents of their anal glands causing a rather unpleasant smell, or that when handled they even sometimes resort to discharging their excrement or the contents of their stomachs? Their excrement, which because of their food is a thick liquid and often discharged in their water container, smells no more unpleasant than that of snakes which eat mice. In a large city, are mice, rats, rabbits and day-old chicks easier and less expensive to obtain than fish is?*

*Many years ago the herpetologist relied on native amphibians as food, but many Water Snakes survive quite well on an exclusive diet of fish. One is however not tied to living fish of a size suitable to be swallowed whole. Fresh or freshly-thawed deep-frozen fish of all sizes can be fed either whole or cut into smaller pieces. The snakes will accept strips of fish either from a pair of forceps or from a food bowl, thus that which is usually classed as "rubbish fish" is by far the best and cheapest source of food. If you buy a trout or small carp from the fishmonger and cut it into strips before deep freezing it, you will always have a supply of food on hand. Fish strips which are fed without bones should always be supplemented by the addition of calcium and multi-vitamin preparations. It is sufficient to lightly dust the fish strips and add a few drops of the multi-vitamin preparation. If you get a snake which will only eat frogs it can easily be converted by putting a piece from a deep-frozen frog amongst the fish strips.*

*The list of food is however not exhausted. According to the species, its age and individual characteristics, earthworms, slugs, pink mice and strips of beef heart can be given as food. In my own collection, two south-east Asian fish-eating snakes much preferred to be fed on new-born rats.*

*I would also like to make a few remarks about housing Water Snakes. As is described in almost all herpetological literature, snakes which like water should be housed in a roomy vivarium which should have a sufficiently large area of water and a completely dry resting place. The somewhat messy excrement makes it necessary to change the water quite frequently. If the aqua-vivarium does not have a drain so that it can be emptied quickly, cleaned and re-filled with warm water, this process becomes rather tedious and protracted. After having kept Water Snakes for a number of years I have found that the most suitable water containers are plastic storage dishes, developing trays or cat litter trays which are easily removed for cleaning and disinfection and which are easy to replace in an otherwise completely dry vivarium. These offer ideal environmental conditions to the inmates. Dry moss and a few roots complete the furnishings of the vivarium which does not need to be very tall. Nevertheless these snakes do like to climb and frequently lie on the shelves which have been fitted to the rear wall of the vivarium.*

*Within the framework of this article it is not possible to name all of those snakes which are suited to life in a vivarium. With the term "Water Snakes" I do not mean specifically the sub-family of Natricinae but rather, in the manner of Klingelhoffer, mean the ecological group of aglyphic and opistoglyphic snakes of the family of Rat Snakes and Colubrids, the style of life of which depends to a*

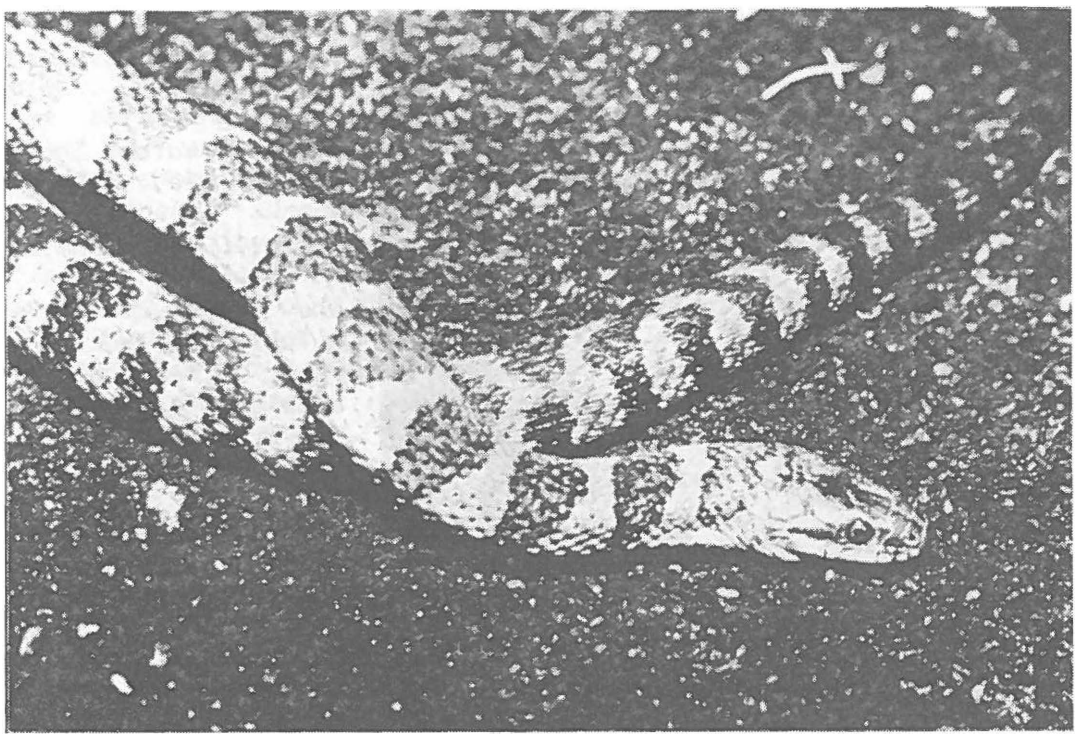


*Figure 1*
*Half-grown*
*Banded Water Snake*

*Photo: Dieter Schmidt*

greater or lesser extent upon the presence of water. Some of these live in moist areas, some directly on the banks of rivers and ponds whilst others lead a completely aquatic life (Klingelhoffer, 1959).

The best known Water Snakes in Europe belong to the genus Natrix (Laurenti, 1768), keel-backed snakes, to which only three species belong; the Grass Snake (Natrix natrix), the Dice Snake (Natrix tessellata) and the Viperine Snake (Natrix maura). The Asian, African and American snakes which formerly belonged to the genus Natrix have been given different designations. In North America, the widespread Water Snakes now belong to the genus Nerodia (Baird & Girard, 1853). This genus is present from Canada to Mexico but does not occur in the west of North America. It is represented by N. cyclopion, (2 sub-species), N. erythrogaster (4), N. fasciata (6), N. horteri (2), N. rhombifera (3), N. sipedon (4), N. taxispolata and N. valida.

I shall describe my experience of keeping American Water Snakes from the point of view of care, reproduction and rearing the young of the Florida Water Snake (Nerodia fasciata pictriventris) and the Banded Water Snake (Nerodia sipedon sipedon). Both snakes belong to the transversely banded Water Snakes which earlier were both classed as sub-species of Natrix sipedon. Today they are classed as the 'Northern Water Snake' (Nerodia sipedon) and the 'Southern Water Snake' (Nerodia fasciata) (Behler & King 1979).

Amongst the various subspecies of the Banded Water Snake, the nominate form is by far the largest (record length 134.6cm). It occurs from south-east Canada and has the largest distribution range in the north-east of the USA. Typical of this grey to brown coloured snake are the dark transverse bands across the back (Fig.1). It can be found in swampy regions, by ponds and lakes and by slow-flowing streams up to an altitude of 1450m. In the wild the Banded Water Snake is very shy and bites readily at anything which moves (Trutnau, 1979). Even when they are young these snakes can be seen to flatten their body, spring through the air and bite at their intended victim. The bite of larger specimens causes quite a wound which bleeds quite freely because the snake's saliva contains an anti-coagulant; it does not however have any venomous effect. Because of this behaviour and their appearance, the Banded Water Snake is frequently confused with the very venomous Water Mocassin (Agkistrodon piscivorous, which occurs much further south) and is therefore needlessly slaughtered.

Active by both day and night, in the wild this snake hunts frogs, small fish, salamanders, young turtles, crayfish and small mammals (Behler & King 1979).

The Banded Water Snake has been bred frequently in captivity. It produces up to 99 young. Intergrades between N. sipedon and N. fasciata as well as between the various species of N. sipedon are known because of their very close relationship (Trutnau, 1979).

Nerodia fasciata pictriventris is the Florida representative of the Banded Water snakes. Typical of all subspecies is a dark stripe from the eye to the corner of

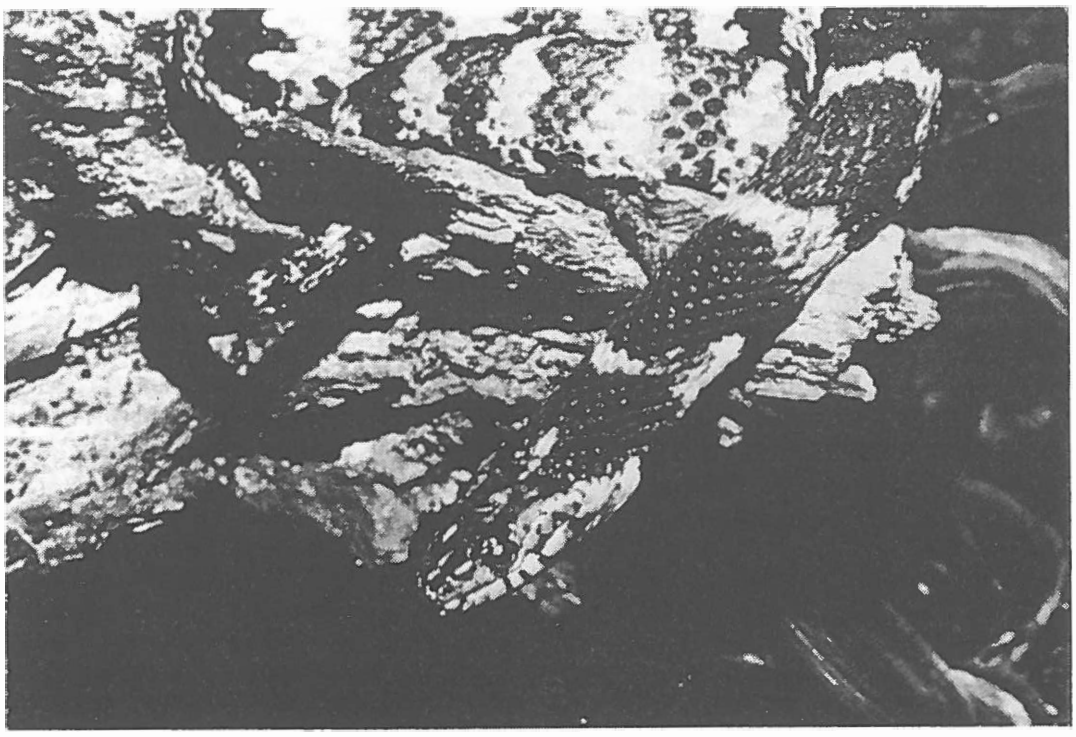


*Figure 2*
*Florida Water Snake (adult male)*

*Photo: Dieter Schmidt*

*the mouth (Fig. 2). Otherwise N. fasciata varies considerably in colour. Most specimens darken with age. Whilst young the Florida Water Snake has a striking red to orange pattern. The record length is given as 158.8cm. As in other Nerodia species, the females are considerably longer and thicker than the males. Their natural habitats are the fresh and brackish waters of Florida up to an altitude of 300m. They are equally at home in the mangrove and cypress swamps. Although they like to bask, Florida Water Snakes are more active at night. Fish, frogs and tadpoles are their main food (Behler & King, 1979).*

*At the end of February, a few days after the end of their hibernation, I was able to observe a pair of Florida Water Snakes mating repeatedly. The female was circa 90cm long and weighed 620g. The male however was only 75cm long and weighed only 200g. The snakes were kept at 22-28 degrees C. Both snakes readily ate dead fish. From the 13th of June, the female refused all food, increased visibly in girth and on the 6th of July produced 21 young. Each of the young animals sloughed after one or two days and was on average 27cm long. From the second or third day after their birth they took food in the form of fish strips from a food bowl without any problems. They grew extremely quickly. As observed in the rearing of Banded Water Snakes their rate of growth depends greatly upon the temperature at which they are kept and this in turn governs how eagerly they feed. At a temperature of 28°C they ate almost daily and grew amazingly quickly. However, lower temperatures slow down the digestive process. It is then sufficient to feed them twice or thrice per week. Only a few days after the birth the adult snakes mated again and on the 28th of October a second batch of 19 young was produced. After hibernation from the middle of December 1982 to the middle of February 1983, on the 2nd of July a further batch of 44 young were born. There were no more young born in 1983. In all three births there were no misshapen or deformed young. It is advisable to reduce the temperature for a short time during the winter even for the sub-tropical Water Snakes from Florida. In the north of its distribution range the Banded Water Snake experiences severe winter conditions and should therefore be allowed a period of hibernation in captivity. For this I consider a reduction in temperature of 8-10 degrees C for 8-10 weeks to be sufficient. Because the young had developed so well they were hibernated during their first winter. At the age of one year they had grown to a length of between 40 and 50cm.*

*As well as the easily maintained Nerodia which is strongly recommended to a beginner I would like to mention some other water-loving North American snakes which we seldom encounter. These belong to the sub-family Lycodontinae and include the Mud Snake (Farancia abacura) with its subspecies abacura and reinwardti. I obtained an adult female of the Western subspecies F. a. reinwardti which occurs in swampy areas in the south of the USA from western Alabama to eastern Texas and in the Mississippi Valley northwards to Illinois. It also inhabits the overgrown and muddy banks of lakes and rivers as well as flooded areas. The Mud Snake is a large and powerful animal (record length 205.7cm). The upper side*

of its cylindrical body is a glossy blue-black. Pink to vivid red stripes start on the belly and extend up the sides. its short tail ends in a sharp point (Fig.3). It is predominantly nocturnal. There are many legends surrounding the Mud Snake. It is feared by the populus because the tip of its tail is mistakenly taken for being venomous and it is therefore called the 'Horn Snake' or 'Stinging Snake'. As if that were not enough, the locals think that it takes its tail into its mouth and rolls over the ground (Hoop Snake) . When it encounters an obstacle, whether human, animal or vegetable, it immediately pricks the obstacle with the tip of its tail whereupon the obstacle immediately dies (Schmidt, Inger 1957).

I would also query a report by Felix (1981) who states that when the Mud Snake is swallowing a frog which has inflated its body, the snake pricks the frog with the end of its tail to allow the air to escape whereby the frog can be swallowed more easily.

The fact of the matter is that when handled, young snakes especially try to escape by wild twisting movements and in this way the tail becomes noticeable because of the very slight pricks (Conant, 1975). I have never been bitten when handling these snakes. They usually roll themselves up into a ball-shape.

What makes it so difficult for us to keep these snakes in our vivaria is their feeding behaviour. In American books they are laconically listed as eating Amphiumids (Behler & King, 1979). Nietzke (1972) gives as their food: newts, frogs, fish, earthworms. In Sochurek (quoted by Klingelhoffer, 1959) the Mud Snake eats mudskippers which in their appearance and behaviour are similar to newts. According to Trutnau (1979) not all Mud Snakes become accustomed to newts and frogs. They can be kept in a vivarium for a long time if the correct food can be obtained. The Philadelphia Zoo for example has kept a specimen of this species for more than 18 years.

My Mud Snake refused any kind of food which was placed in its vivarium - I tried live and dead fish, frogs, toads and even half-grown Fire Salamanders - captive bred! After it laid its eggs I force-fed the snake with fish. Nevertheless, without appearing to lose any weight, it died after two months.

When I first received the snake there were large, pus-filled swellings in the tail region. These I was unable to treat successfully.

However, because of a certain amount of success with reproduction I wish to dwell upon the subject of the Mud Snake. On 10th August 1981 shortly after its arrival the snake laid 26 eggs in a peat-and-moss-filled earthenware pot which had been placed in the vivarium for the purpose. The approximate length of the eggs was 31-34mm, approx. diameter 19-20mm. With a record clutch of 104 eggs the Mud Snake is most certainly one of the most productive snakes. The eggs were successfully incubated in a bed of chopped foam rubber in a plastic incubator at a temperature of 27-30 degrees C (at night 20-30 degrees C) and relative humidity of around 100%. An egg which I took to be infertile after three days was opened and was found to contain a living foetus some 25mm long. After 33 days an infertile egg and a rotten egg were removed. On the 55th-57th day of incubation, all the remaining 24 young hatched. Up to the point of hatching, the length of the eggs had hardly changed (33-34mm); they did however increase in diameter by 2-4mm. Many of the egg shells had the appearance of wet tissue paper in that the red bellies of the hatchlings could be clearly seen through them. The egg shells were completely soft and collapsed after the young had emerged. The young had the same markings as their mother but were grey instead of black up to their first slough which happened after around 15 days. The young were around 22-24cm long and after sloughing changed to a glossy black/red.

With the birth also came the worries. Every kind of food was given (guppies, fish pieces, earthworms, crickets) but it was all refused so that eventually force-feeding had to be undertaken. I started with a hatchling which constantly lay under a piece of bark or burrowed under the moss. When lifted it appeared soft, limp and lifeless. After a few seconds however its body became rigid, its tail coiled-up and it tried to escape using wild twisting movements. It was impossible to forcibly open its mouth to insert a guppy or piece of fish. Finally I prepared a puree of calcium, fish and vitamins. This I injected into the mouths of the young using a plastic syringe. At first they were given 1 ml but this was later increased to several millilitres.

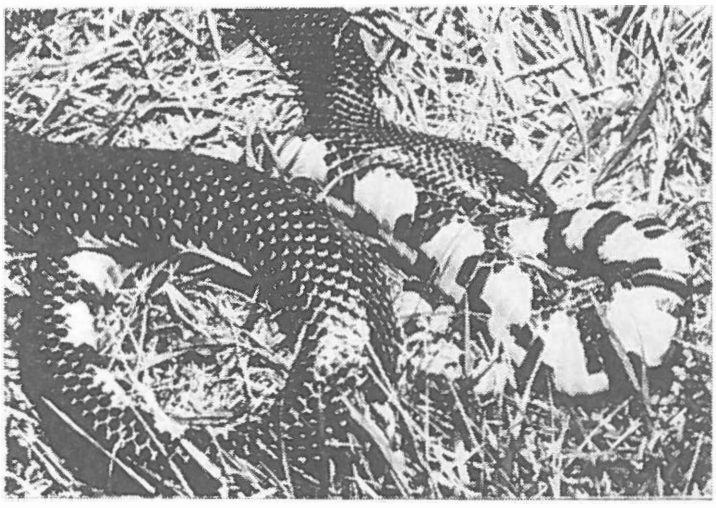


*Figure 3 Adult Mud Snake*
*Photo: Dieter Schmidt*

*Young animals which were given to the Berlin Zoo and to other herpetologists died after only a few weeks. I kept six young for myself. During the winter these were kept at 25-28°C and were force-fed weekly. Every attempt to get them to feed voluntarily failed until August 1982 when each of them caught and swallowed a newt-larva and a newly metamorphosed Common Frog. They had only grown to around 30cm and had sloughed 6-7 times. This source of food, however, soon dried up because the frogs had grown too large for them to swallow. At metamorphosis, Common Frogs were usually too large for them. They had never taken tadpoles and could not be persuaded to take dead small frogs or pieces of larger frogs and therefore force-feeding had to be recommenced. Because the young snakes appeared to be quite healthy they were placed in their vivarium and allowed to hibernate. Unfortunately, after only six weeks(at the age of 16 months)they were all found dead in their vivarium. Obviously, force-feeding had not allowed them to build up sufficient reserves to withstand hibernation.*

*With this the Mud Snake became extinct in the German Democratic Republic. Banded Water Snakes and Florida Water Snakes can however easily become accustomed to life in vivaria and can teach beginners a great deal about the care and maintenance of snakes in captivity.*

*LITERATURE*


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*Correspondence to: Dr. sc. Dieter Schmidt*
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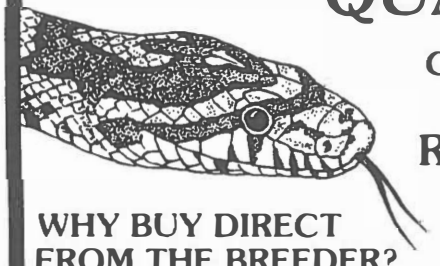
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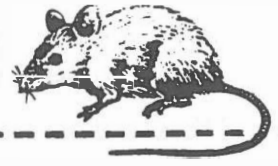
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# Asian Rat Snakes of the *Elaphe* Genus
# Part VIII(a) *Elaphe taeniura* (Cope,1861)

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.*

*Translated from the original German by John Hackworth.*

*In spite of the relatively frequent import of this magnificent large Elaphe from Bangkok and Hong Kong, almost nothing has been written about maintaining and breeding them in the vivarium. For this reason, this snake is an obvious choice for herpetologists because, as long as healthy snakes are obtained, they present no problems to their keeper.*

*According to my information, Dr. R. Fesser (Austria) was the first person to import this species from Taiwan and subsequently to breed it. In this way healthy captive-bred specimens found their way into the vivaria of a few fanciers.*

*From the beginning of the century until the 'thirties' E. taeniura was described by many herpetologists. There was a great deal of literature but it was all badly classified. Now surely it is time to examine the subject once again, basically because the survey of the taxonomy and validity of the various forms has been lost in this mountain of literature.*

*Today one can conclusively say that six subspecies can be declared valid. A short while ago, however, I obtained a completely new form of E. taeniura from Hong Kong. This variant shows a number of differences compared with other subspecies and will be described in more detail later (Schulz, in preparation).*

*Elaphe taeniura taeniura (Cope, 1861)*

*Colouring*

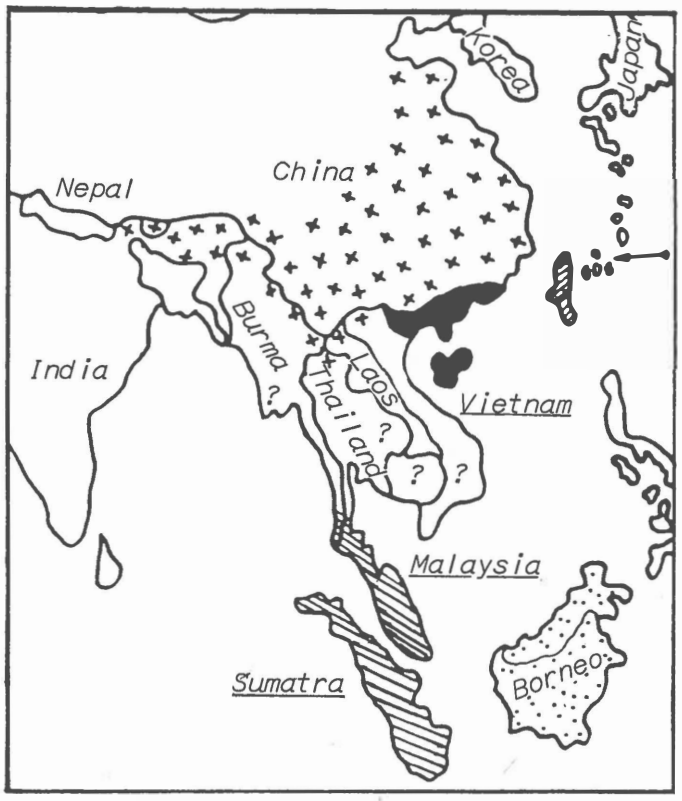
*Basic colour dirty yellow to olive coloured. Over three to four head lengths the neck is unicoloured until the dorsal markings begin. These consist of a ladder-like black pattern (similar to the pattern on juvenile E. scalaris). In some specimens this can also be somewhat reduced. On the sides of the body, including the tail, the markings change into a vertebral yellow stripe with a black or dark brown stripe on each side. The two black stripes can also be marked with narrow transverse white stripes. From each eye a black stripe extends to the corner of the mouth. The top of the head is unicoloured. The upper and lower lip scales are coloured yellow and pale orange. As is the case with Elaphe (Goniosoma) oxycephala the tongue is distinctly blue-black.*

*Ventral scales: 230 - 250*

*Length 150-180 cm. However, usually fully-grown at 150 cm.*

*Distribution*

*Because the discovery of valid new subspecies can still be reckoned with, it is only possible to give distribution data for the nominate form. According to Smith (1943) E. t. taeniura is found in Sikkim, Burma (Abor Region), Valley of the Rong-To*




E. t. taeniura
E. t. ridleyi
E. t. vaillanti
E. t. friesei
E. t. schmackeri
E. t. grabowskyi

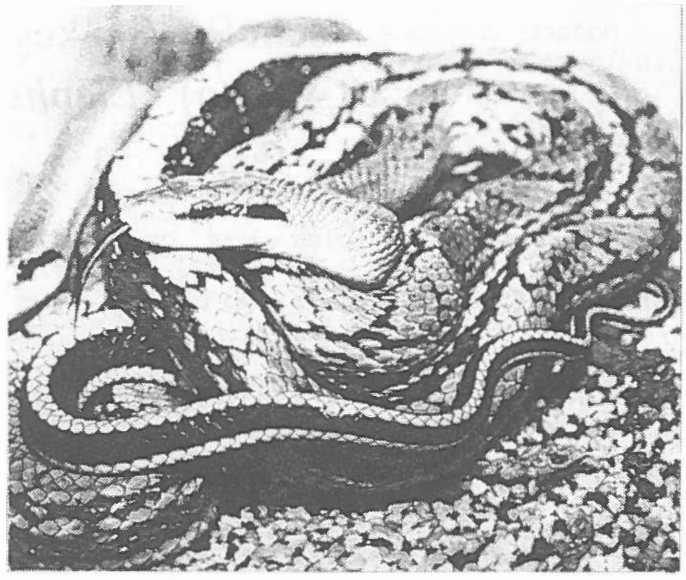
north of Rima, Pangnamdim, Chin Hills (Pakkoku District) and Northern Thailand. Taylor (1965) mentions for Thailand the area of the Chiang-Mai and the Dong-Rek Mountains of Central Thailand. This species has furthermore been found in Kampuchea, Vietnam (Tongking) and in many parts of China including the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Hunan, Jiangxi, Fujian, Guangxi, Hubei, Anhui, Zhejiang, Jiansu, Henan, Gansu, Shanxi, Ningxia (?), Hebei and Shandong (?). The distribution in China must however be considered carefully because snakes have been spread over the entire country as food. Thus especially this Rat Snake cannot belong to the typical fauna of many provinces.

Habitat

Like many other members of this genus E. taeniura shows great variability in its choice of habitat. Mell frequently found them in the vicinity of small ponds. In some areas it has even developed into a follower of civilisation and can be found living in fields and gardens (Pope, 1930). E. taeniura lives on flat as well as hilly land up to an altitude of 3000m (Sichuan), 780-1100m (Shanxi), 500-1500m (Jiangsu) or 1300-3000m (Yunnan) and up to 2000m in Burma. As a predominantly nocturnal snake E. t. taeniura can move very quickly and when fleeing can manage quite a turn of speed. If it is cornered it either flattens its throat or inflates it and strikes quickly. Unfortunately with my animals I have only been able to observe this behaviour on one occasion. Mostly these snakes attempt to flee. Occasionally with my animals I have been able to observe that when startled they draw their spine into a wave-like position or hide their heads beneath their body coils (see also E. radiata, Part VII, published in Snake Keeper, Volume 2, Number 8).


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E. t. taeniura in the author's collection
Photo: K-D Schulz

Maintenance in the vivarium

A few years ago I had the good fortune to be able to obtain three specimens of the nominate form. The snakes (2,1) came from the clutch of a gravid imported female. After a careful scale count and check of the colour, etc. according to available literature, I was able to determine that the animals originated from the Shanghai region of China. The snakes are housed in a vivarium 120 x 70 x 80cm (LxBxH) which is illuminated for 12 hours daily using an 18W (white) fluorescent tube. In one corner the water container is slightly heated by the timing mechanism for the illumination. The substrate is a gravel/peat mixture which is kept slightly moist in one corner. A larger water container, several climbing branches and several pieces of cork bark complete the furnishings. During the day the temperature varies between 25 and 30 degrees C and at night between 20 and 22 degrees C.

E. t. taeniura is a very shy snake which, when disturbed, immediately hurries to its hiding place. For most of the time the animals lie under the cork bark and only leave these hiding places when the room is quiet during the hours of twilight. Occasionally the snakes can be seen to sway their heads from side to side. This has also been observed in most other taeniura sub-species. When agitated, E. t. taeniura, in a similar manner to Elaphe (Goniosoma) oxycephela, flicks its tongue rapidly up and down in a vertical direction whereby the blue tongue is flicked over the snout in a small arc

motion. As opposed to E. taeniura friesei the nominate form is only an opportunist climber in the vivarium and remains on the bottom for most of the time. Food takes the form of laboratory mice which are seized and constricted with amazing speed. The snakes are fed every ten days with two mice per snake. The snakes are sometimes extremely avaricious so care must be taken that only one snake seizes each mouse.

Reproduction

After being placed together in a vivarium in December 1984 my three E. t. taeniura immediately began mating activity which, however, did not lead to copulation. At that time the female measured 120cm and the males 140 and 150cm. Only after hibernation (at 15 to 18 degrees C for two months until the end of February) were the mating activities repeated, in March 1985. When the lights were switched off the males began chasing the female. The latter attempted to escape and kept lashing out with her tail. These usually nocturnal attempts persisted for almost two weeks. Copulation occurred on the 15th of March 1985 with the larger male. This copulation lasted several hours during which the snakes lay under the cork bark tightly coiled together. On the 7th of May between 6.00 pm and 10.00 pm, five elongated eggs were laid in a box containing moist peat which had been placed in the vivarium for this purpose. The eggs were laid together in an adhesive clump and measured 65 x 25cm to 70 x 30cm. They were carefully separated and placed individually in a container of moist peat before being transferred to the incubator which I have already described several times. The temperature in the incubator was between 25 degrees C and 29 degrees C with a nightly reduction to 22 degrees C. The atmospheric humidity was almost constant at between 95 and 100%. After four weeks one egg showed signs of mould; this was immediately treated with active carbon powder which halted the moulding process. With other clutches that was unfortunately not always the case. On 16th of July 1985, after 70 days, the first young snake emerged. The others followed three and four days later. All the young were in perfect condition even that from the mouldy egg. None of them showed any damage or deformation and they measured between 35 and 38cm.

To be continued.

The second part of Asian Rat Snakes of the Elaphe Genus, Part VIII, Elaphe taeniura, will appear in next month's issue.


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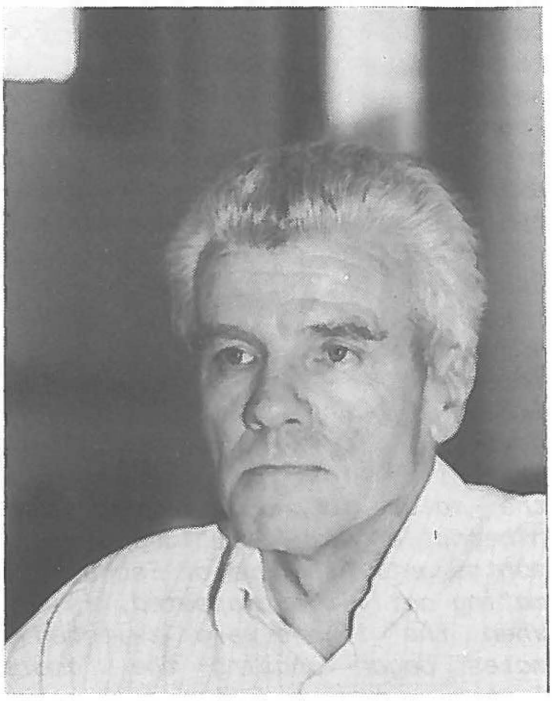
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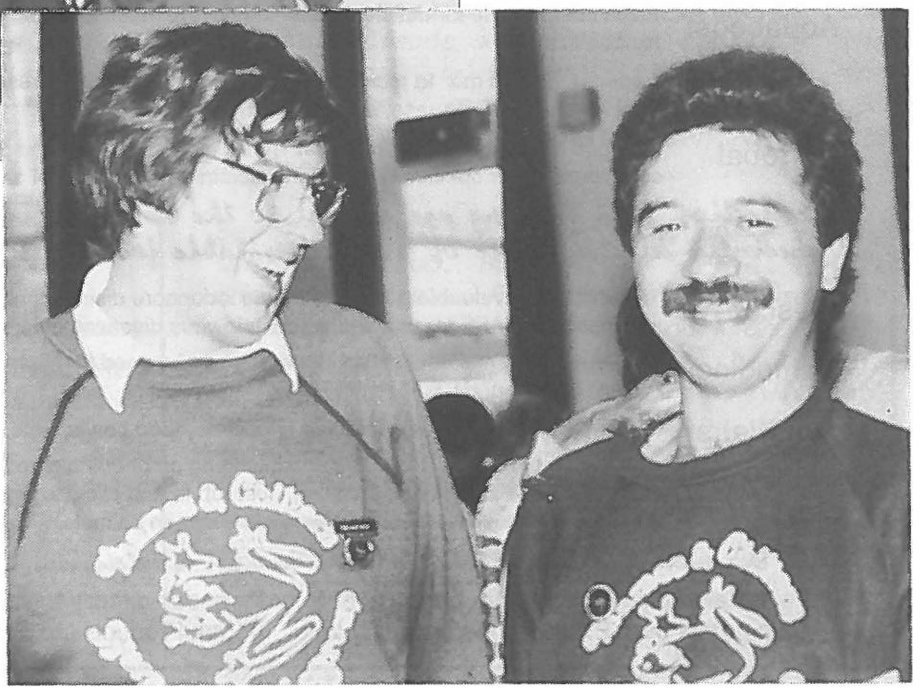






*Above*
*The Secretary of the Thames and Chiltern Herpetological Group, Frank Schofield.*

*Below*
*Treasurer John Owen (left) and event publicist Robert Snowdon look pleased with the attendance figures and takings.*



*The Thames and Chiltern Herpetological Group's Display of Reptiles and Amphibians held on July 16th attracted over 1500 people from all over the country. An excellent selection of animals were displayed by T. & C.H.G. members and over £800 was raised for the Group's funds.*

*Photographs: Lesley Close*

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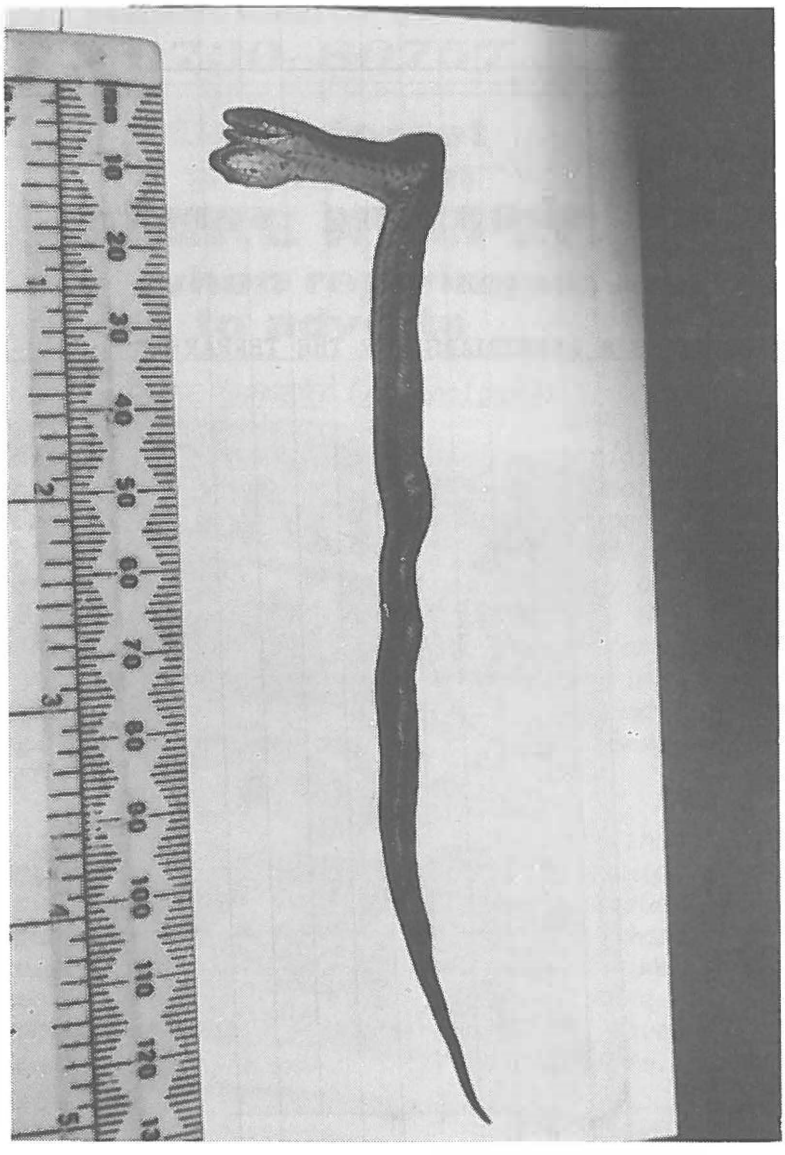
*Dear Sir,*

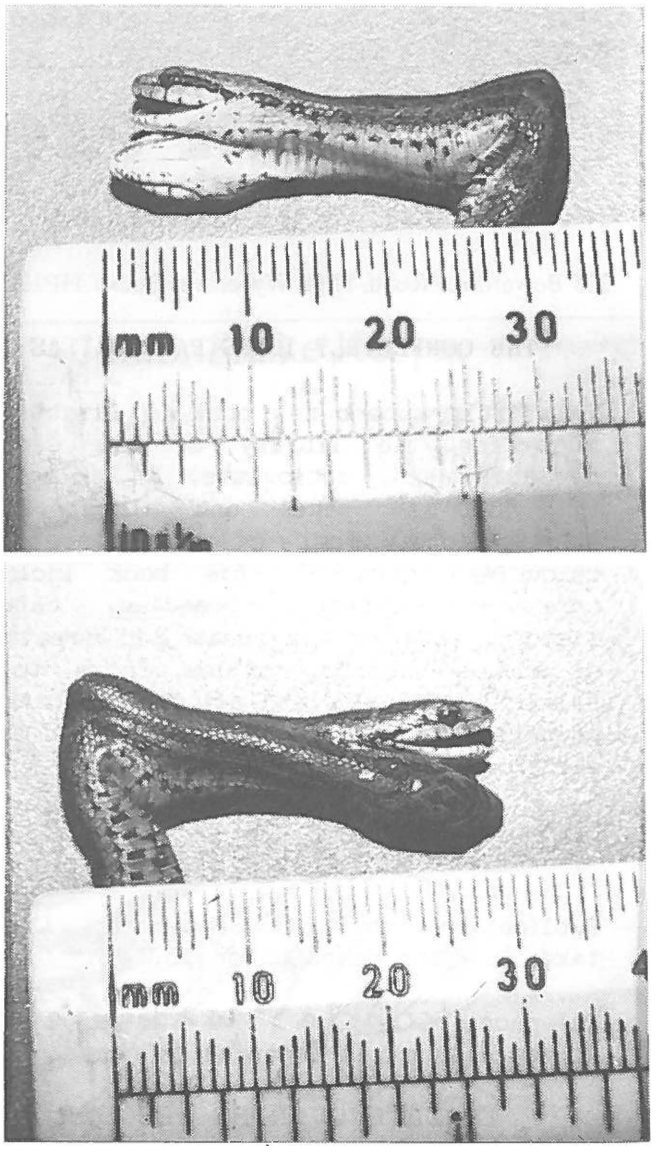
*I have enclosed some photographs of a two-headed Elaphe rufodorsata which was born on the 31st of July 1988. Three young were born in all, two of which are alive and well. The two-headed snake was, however, dead when found on the day of birth. The length of the dead snake is 15.5cm. The two live young are 15.5cm and 16cm in length. The adult female measures about 60cm. She was obtained in April 1988 and housed with a male; however, no mating was seen to occur so it is possible that she was already gravid when bought.*

*I have frozen the dead snake and would be pleased to pass it on to anyone you know who is involved in herpetological research.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*Elizabeth Cole*
*Worcs.*






*Photographs: Elizabeth Cole*

Dear Snake Keeper,

This is a letter to warn other snake keepers who might make the same mistake as I did.

We have a pair of Indian Pythons (Gloria, 2.2m and Nelson, 2.9m). They both live happily in a large vivarium in the spare room. Both snakes are very good natured. Recently at feeding time four large rats were placed in the vivarium. After a few minutes I looked in to find Nelson had picked up a rat. I went to put the kettle on and when I returned, to my horror, I could only see one snake's head. It seems that they both went after the same rat. I screamed in panic to my wife; Gloria had swallowed about half a metre of Nelson. We frantically searched for information on what to do but couldn't find any. By this time there was only about a metre of Nelson hanging from Gloria's mouth. I tried very hard to prise them apart and I was in a total panic.

We decided to try putting them in water. My wife ran the bath as I struggled to get them both into it whilst keeping Gloria's mouth open as much as possible. I put her head under the water and managed to release about a metre of poor Nelson. A few seconds later Gloria took him down again, swallowing about 1.5 metres. Gloria's head was again submerged and I finally got them apart. I was very happy to see Nelson's head again - still holding the rat! He didn't look too bad considering what he had been through. I returned a not-too-happy Gloria to the vivarium (she had a very floppy jaw) and when I returned to the bathroom I found Nelson was happily eating his rat in the bathroom as though nothing had happened. We really thought that he would look terrible. The moral of this story is that feeding time is a time to be alone.

Yours faithfully,

P.D. Alger
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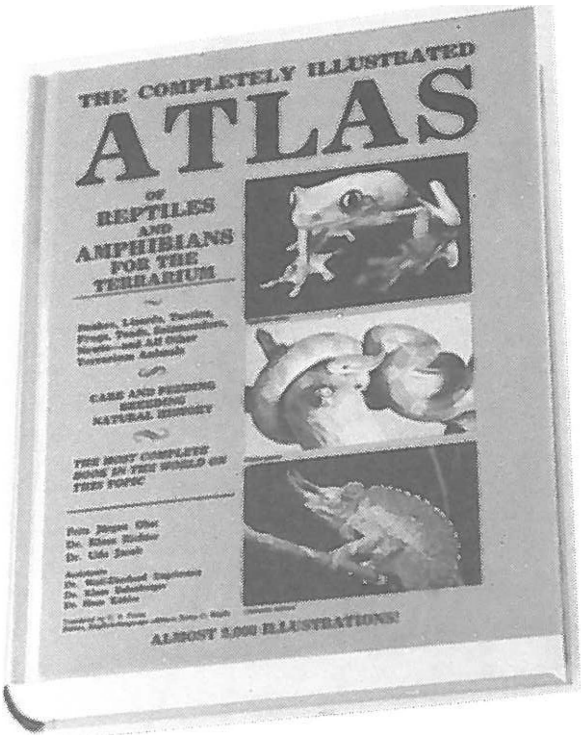
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## SNAKE SURGERY (An apology)

*Following the publication of the article entitled, "Snake Surgery" by 'Geoff Gopher', which appeared in Snake Keeper, Volume 2, Number 5, we have received a letter of complaint from the Secretary of 'a royal college of learned gentlemen'. He wrote to point out that the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 prohibits the carrying out of veterinary surgery upon any animal by anyone other than a registered veterinarian.*

*We would like to make it clear that the article was entirely fictitious. It should have appeared in our April issue (published on April Fool's Day) but was held over due to lack of space. We apologise to anyone, including the aforementioned college, who may not have realised that it was a fictitious article.*

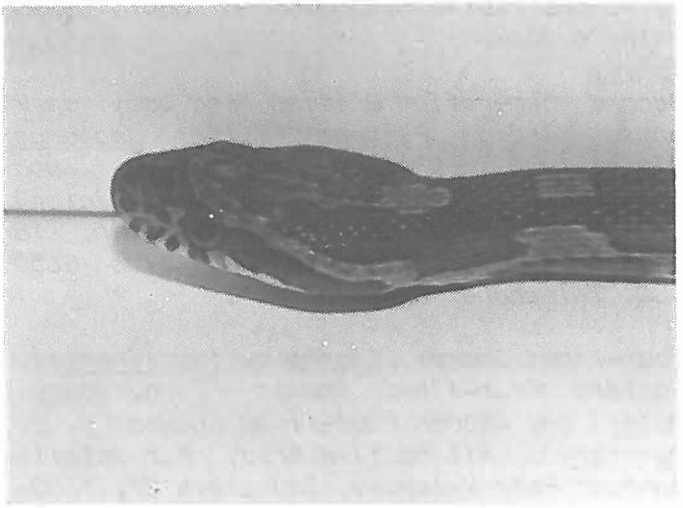
## Stowaway Snake #2

*Following fast in the tracks of the Peninsular Ribbon Snake (Thamnophis sauritis sackeni) reported in Snake Keeper, Volume 2, Number 6, comes a second stowaway snake.*

*The female Corn Snake (Elaphe guttata) shown here arrived by exactly the same means and route as its predecessor and has happily settled into captivity.*

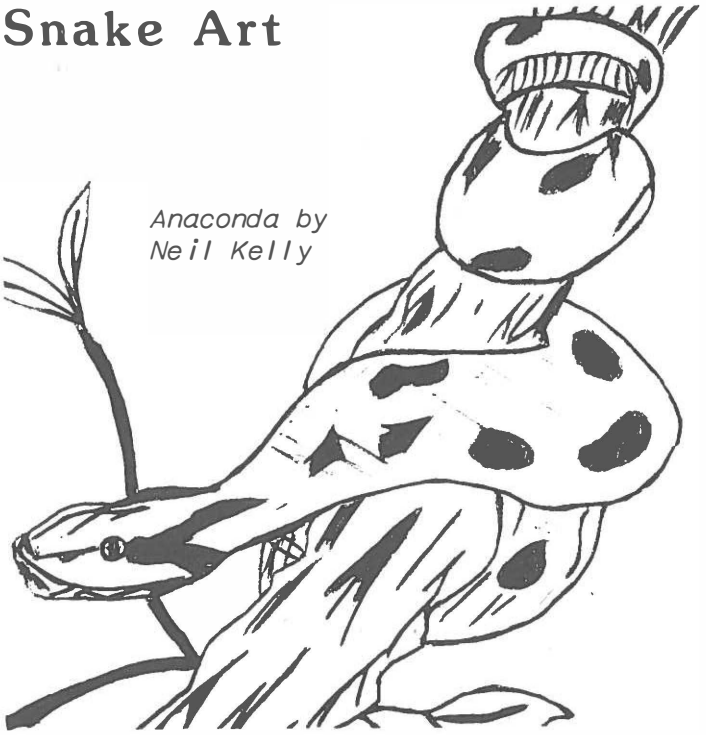
*Is this purely one-way traffic or do any of our Stateside readers know of stowaway snakes going in the other direction?*

*Photo: Michael Connolley*



## Junior Snake Keeper

### Snake Art



*Anaconda by Neil Kelly*

## 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

Two Indian Pythons, 9' and 11'. Two Texas Ratsnakes 4'. Four Common Boas, 3' - 5.5'. Three Clouded Boas (Boa constrictor nebulosa). Offers. Telephone Peterborough (0733) 350324.

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One pair of young Carolina Corn Snakes, 3'. £50 for the pair. Phone (0494) 25345 (Bucks).

Herptile field trips 1989:- Galapagos Islands luxury private yacht tour, very full three week itinerary with all important locations visited. Small group of herpetologists. Mostly booked, but a few places still available. Other trips:- Florida (visiting various special reptile locations), Texas-California desert reptile expedition, Seychelles and Madagascar. Full details on request, phone (0249) 720114 or write to A.C. Highfield, BM Tortoise, London WC1N 3XX.

Hatchling Elaphe guttata guttata x E. g. rosacea intergrades. Telephone Dave on (081) 251 2151 (Tyneside).

Two female Royal Pythons (Python regius). Long term captives, feeding well. £40 each. Three Bells Agamas (Leiolepis belliana) £25 trio or £9 each. Three Tokay Geckos (Gekko gecko) £5 each. Also Chile Rose Tarantula (Grammostola spatulata) £10. Telephone Chris Fletcher on (0724) 855859 (South Humberside).

Carolina Corn Snakes £20, Florida Corn Snakes £18, African House Snakes £18, California Kings £30, Northern Pines £35, Bulls £25, Bearded Dragons £35, Leopard Geckos £7, Eyed Lizards £15. Other reptiles and amphibians available. Geoff Clarke (0929) 471851.

Rare 6' African Rock Python (two year old, female). Lovely looking and good to handle. Genuine reason for sale. Bargain at £110. Phone High Wycombe (0494) 465170.

Corn Snake hatchlings (Elaphe guttata guttata). £20 each. Telephone (0253) 302538 (Blackpool).

Wild-caught African House Snakes (Lamprophis fuliginosus). Wild-caught African Egg-eating Snakes (Dasypeltis scabra). All will be eating. Telephone (0245) 466503 evenings.

### WANTED

Mature captive-bred female Corn Snake. Preferably one with good breeding success. Must be healthy and in good condition. Seller to pack, rail/road transport to Penrith. Good price for good snake and costs paid. Phone (0768) 890289.

Four-lined Snake (Elaphe quatuorlineata). Hatchlings preferred. Telephone (0289) 88277.

Sub adult male Corn Snake (18" - 24"). Telephone Chris Fletcher on (0724) 855859 (South Humberside).

Adult or sub-adult Elaphe guttata emoryi. 1, Sanderson Road, Monkseaton, Whitley Bay, Tyne and Wear NE26 3PF or phone (081) 251 2151.

Female Children's Python. Telephone Colin Edmondson on (0647) 52598 after 6.30pm.

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* when replying to adverts. *
* Thank you. *
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SNAKE KEEPER DISTRIBUTION
Over 700 copies of Snake Keeper have been distributed during August.