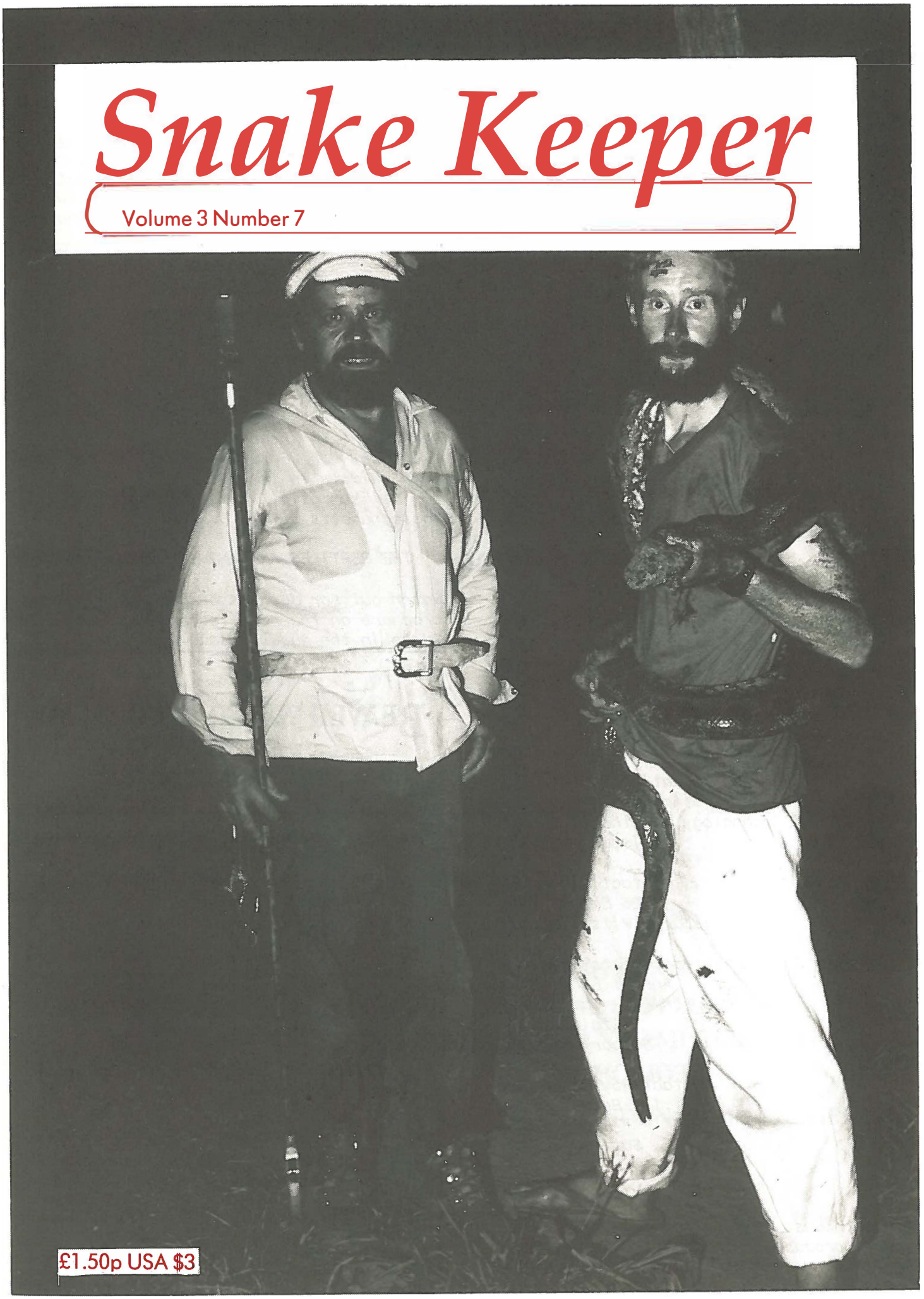
# Snake Keeper

Volume 3 Number 7



£1.50p USA $3

# *Snake Keeper News*

## S.R.A.C. CHANGE

The Snakes, Reptiles and Amphibians Club have now changed their name to The Snakes, Reptiles and Amphibians Society. For further information about the society contact The Secretary (Carl Guthrie), 21 Gardenia Walk, Colchester, Essex CO4 3RX.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

25th July B.A.T.K. National Tortoise Day
Hurrans Garden Centre
Kidderminster, Worcs.

Contact Sheila Richmond
Telephone (0922) 53869

29th July T.& C.H.G. Exhibition of
Reptiles and Amphibians
Hazlemere Community Centre
Rose Avenue
Hazlemere, Bucks

Contact John Owen
Telephone (02406) 4973

2nd September Zoologica
South of England Showground
Ardingly, Sussex

Contact C H Keeling
Telephone (0483) 37547

10th September Salisbury and District
Aquatic Society Show
(inc. Reptile/Amphibian section)
College of Technology, Southampton Road
Salisbury, Wilts.

Contact R F Adams
26 Empire Road
Salisbury, Wilts SP2 9DF

7th October Amateur Entomologists' Society
Annual Exhibition
Kempton Park Racecourse
Staines Road
Sunbury, Surrey

Contact Roy McCormick
125 Brocks Drive
North Cheam
Sutton, Surrey

## N.E.R.A.G.

The North East Reptile and Amphibian Group have produced their first monthly newsletter. 'The Natrix' contains information about the Group and includes articles about setting up a vivarium, first attempts at reptile keeping, pond destruction, the grass snake (Natrix natrix) plus a competition and a cartoon strip. For further information about the Group, write to Richard Toward, 5 Tweedy Terrace, Walker, Newcastle Upon Tyne NE6 3AS. Telephone Tyneside 2653641.

## EUROPEAN CORRESPONDENTS REQUIRED

Allison McNeill (Massachusetts, U.S.A.) is interested in corresponding with European snake keepers. Her major interests are the captive breeding of Lampropeltis, Elaphe and Pituophis. She has many friends who are breeding snakes of these species and who might be interested in setting up an exchange for European or Asian captive born animals in the future. You can write to Allison at 41 Webster Street, Malden, Massachusetts 02148, U.S.A.

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# *Snake Keeper*

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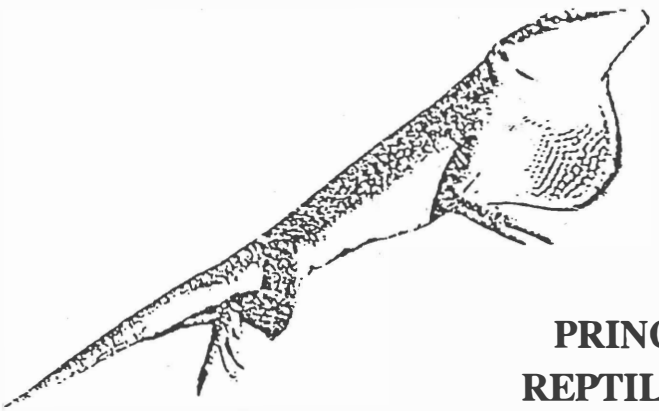
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*Front cover:*
*Celio Valle (left) and Mark O'Shea holding a sucuri on the Ihla de Maracá, Brazil.*
*Photo: Mark O'Shea*


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# The Maintenance and Breeding of the Red-tailed Green Racer, *Gonyosoma oxycephala* Part II

by G.H. Heijnen

Light is provided by TL lamps (two of 20W and one of 30W), SL lamps (two of 18W), a persglass lamp of 80W and a HPL lamp of 80W. Using timeswitches, the various lamps are switched on and off so that a day-evening-night cycle is created. The lighting period is the same throughout the year i.e. 12 hours per day. The light intensity is greater in winter than in summer.

As well as the heat from the various lamps the main heating comes from an 80W dark heater and a 60W floor heater, both of which are connected to a thermostat which is set to approximately 23 degrees C. In this way the minimum temperature in the vivarium is 22 degrees C whilst the maximum temperature is 32 degrees C. It is naturally warmer below the lamps.

At night the atmospheric humidity is between 80 and 90% whilst during the day it is around 60%. Every two or three days I spray the vivarium with one litre of water. Below the substrate there is a drainage system so that superfluous water can be led off. The snakes often drink a great deal of the sprayed water and very rarely use the water bowl.

In this vivarium I also keep a Cook's Garden Tree Boa (Corallus enydris), a pair of Green Anoles (Anolis carolinensis) whilst the bottom is occupied by a pair of Crocodile Salamanders (Tylototriton verrucosus) and a small colony of Fire-bellied Toads (Bombina orientalis).

## Problems with the Female

After a few months I noticed that the female was making jerky movements and that otherwise her behaviour was different than normal; she was less lively than usual and lay with her head pointing upwards. On first examination there were no obvious signs of illness. She soon began to produce a great deal of clear saliva which, because of her swallowing actions, appeared as froth at the sides of her mouth. My veterinary surgeon gave me Chloramfenicol solution which I had to give to the snake for five days. As soon as the course was completed the snake sloughed. After that there were no 'signs of a cold'. The symptoms described here occurred again later. Before each slough there was an increased secretion of saliva. During its period of 'colds' the snake continued to eat well. This phenomenon could have been caused by the fact that the snake was frequently to be found with its head buried below the substrate. The head thus often looked very dirty.

After a year, around the middle of April 1987, the female regurgitated a half-digested mouse. I gave her a Ridzol-S cure after which food was again digested properly. The male did not have any of these problems.

## Breeding

In order to stimulate the snakes to breed I used Van Riel's (1977) example and increased the atmospheric humidity. I tried to keep it at approximately 90% during the day by spraying more frequently. In addition the daytime temperature was also lowered somewhat; This happened more or less by accident in that I forgot to replace the plug in the time switch so that previously warm spots suddenly became cooler. It was immediately noticeable that the snake became more alert and active although at that time the atmospheric humidity was very high during the day.

After a few weeks at very high humidity I saw, to my great amazement, a mating on the 22nd of June 1987. This lasted around two hours. At the time of mating both snakes made 'dancing' movements with their necks. This was somewhat similar to the well-known 'Adder Dance'. The mating was so intense that sperm was dripping from both snakes.

I was unable to observe any further matings. After the initial mating the female was fed a few times but stopped eating around the middle of July. By the middle of August it was obvious that she was gravid because her rear half was getting noticeably thicker. This continued until the 10th of September 1987 when she



*Gonyosoma oxycephala* Photo: J.J. van Duinen

laid her eggs. During this time she was constantly searching for a suitable place to lay the eggs. The substrate consisted of a 10cm layer of peat moss so that there were adequate places to lay eggs.

She began to lay the eggs at approximately 8.30pm. The first five were laid within about 20 minutes and the last three were spaced out over 40 minutes. The eggs were a beautiful white colour.

After laying the eggs the female lay totally exhausted for several days. She had lost a great deal of weight and the actual laying process had greatly sapped her energy. After ten days she finally ate a mouse.

The Eggs and the Hatching

The most obvious thing about the eggs was their size; they measured approximately 7cm whilst their weight varied from 25 to 29g. They had the appearance of hens' eggs but were somewhat smaller.

I removed the eggs from the vivarium the same evening and transferred them to an incubator. The eggs were placed in a plastic box containing peat moss upon which the eggs were laid. The container was placed in a larger aquarium containing water, and covered with a sheet of glass. The temperature in the incubator was 28.5 degrees C and at this temperature the incubation period was around three months. The size of the eggs increased during incubation. Some almost doubled in circumference whilst two eggs, although they had grown, remained much smaller. The first young snake came out of its shell on the 10th January 1988, having made a slit in the egg the previous day and pushed its head out. Within four days all of the young snakes had hatched. The largest young came from the largest eggs and from the two smaller eggs the smallest young hatched. The largest of the young measured from 47 to 50cm and weighed 20 to 22g. The two smaller snakes were shorter and weighed 15g.

Rearing the Young

From the eight young, I gave two to a friend and fellow herpetologist and the remaining six I kept separately in small plastic containers. Absorbent kitchen roll was placed on the bottom of each

container. The furnishings were a small drinking bowl and a climbing branch. The temperature was kept at a minimum of 22 degrees C and a maximum of 27 degrees C.

Each of the young sloughed after ten days. One of them, the smallest, was not as alert as the others. After they had sloughed they were each offered a nestling mouse which was refused. A week later I repeated the process with the same result. On the 10th of February I managed to persuade all of the young to eat using the same 'trick' as I had used with their parents. I held each snake in my left hand and using my right hand and forceps I proceeded to irritate them with a nestling mouse. As each snake became sufficiently agitated it bit the mouse and promptly swallowed it. For the first feed I used live mice which were not first constricted but simply swallowed live. Two of the young later regurgitated their mice. This problem was later solved by using dead nestling mice for later feeds. The smallest of the snakes still regurgitates its prey regularly and readily voids the contents of its stomach. The other five, however, continue to do well.

I regularly spray the young and they often drink this sprayed water.

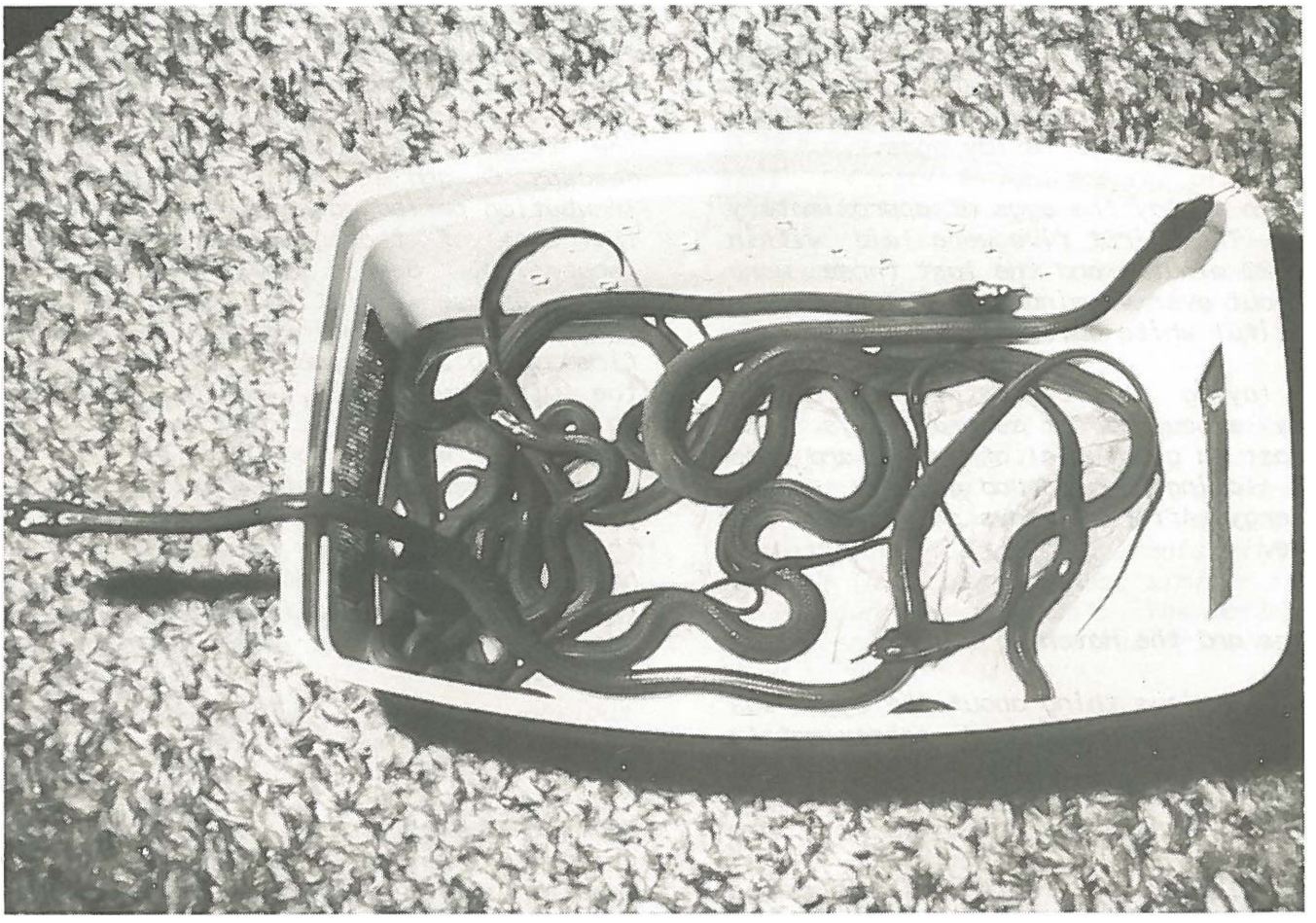
Conclusions

Although it is difficult to give exact guidelines for breeding this species of snake, in my opinion it is vital that the atmospheric humidity be increased to 80 or 90% both day and night to stimulate mating behaviour. I base this on my own experiences and those of Van Riel (1977). In the meantime I have used the same method and on the 4th July the female again laid five eggs.

I am of the opinion that this splendid snake is easy to keep in the vivarium as long as the prerequisites of temperature and humidity as described in this article are met.

*****

Author's address: G.H. Heijnen
Saturnusbaan 16
7891 ET
Klazienaveen
Nederland



Newly hatched Gonyosoma oxycephala

Photo: J.J. van Duinen

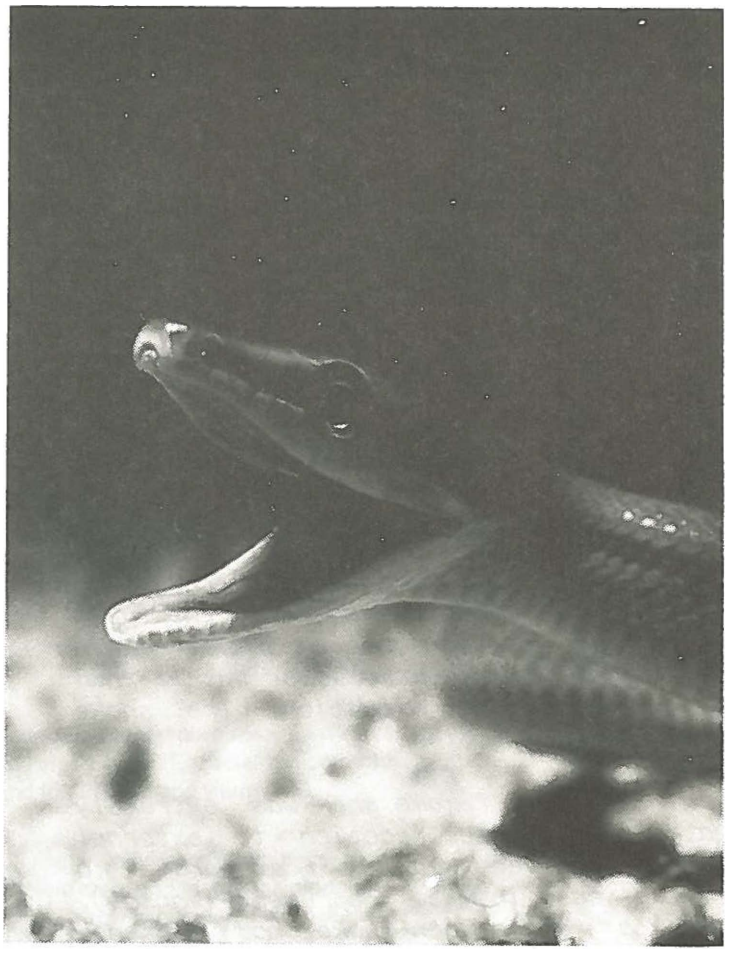
*Literature*

*Van Riel, C.A.P. (1977) Voortplanting in het terrarium van Gonyosoma oxycephalum (Boie). Lacerta 37 (2): 19-22.*

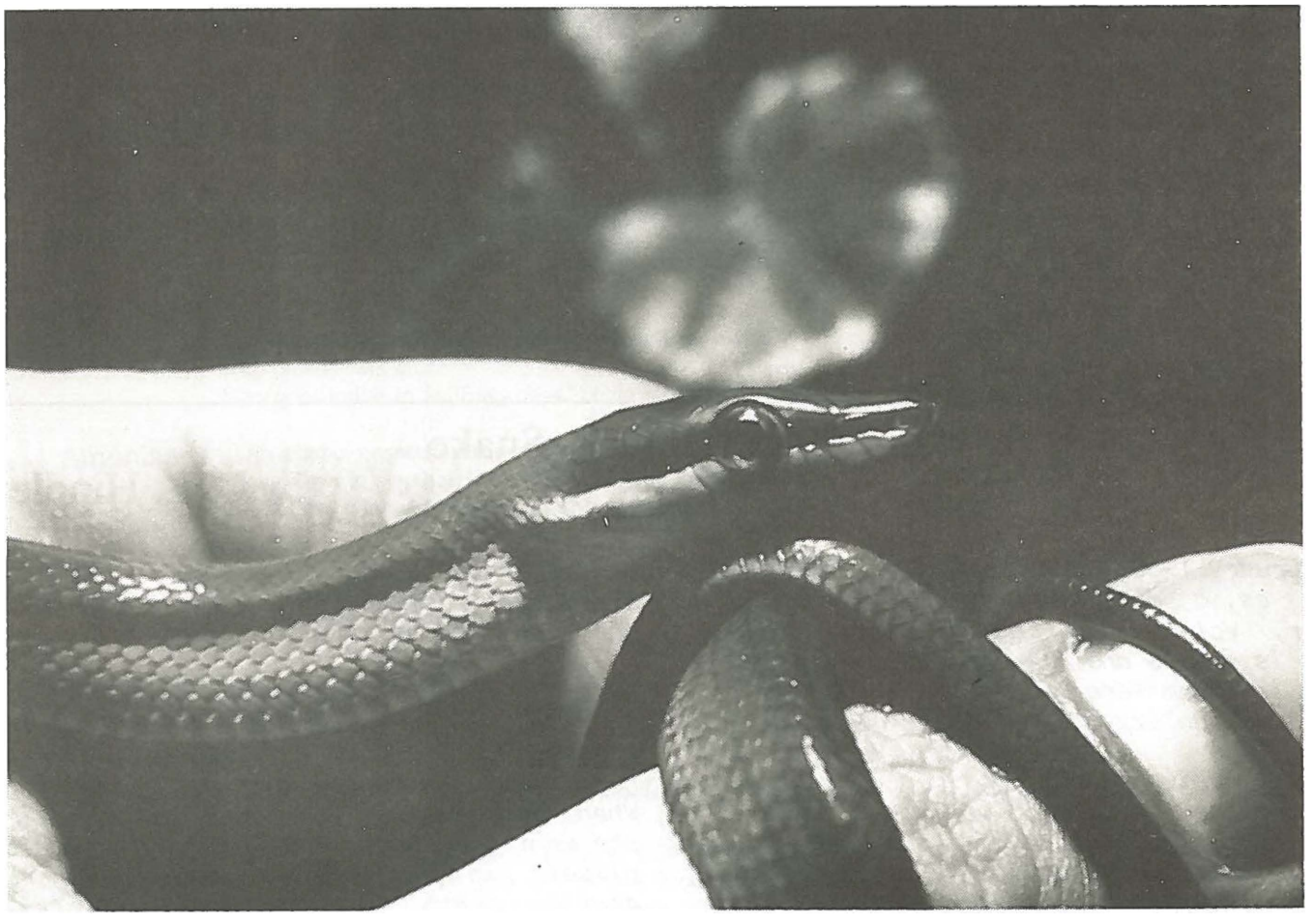
*Trutnau, L. (1981). Schlangen im Terrarium Band 1: Ungiftige Schlangen. Eugen Ulmer, Stuttgart.*

*This article, 'De verzorging van en de kweek met de spitskopslang (Gonyosoma oxycephala)', was originally published in the Dutch magazine 'Lacerta' 1/88 and is printed by kind permission of the Author. Translation by John Hackworth.*

*Editor's note. Further reading for Gonyosoma oxycephala enthusiasts can be found in Trevor Smith's article 'Gonyosoma oxycephala - The Red-tailed Racer' printed in 'The Herptile' 13 (4) (December 1988).*



*Right and below*
*Young Gonyosoma oxycephala*
*Photographs by J.J. van Duinen*



# A Retained Egg

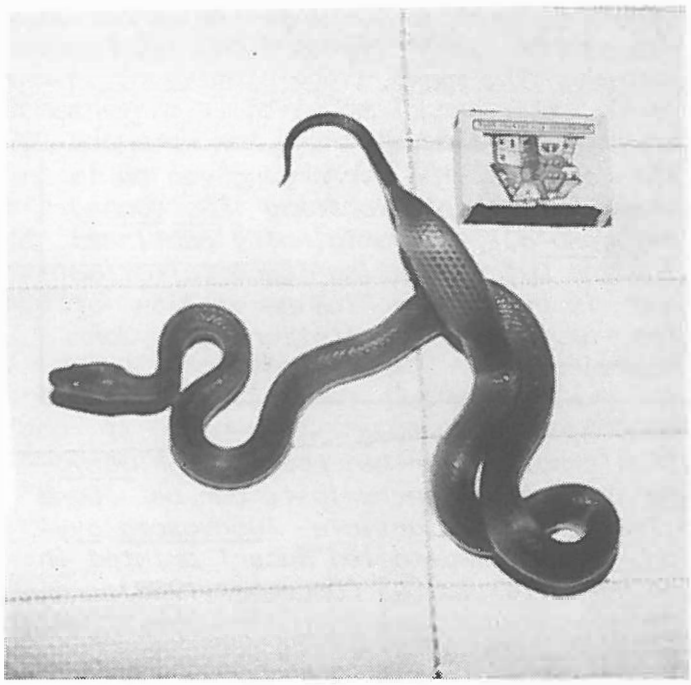
## by Andrzej Kowalew

*A friend of mine, Marcin, keeps four Lamprophis fuliginosus. As I also keep snakes of this species in my collection we often exchange information on them.*

*On the 2nd of December last year, Marcin telephoned me and asked if I would call on him as quickly as possible. Within a few minutes I arrived at his place and discovered Marcin had a really serious problem. His one year old Lamprophis fuliginosus had laid three sterile eggs the previous day. When she had tried to deposit the fourth, and probably the last, egg she had not been able to do so. Marcin had bathed her in warm water but it had not improved the situation. The snake became more exhausted.*

*When I saw the female she was extremely apathetic and her reaction to external stimuli was very weak. I had heard of a similar case in Plock Zoo (near Warsaw). There a female Corn Snake had suffered from the same problem. She had been succesfully operated on and in the following year she had laid eggs without any complications. Marcin had all the necessary equipment for an operation but we did not fancy the idea of cutting the snake so we decided to try another method. Using a syringe and a thin flexible tube we pumped 0.5ml of Liquid Paraffin into the cloaca of the snake. Then we massaged the belly of the snake and tried to push the egg gently. We expected that the snake would struggle violently but, however, it behaved very passively.*

*The massage took some three minutes until the egg began to emerge from the cloaca. This was the moment when the poor female began to co-operate. Soon the egg was outside. Much to our relief there were no signs of blood on the egg. The snake recovered very quickly. As in the past it is now an active and well feeding snake.*



*Lamprophis fuliginosus with retained egg.*
*Photo: Andrzej Kowalew*

*****

*Author's address:*

*Andrzej Kowalew*
*Chlodna 15/1301*
*00-891 Warszawa*
*Poland*

# Kola, The Sunbeam Snake

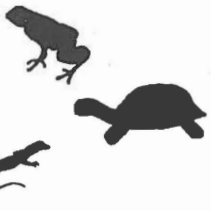
## by C. L. Hindley

*In February 1988 I bought another Sunbeam Snake as a mate for Izzy (see Snake Keeper, Volume One, Number Nine). This snake is a male and I've called him Kola. Kola is 106cm long and is a lighter shade of brown than Izzy.*

*Upon his arrival I put him in a quarantine cage and treated him for worms and mites. A week later I offered him a small live mouse to eat. He took no interest in it at all but I wasn't really worried because he looked healthy and in good condition. Every three days I tried him with a mouse and each time he refused to eat it.*

*After a month in quarantine Kola went to join Izzy in her vivarium. As soon as the vivarium was opened Izzy rushed out from her hide log to see what was happening. When she saw that it wasn't feeding time she went back under the log. Kola buried himself in the moss and remained there. Another month went by and Kola still*

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hadn't eaten so I offered him newly-furred gerbils and newborn rats but he wasn't interested. I decided to try goldfish and earthworms but Kola also refused these. I tried him with dead zebra finches and even a frog. Kola was getting very thin now and I had considered taking him to the vet to be force-fed when, suddenly one of my baby Dice Snakes died. I usually preserve my snakes in formaldehyde when they die but this time I gave the dead snake to Kola and he wasted no time in eating it. Now I knew what he would eat but I didn't like the idea of feeding him on snakes so I decided to take him to the vet to be force-fed. I made a mixture of lean mincemeat, egg and vitamin powder and liquidised it then we set off for the vet's surgery.

The vet put a long rubber tube down Kola's throat and into his stomach and began to force-feed him with the mincemeat mixture. Everything went well until the vet let go of the tube to refill the syringe with food. Of course Kola swallowed the rubber tube with a very smug look on his face. The vet said it would be best to leave him for 24 hours to see if he would regurgitate the tube. He didn't so it was back to the surgery. The vet anaesthetized Kola so that he could look down his throat for the tube.

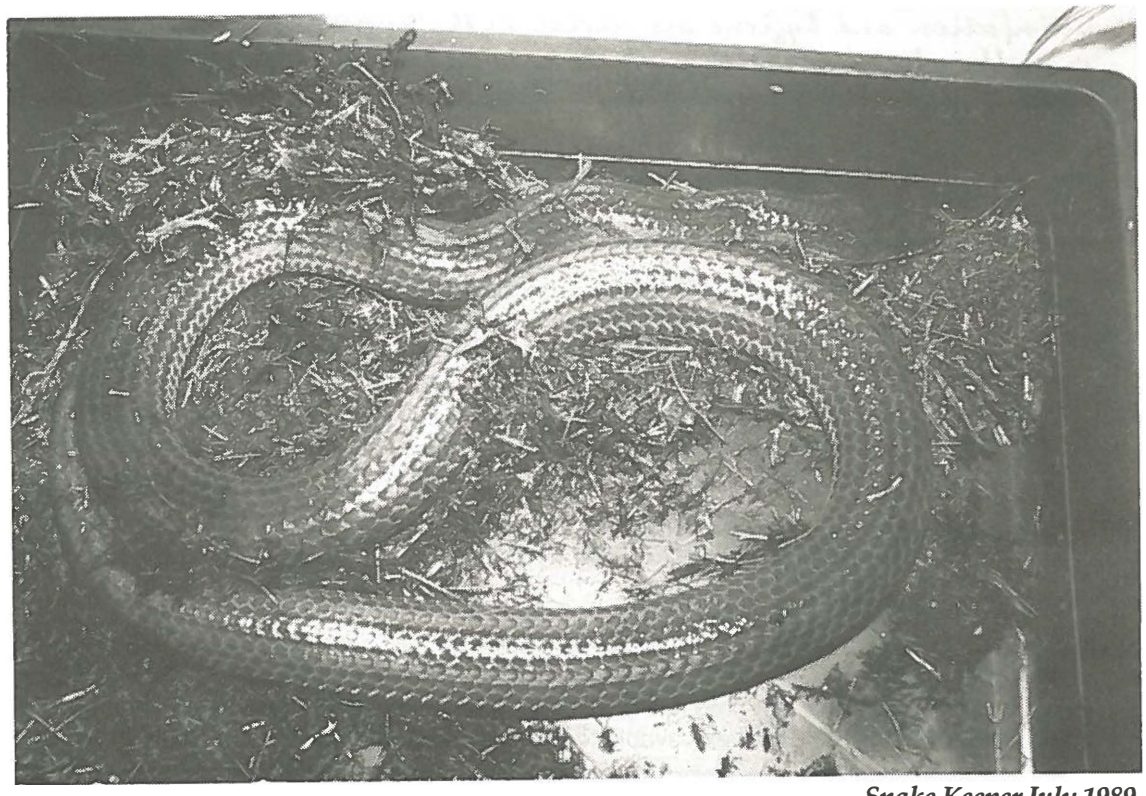
When I went to collect Kola the vet said there was no sign of the tube so he must have digested it. However, Kola looked



alright. He was lively enough but he still wasn't eating.

The next day I cleaned his vivarium and found the rubber tube covered in slime and mucus in his hide box so he must have regurgitated it in the night.

A week later I gave Kola a small live mouse and this time he did eat it. From then on he has never refused a live mouse although he won't eat dead ones. I had to



Above and right

Kola,
The Sunbeam Snake
(Xenopeltis unicolor)

Photo:
C.L. Hindley

split Izzy and Kola up at feeding time because Izzy is very greedy. What she does is eat her mouse as quickly as possible and then she rushes over to snatch Kola's mouse and always gets it. The snakes are kept separately now because one night I heard a lot of noise coming from the snake room. I rushed in and saw Izzy chasing Kola around the vivarium and fighting. The way they were reared up against each other reminded me of the way male adders fight over a female. I immediately pulled the snakes apart and examined them both. Kola had deep bite marks all over the top half of his body. Several were bleeding so I washed and bathed them in a a hydrogen peroxide/water solution. Then I placed Kola in a small vivarium on his own. I examined Izzy who didn't have a scratch on her. The next day I took Kola to the vet for an antibiotic injection. The cuts have healed up but there are still scars left from the deepest ones. Later I found out that Izzy is also a male so I wonder if they were fighting over territories in the vivarium like some male lizards do.

*****

# Simpler Furnishings Make For Quicker Clean-Ups

## by Alfred and Deborah Fleming

Snake cage maintenance is a very important aspect of snake husbandry. The simpler the clean-up, the more likely that the clean-up will be completed on a timely basis. Likewise, if cage furnishings are easy to clean, the end result is the same.

I've found that the key to quick and easy clean-ups is sticking to the basics. Furnish the cage with the minimum requirements for the snake being kept. Simplicity need not sacrifice quality of life, but can enhance it through better hygiene habits.

It has been my experience that glass aquariums make the easiest of all cages to clean. Hot water, disinfectant, a sponge and in five minutes you are done (consult your veterinarian for a disinfectant that will kill gram negative bacteria and not your snakes).

For arboreal snakes that like to have something to perch on, P.V.C. pipe (or any sturdy plastic piping) works very well. It can be cut to fit snugly between the glass walls of the aquarium or supported by the use of adjustable rod holders held in place by double edge tape. The latter is recommended for heavier bodied snakes. The piping is light weight and wipes clean with a sponge. You can choose from an assortment of diameters for different sizes of snakes. This method, however, is not recommended for larger pythons and boa constrictors.

The hide box is another basic and a must for all nervous snakes. You can buy flower pots or plastic fish caves and logs etc, which at times prove to be more pain than gain. Or you can use what I use, cardboard boxes. Find a box that your snake fits into comfortably and cut all four flaps off. Turn it upside down and cut a doorway. Tape all edges with packing tape to protect the occupant from paper cuts and your hide box is finished. I also recommend that you tape the box in a corner over the heating element so that both are used together. For my smaller snakes I use empty paper towel rolls. The hatchlings love them and use them as much if not more than the older snakes use their hide boxes. The biggest advantage of using cardboard hide boxes is that they are disposable and can be replaced at little or no extra expense.

Setting all other advantages and disadvantages aside, and, with ease of clean-ups as the forethought, let us look at beddings. There are many acceptable beddings but only a few lend themselves to quick and easy clean-ups. Woodchips can be very messy when dumped or scooped out of the tank and accidental ingestion by a snake is a main concern on my part. Newsprint and butcher's paper are not very absorbent and with the former you have a risk of ink poisoning or serious infection should your snake develop an open wound somehow. Foam-backed Astroturf on the other hand gives your cage that outdoors look and is easily cut to fit. It is also absorbent to some degree. However, you still must contend with worries of ingestion of plastics that fray uncontrollably. It is almost impossible to disinfect Astroturf properly not to mention it requires replacement every six

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Appendix 1 species will be advertised when permits are obtained as it is an offence to advertise them without D.o.E. exemption.

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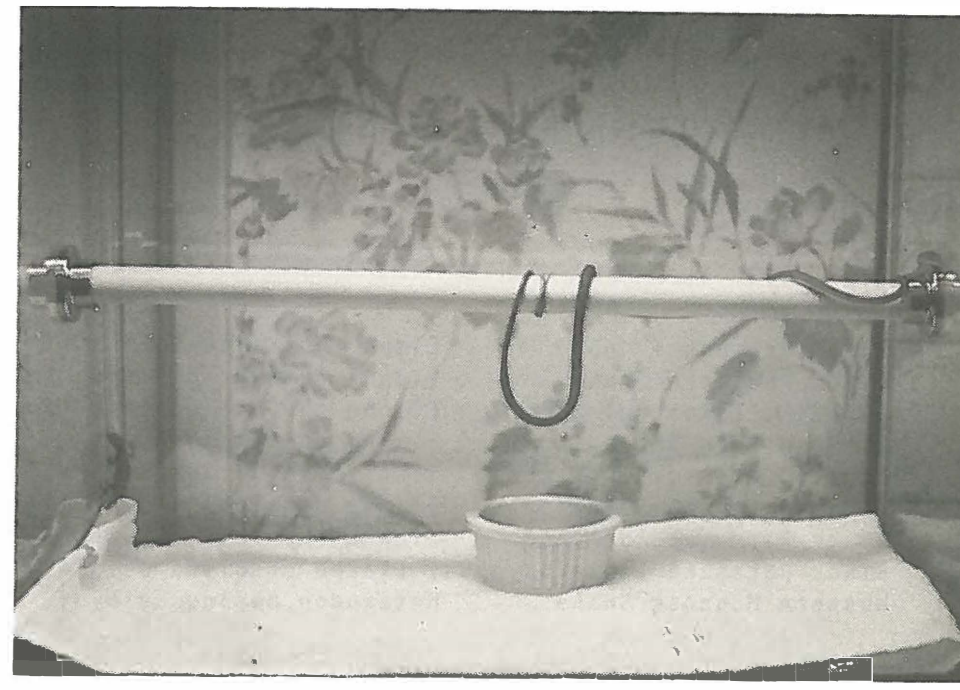
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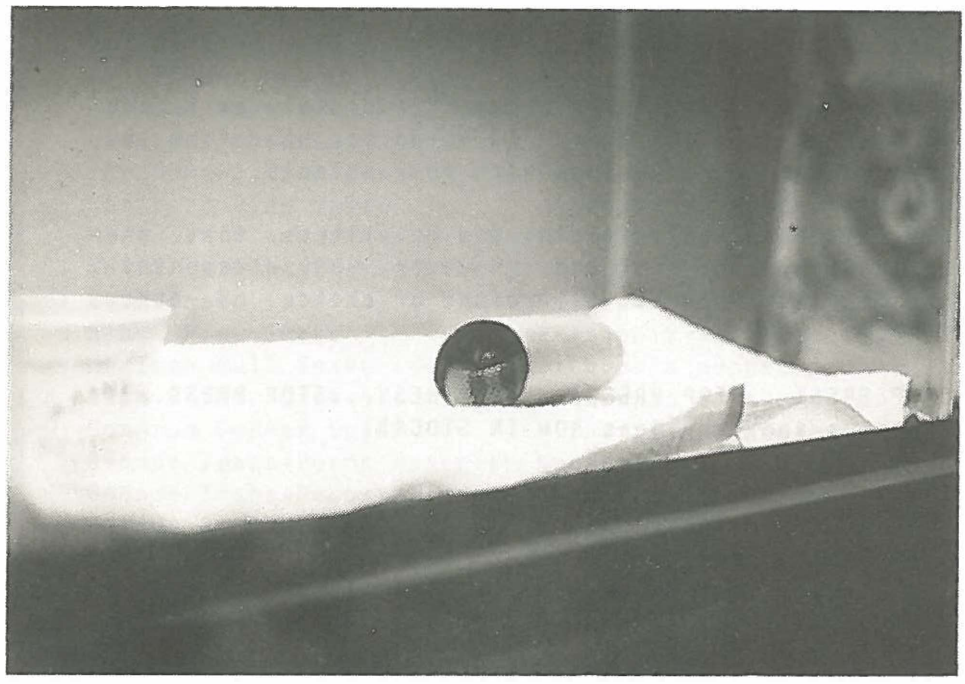
to twelve months and Astroturf is costly to replace.



I have just recently switched from Astroturf to white terry cloth towels, and I must say the advantages of terry cloth towels over other beddings that I have tried in the past are amazing. The fray and ingestion problems that come with some other beddings are practically non-existent in towels. I recommend that you buy white towels since no dyes are used in the colouring of the fabric so your snake will not be exposed to bleeding dyes which may be harmful. The terry cloth is very absorbent and it can be rolled up and lifted right out of the tank containing most, if not all, of the fecal matter deposited.

The towels I purchased at a discount store at a fraction of the cost of a whole outfitting of turf. One of the best advantages is that the towels are machine washable. Turf frays at a rapid rate when placed in a clothes dryer. And although no bedding is without flaw I have found more good points than bad points with white terry towels.

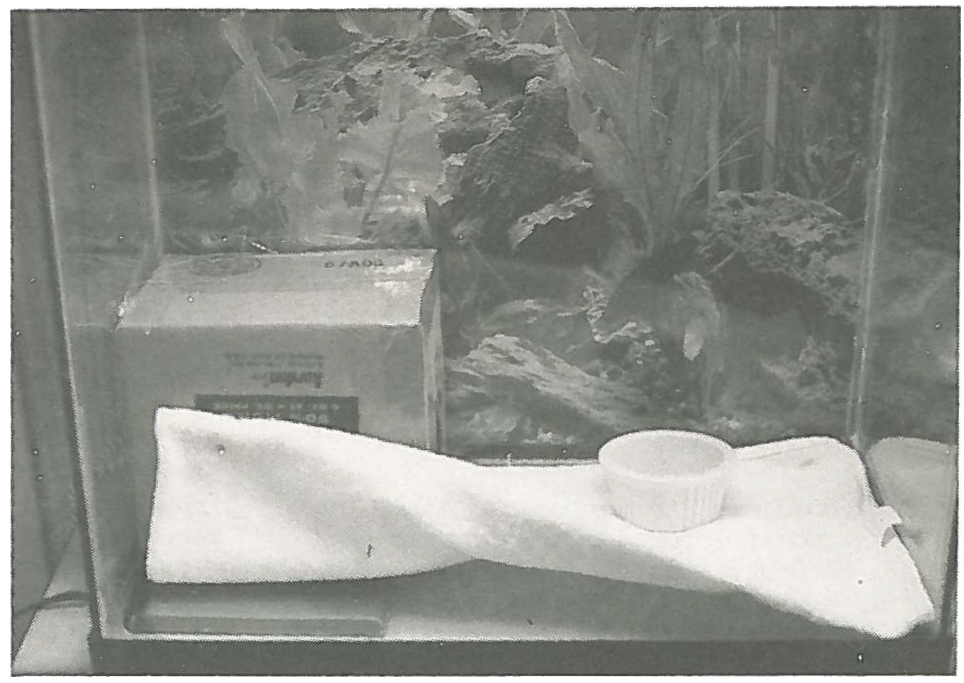
I am a believer that soaks should be controlled in snake husbandry to prevent self-inflicted skin problems in snakes. So depending on the size of snake being kept, your water dish need not be very large. A few items that make great water dishes are empty butter containers (like the plastic ones you buy at the store), empty meal worm or night crawler containers, or their plastic lids. When you purchase these items you pay for the container too, so why not get 100% use out of your investment. If you are looking for hard-to-knock-over bowls most pet shops sell weighted plastic bowls for the clumsy snake in your collection. I recommend staying clear of the metal bowls and pans because of the corrosion and rust hazards.



Above
The author's Long-nosed Tree Snake (Ahaetulla [Dryophis] prasinus) resting on his perch

Left
The author's Honduran Milk Snake (Lampropeltis triangulum hondurensis) using its paper roll for extra security

Photographs by A. Fleming



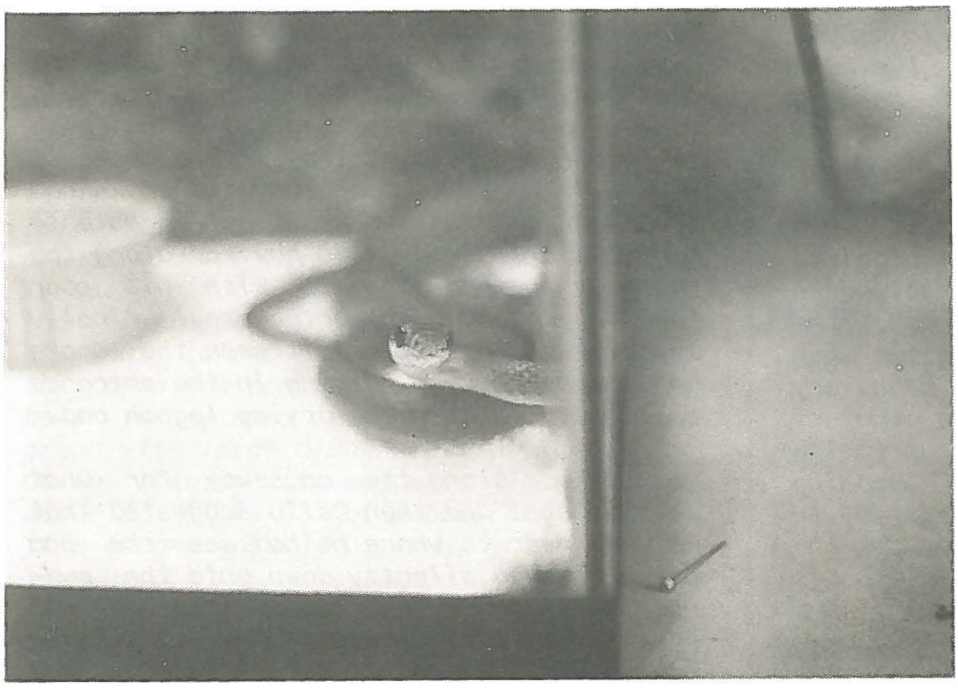
Stainless steel bowls that I've used in the past have rusted on occasion. So when it comes to water bowls it is best to stick to plastic.

Heating is an issue that will never be resolved to the satisfaction of all herpetologists. So it is best to just remain with what works best for you. I've found that as long as the air temperature is in the proper range for the snakes being kept that ordinary floor heating methods work very well. I use a heat plate put out by a company especially for reptiles. When placed under the aquarium it not only heats the glass but heats the towelling up nicely as well. I might also mention that I have had no feeding or burn problems using this heating method. Since the plate is outside of the tank the snake never soils it. In addition, the power cord does not get bent backwards and forwards when it comes to time to fit the lid on the tank thus extending the cord's, and, ultimately, the heating element's, lifespan.

In closing, I would like to add that with the method of husbandry I have described and in a collection of reptiles some 15 tanks at last count, my clean-ups get done sooner and in half the previous time. In comparison with all those sophisticated and high maintenance gadgets out there, I can't help thinking that simple is better.

*****

Editor's note. Alfred lives in Alaska and is the first subscriber from the United States to submit an article for publication in Snake Keeper. Let us hope that this is the first of many from our North American readers.



Above
A 38cm high aquarium set up with the basics for any ground dwelling snake. (Note the heat plate under the aquarium glass, positioned so that it can be used in and out of the hide box.)

Left
The author's Culebra (Clelia rustica), a very nervous specimen, sports a perfect nose thanks to the use of a hide box.

Photographs by A. Fleming

# What's Green with Black Spots and Lives in a Hole?

## (Answer: a Sucuri!! None the wiser, then read on?)

## by Mark O'Shea

"Quer capturar jiboia grande?"
I looked up from what I was doing, running a small colubrid snake of the genus Liophis through the rather out-dated dichotomous key to that genus in the Catalogue of Neotropical Squamata. Celio spoke again, this time in English, "Do you want to capture a big jiboia?"

Since jiboia is the Portuguese name for the boa constrictor and my purpose for being in Brazil was to capture snakes, lizards, frogs and anything else herpetological which came my way, I was certainly interested. I was approaching the end of a seven month period spent compiling a herpetological inventory of the 100,000 hectare Ihla de Maracá, an uninhabited and heavily rainforested riverine island (twice the size of the Isle of Wight) situated on a tributary of the Rio Negro in the Territorio de Roraima, that part of Brazil which extends north between Venezuela and Guyana. The project, a joint Royal Geographical Society/Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazonia venture, was the largest Anglo-Brazilian multidisciplinary ecological project ever to enter South America. I felt quite honoured to have been asked to join the RGS team as the herpetologist.

My questioner, a short, dark, bearded man who wore a brightly coloured woollen knitted cap, was Celio Valle, then a Professor of Biology from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais in Belo Horizante, Brazil and presently the head of ecological stations for the Secretaria Especial do Meio Ambiente, a sort of Brazilian Department of the Environment which controls all ecological stations and reserves such as the one where we were working on Maracá. Celio, a mammologist, had been walking back from setting a series of small mammal traps along the edge of the lagoon below the station when he had seen what he believed to be a very large boa constrictor and, sure that I would be interested, he hurried up to the laboratory, where I was by now becoming increasingly frustrated by my inability to determine the precise identity of the little watersnake, to inform me of his find.

I set off with Celio, not ideally shod for snake catching in flip-flops but believing we were only going a short distance to catch a jiboia, I did not bother to change into more substantial footwear. Outside the laboratory the evening was rapidly becoming night but there was a good moon so we would easily manage without a torch. Below the station there lay an extensive stretch of seasonally flooded savanna known as campo. Across this ran a raised man-made causeway connecting the station with the river a couple of kilometres away. On either side of the causeway were water filled borrow pits (a result of the building of the causeway a few years earlier) which served as seasonal lagoons, home to a wide variety of fish, amphibians, waterbirds and caiman and a good place to watch for occasional visitors such as peccary, deer, tapir or jaguar. Now, in early March, the lagoon was drying up as the dry season took hold and the original long stretches of water became a series of diminishing pools. The lowering water levels and trapped fish tempted the adult jacaré-tinga or spectacled caiman (Caiman crocodilus) to return to these overcrowded water courses.

For some reason I had understood Celio to say that the jiboia was near the station end of the causeway and I imagined it to be lying up in the leaves which covered the tree lined edges of the narrow roadway. I even shouted ahead to a group of scientists returning from the river to be alert and not to disturb the snake. They passed us saying that they had not seen any snakes on the path and could surely have not missed something the size of a large jiboia as they walked back to camp. I began to fear that the snake had moved off and that we would not be able to find it so I asked Celio how far along the causeway he had seen it. With his poor English and my poor Portuguese I finally discovered that he hadn't seen the snake on the causeway but lying in the entrance to a muddy hole in the drying lagoon bed.

We walked along the causeway for what seemed ages and then Celio suggested that we were near to where he had seen the boa so we moved silently down onto the mud-flat of the drying lagoon. As it was darker under the shade of the overhanging causeway-fringing trees I could not



*The drying Maracã lagoon by daylight* *Photo: Mark O'Shea*

*believe that Celio would find the exact mud hole again but with a confident "Aqui!" and a pointed finger he announced that this was definitely the hole in which he had seen his jiboia.*

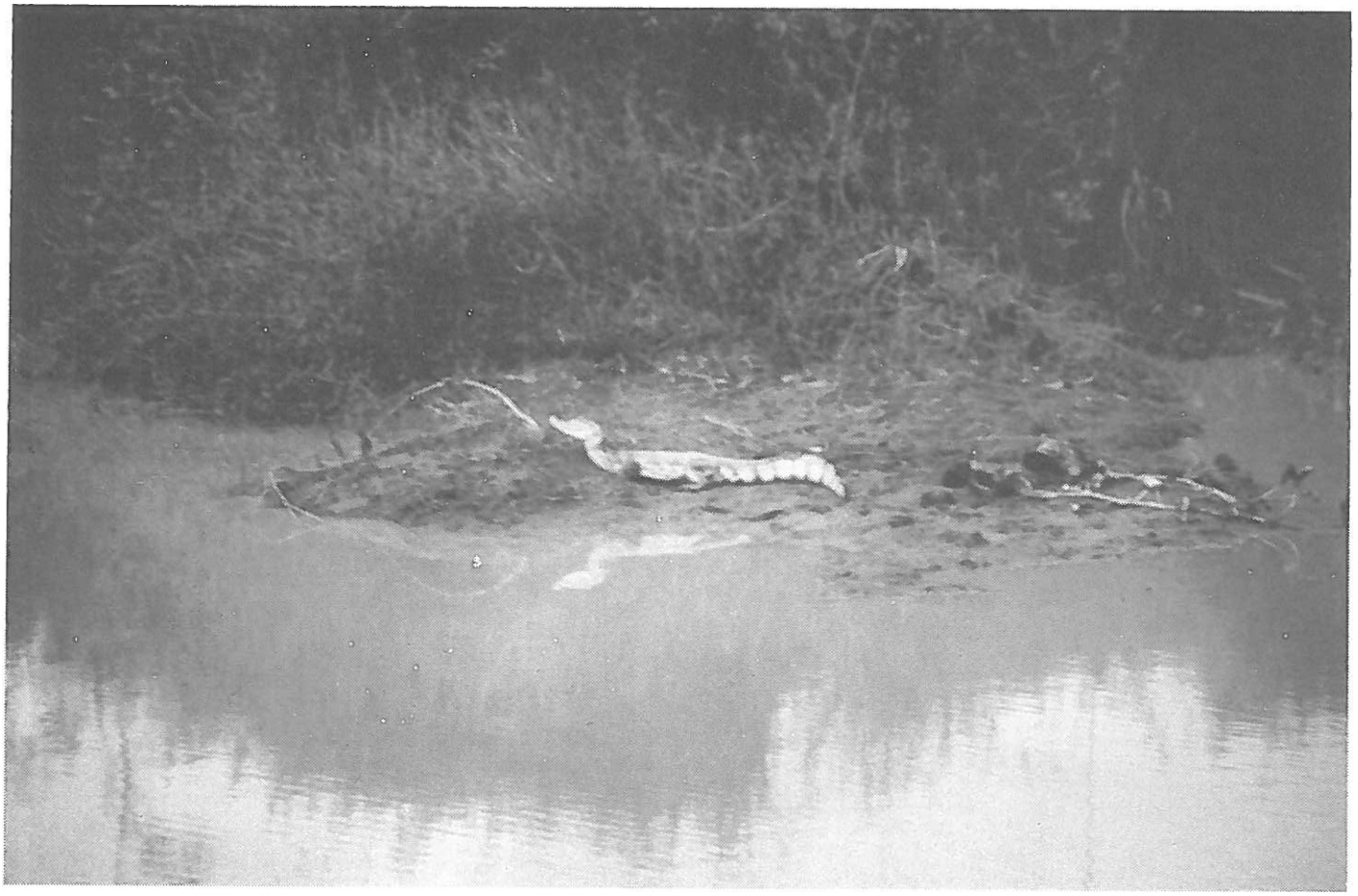
*No snake was in evidence and, it now being night, I considered that our quarry may have gone out in search of a slightly smaller quarry himself. Even so there was a possibility that he was still at home so with Celio leaning over me eagerly I thrust my right arm down the hole and felt about. Sure enough I felt the coils of a large snake and then my hand fell on its tail. Taking a firm grip I pulled and about 45cm of tail emerged from the hole. I was in for a surprise because rather than finding myself holding the expected chestnut to red-brown and black blotched tail of a boa constrictor, what I actually held in my hand was unmistakably dark green with large black ocelli. Turning to Celio I said "Isto nao está jiboia, está sucuri!" (This is not a boa constrictor, it's an anaconda.)*

*For some reason Celio did not want to help me any further and he moved rapidly away from the tail, the hole and me. To be fair that is a perfectly reasonable response to being told you are in very close proximity to a large anaconda which has just had its tail pulled, in a sticky muddy lagoon bed at night without the benefit of a snakestick or even a torch.*

*At that moment the tail gave a jerk which almost pulled me over as the angry sucuri decided to find out who or what was restraining him. However, unlike most species of snake which would glide up the hole to investigate the source of annoyance, this anaconda just punched its*

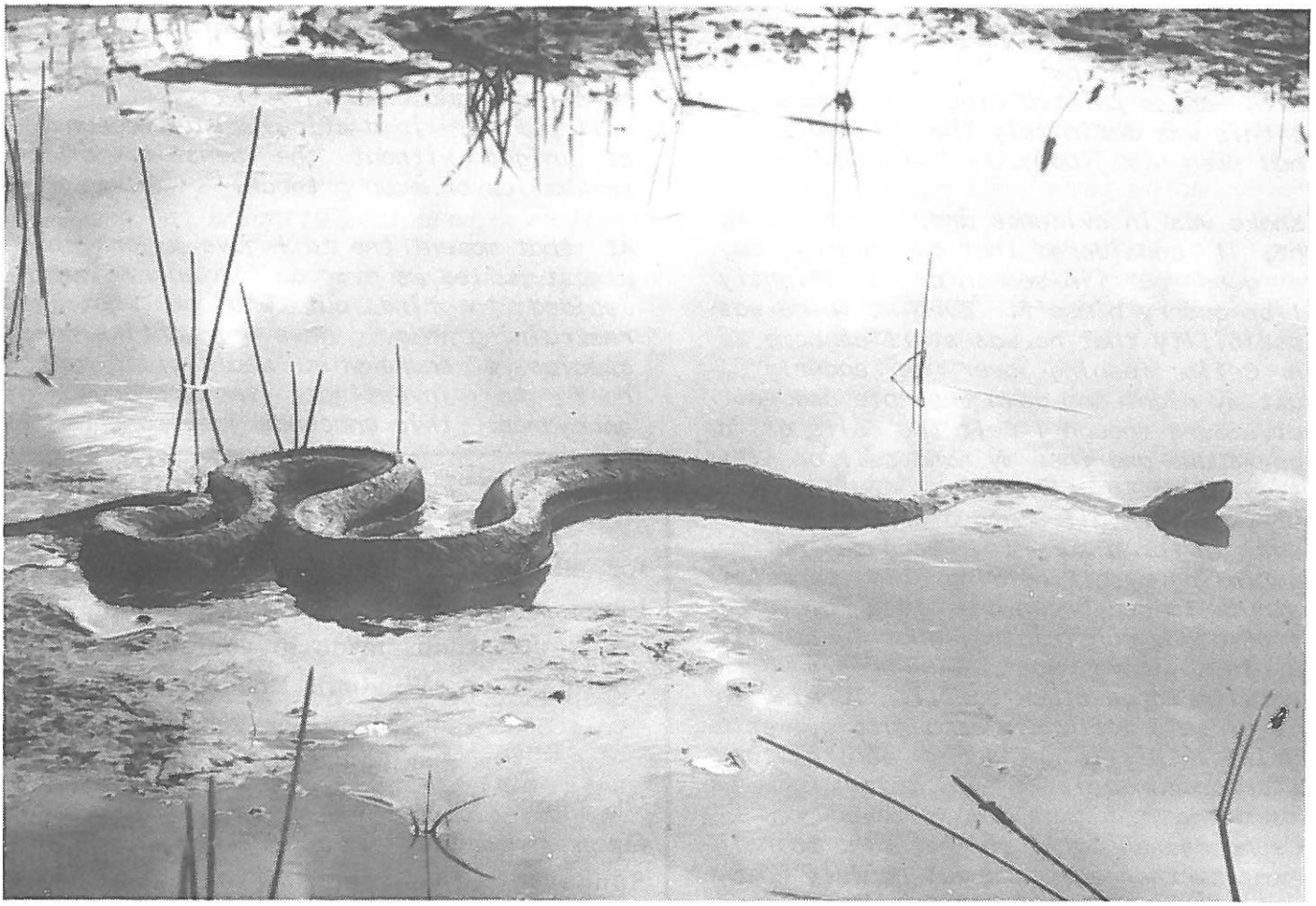

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*Above The lagoon is also home to a large population of spectacled caiman or jacaré-tinga*

*Below A Maracá lagoon sucuri or anaconda swimming* *Photographs by Mark O'Shea*



way through the mud of the lagoon bed in a way I can only describe as reminiscent of "The Creature from the Black Lagoon". When some 60 to 90cm of angry mud-covered anaconda stood, statue-like, before me I decided I had to either get out of the way pretty quickly or secure that large head before it worked out exactly where I was. Dropping the tail I dived for the head and neck and we went down into the wet mud. To be honest it wasn't much of a "fight", nothing on the scale of the anaconda wrestling I had seen on the television as a child, and I was soon able to restrain it safely and return triumphant, together with an admiring Celio, to the station (see front cover picture). Unfortunately when I arrived more important events than the capture of a mere sucuri had taken place, the evening meal of rice, corned beef and farinha had been served, and few people were very interested in my successful capture. After all, three metres was not large in these parts of Brazil but it was the largest one that I had caught during my seven months, the other two being only 210cm and 91cm in length.

Later, I released this and another anaconda into the clear water of the river and watching them swim away across the sun-dappled river bed was a satisfying conclusion. Maybe next time I go up to Maracá they will be a little bigger.

Incidentally did you know that anacondas "whoosh" like the wind? Well that's another story.

*****

Mark has been keeping snakes for well over twenty years and for almost ten years has been travelling overseas to search for and to photograph them. He is now involved in scientific research into tropical herpeto-fauna and has worked on every continent apart from Antarctica. In the UK he divides his time between writing up his research, lecturing and overseeing the Reptile Houses at West Midlands Safari Park and Knowsley Safari Park.

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# Reasons to be Cheerful?

## by Kevin J. Hingley

The recent vivarium heating/lighting debate has certainly brought forth numerous points of view from various quarters, not to mention the reaction to the taxidermy issue. However, the brief letter from P. Kite of Dyfed (Snake Keeper, Volume 3, No. 2) should make us all sit up and take note that somewhere out there are novices who rely on experienced herpetologists, not just snake keepers, to inform them through articles in the various publications now freely available how to look after their animals and, hopefully, eventually breed them. After all, most animal keepers consider their charges to be correctly maintained once breeding in captivity is achieved, although this need not always be the case as some keepers only have single specimens and unless these are hermaphrodites the chances of reproduction would range from zilch to miraculous.

When I began keeping reptiles twelve or so years ago I had no help from anyone during the first 18 months save a few friends who started keeping them a short while later. Apart from the few books my local library had to offer or what reading matter we could find on book store shelves we were on our own and had to learn the hard way. I didn't, in fact couldn't, find out if there was a club or society that catered for our interest until 1978. This was some 18 months after my collection had grown from a single Green Lizard (Lacerta trilineata), to two Green Lizards, two Curly-tailed Lizards (Lieocephalus carinatus), two Royal Pythons (Python regius) and a single baby Reticulated Python (Python reticulatus). I was doing well with the lizards but none of my snakes would feed because no-one had told me that handling them daily would disturb them and put them right off doing anything except starving themselves to death. Then, in 1978, we finally learned of the elusive International Herpetological Society - it did exist after all and was not just a rumour. What a godsend this turned out to be; monthly meetings, monthly newsletters, four journals a year and the chance to meet hundreds of other people with the same interest and with enough experience for us to find out where we had been going wrong. However, you can't hope to learn it all at once or hope to be successful with every species you keep but over the years

*the knowledge accumulates and ones successes begin to outnumber the failures.*

*I think P. Kite, and other newcomers to herpetology, are very lucky compared to those of us who began years ago and I am full of admiration for the professionals and amateurs before me who have, by and large, helped me and others like me to keep my animals reasonably successfully. By way of showing my appreciation I have tried for the past seven years to pass on the information I have gathered by writing articles and offering them for publication in various herpetological journals and, of course, Snake Keeper magazine.*

*The information is there for anyone who really wishes to find it and put it to good use but you should remember that someone else's theories may not work for you when you put them into practice. Although, generally speaking, most of the information offered in publications today is basically very sound it is sometimes a little condensed and generalised.*

*When it comes to vivarium design and building, heating and lighting, substrates and vivarium furnishings each keeper has his or her own ideas or they may simply follow another keeper's choices. I prefer to build my own vivaria from Contiplas (a Formica coated chipboard) because it is easy to work with, lightweight and strong and it can be easily cleaned. I also prefer to use light bulbs of a suitable wattage coupled to a thermostat or merely controlled manually by a switch. My budget doesn't run to 'state of the art' technology, besides which I've seen sufficient cases of serious burns caused by powerful spot lamps, ceramic heaters and tubular heaters to convince me not to use them. I build my vivaria as an upright block of individual cages of various sizes suitable for the modest collection of reptiles that I keep. My current set-up is 1.8m tall by 1.2m wide by 38cm deep. This unit is divided into five separate cages of the following approximate sizes; one of 120 x 60 x 38cm, two of 120 x 40 x 38cm and two of 60 x 40 x 38cm (l x h x w). The largest single vivarium is the bottom one and this is heated by a 60, 100 or 150 watt light bulb depending on the time of year. It is not thermostatically controlled but can be switched off if necessary. The cage above this is heated by a thermostatically controlled light bulb of 60 or 100 watts and this vivarium has an area of bottom heat supplied by the light bulb below which is placed centrally. The bulb in the second cage up is placed at one end and this provides a thermal gradient. The two cages above this are heated by light bulbs of 40 to 60 watts but only one is thermostatically controlled. The bulbs are placed at the sides creating a small thermal gradient and one cage receives bottom heat from the cage below. The top cage receives all its heat from the cages below it due to the rising heat although this is boosted slightly during the day when a fluorescent light is switched on. The cage temperatures range from 26 to 30 degrees C (78 to 86 degrees F) and all of my snakes (13 plus one I am looking after for a friend) and my Water Dragon all feed well and appear healthy.*

*Some readers may recoil in horror at my being a spokesman for light bulbs but I know that I am not the only one who prefers this humble and cheap form of lighting and heating. I for one believe we should all be able to keep our snakes and other reptiles how we please and if they are feeding, sloughing, defaecating and breeding then what is the problem?*

*To avoid any confusion as to how I have managed to house 14 snakes in only four*


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vivaria I hasten to add that, with the exception of three Royal Pythons, all of my snakes are housed individually in either a small aquarium with a ventilated wooden lid or in Hagen pet boxes. The Royal Pythons share a large vivarium and are separated and fed individually with no adverse effects as they are not frequently handled at other times.

My advice to the novices out there is read or better still buy as many books and other publications as you can before buying anything else to add to your collection. Always read up well in advance as to the requirements of the next particular species you would like to attempt to keep and try to buy captive bred stock as this is less likely to create problems. Buy or build the vivarium or vivaria that you both like the best and which suits your budget, likewise with heating/lighting. Keep the vivarium simply furnished and use newspaper for a substrate and set up a vivarium for a couple of weeks before placing any animals in it so that you are confident that conditions are right.

I always answer any letters sent to me seeking advice, as several people will testify, or you can telephone me. I look forward to hearing from anyone who may like to get in touch.

*****

Author's address: Kevin J. Hingley
22 Busheyfields Road
Russells Hall
Dudley
West Midlands
DY1 2LP
Telephone (0384) 457368

# Caring for your Human Owner

## by Ken Royale

Well fellow Royal Pythons, those humans have been writing about us so it's high time we wrote about them.

As you know, your human is one of the most ferocious species on Earth. No wild animal will approach them. They spend most of their time busily destroying each other as well as other animals for no apparent reason other than to kill. When they are not killing and at so-called peace they are always squabbling or bickering, even with their mates. As humans are impossible to live with, many of them keep other animals, including ourselves, known as pets. In our case, after a hard day's battering at a place called the office, it is nice to come home to a soft silky companion who coils around your arm. Now my Royal friends, all you have to do is lay your head on your human owner's chest and after a time its body rate will slow down to match yours, and it will relax.

Try looking your human straight in the eye. This has a remarkable effect on them. After a while your human will come to rely on you. Now is the time to gain control - try turning your head sharply away from him or her. This should result in whimpering and whining and noises such as "What have I done?" You can now try not eating. We can go for a long time without food but it causes great distress to our humans. Now demand to be picked up at the most inconvenient times possible. This will wear your owner down.

By now you should have gained control of your human and it may have found you a mate. You can now revert to being kind again. The humans have formed clubs to care for us and eventually we can take over the human race - much better than living rough in the wild! They forget that we have been around for a lot longer than they have. Happy human taming.

Ken

*****

Editor's note. Regular readers will know that Ken and his fellow Royal Pythons take care of artist and long-time Snake Keeper contributor Stuart Gray at their home on the Isle of Wight.

Royal Python enthusiasts can now subscribe to their own quarterly newsletter. 'Royal News' is produced by Lee Bowler and occasionally includes an article by Stuart Gray. Further information can be obtained by writing to Lee at Braemar, 28 Honor Road, Prestwood, Great Missenden, Bucks HP16 ONJ. Telephone (02406) 6328.

# LETTERS

Dear Snake Keeper,

Although the Letters Page is starting to resemble a battlefield I would like to put forward my opinions regarding hide boxes.

I have met Mr and Mrs Martin and purchased a Boa from them. Although their methods and opinions are somewhat controversial their results are impressive. I do feel, however, that snakes are much happier, thus avoiding stress, if they are provided with a secluded retreat. As for the snakes being too cool and unobservable, my personal solution to this problem is a solid, rectangular wooden box with a hinged lid. On two sides, using a jigsaw, reasonably large portholes are cut out as well as a large one on the hinged lid for extra observation. All the holes are then covered with wire mesh of a size suitable for the snake to be housed. The mesh allows a flow of warm air in and around the box which prevents the reptiles becoming cool or the air in the box becoming stale. The snakes feel hidden but are in semi-full view enabling the keeper to notice any problems with the snake's health.

I have one of these hide boxes in a large vivarium which is home to two male Boas. Should one of the snakes be due to feed and I find him in the box, I simply pop in a rat or other food item. This eliminates any stress caused to the snake by removing it from the cage every time feeding has to take place. If the snake on the outside of the box is due for a meal I simply lock the other snake in the box and feed the other animal outside the box. When the snake has finished eating I open the lid, fasten it back and the snakes can come and go quite freely.

Col G Pywell-Fox
Driffield

*****

Dear Michael & Lesley,

I would like to comment on the letter from C & M Martin (Snake Keeper, Volume Three, Number 5). There are several points I would like to cover with regard to their letter and the letters of other contributors.

1) In paragraph two of their letter the Martins imply that Mr Hingley says "As far more people use light bulbs this method must be better than infra-red heaters." Mr Hingley actually says "I have always used domestic light bulbs" and he goes on to say, "I also know of other herpetologists in my area who use the same methods as I do and they too have had more successes than failures." No mention of infra-red heaters (not even a hint of one).

2) In paragraph three of their letter, the Martins ask "How does a novice know which snakes need a photoperiod and which don't?" Now that is a good and reasonable question but the next line spoils what I thought was going to be good sensible information when they say, "We think that all snakes need a photoperiod." Where, may I ask, is the scientific back-up to this most confusing statement? What use is a lamp floodlighting a vivarium containing burrowing snakes or cave dwelling snakes and what about blind snakes?

3) With reference to paragraph five of the Martins' letter (the barbaric light bulb saga), I am sure that Mr Hingley has heard of heater guards but have the Martins heard of dimmer switches? No flashing lights just a constant glow and an even temperature. Much better still are the thermostatically controllable dimmer switches; again no flashing but simple dimming or brightening to maintain a constant temperature.

4) Paragraphs five and six (the hide box saga) contain a bit of a contradiction. First, the hide box is permissible but, presumably, only if you use light bulbs. This will eliminate the stress caused by the flashing lights but, hang on a minute, now that the snake is in a hide box it will no doubt become stressed because it can't come out. Now the novice is becoming really confused. As for the examples given of dead snakes and rotting eggs in the boxes, if this is a sample of the herpetologists in the Cheltenham area then they should not be allowed to keep worms, let alone snakes! A daily check inside the vivarium is no different to a daily check inside a hide box - it just takes a fraction more effort.

5) In paragraph seven of their letter the

Martins mention Chris Mattison's comments on their article. They say "We feel that most of his worry about the dull heat emitters was the problem of the thermostat." I have just read the article three times and still can't find the part the Martins are describing. Mr Mattison agrees with the Martins initially then slaps their wrists for misleading beginners and questions the reasons for their choice of infra-red heaters. He then condemns their system of overall flood heating as not as natural as they are indicating.

6) In Mattison's letter he invites readers to see his set-up. I have seen it and I am impressed. I will declare that I am not a supporter of the light bulb nor am I over impressed with the infra-red heater system of which I am a user. Infra-red systems are good for arboreal snakes and large vivaria. Light bulbs, to my way of thinking, are permissible for beginners. Who wants to pay £100+ for heating, lighting, timing and thermostatic equipment to house a £5 garter snake when the whole package could be done for less than £25 including snake and vivarium? If anything puts people off keeping snakes it is equipment costs and electricity running costs. Following the method used by Chris Mattison and the top breeders in the UK and USA I have just purchased a 12 metre Jemp soil-warming cable at a cost of £19.95p. This is rated at 150 watts and with this I can heat over 30 individually kept snakes. These cables come in lengths of 3, 6, 12 and 24 metre lengths and the wattage varies with the length. No thermostats are needed so I have saved myself at least £10. A full description of the system can be found in Chris Mattison's latest book. Read it, it makes a lot of sense and will save the pocket.

I hope that I have not been over critical, but here in the north of England a spade is a spade and not a shovel!

Yours sincerely, Malcolm Carruthers
Cumbria

Dear Sir,

I read with some amusement Mr and Mrs Martins' reply to the recent comments published in Snake Keeper regarding their article on the heating and lighting of vivaria. I cannot see how they have managed to interpret that I have implied that light bulbs are superior to infra-red heaters from my statement (quote), "I'm sure there are a greater percentage of herpetologists who use domestic light bulbs..." (unquote). This statement was drawn from the fact that I know more people who use light bulbs than alternative methods and was not intended to condemn those who use other forms of heating/lighting combinations - each to his own I say and what the dickens has that got to do with centuries old sailors, the edge of the world and Columbus?

I shall obviously have to board up all of the windows in my house now so that my snakes aren't exposed to a photoperiod. Of course they receive natural light during the day via a window but what about the night when it is pitch black outside? There is no photoperiod then as it is interrupted by a light going on and off and, as my cages operate on different thermostats, not all of the lights go off at once to plunge the snakes into complete darkness. They receive diffused light from the other cages whose lights are on at the time which has to be better than snakes which are plunged into darkness at the flick of a switch. My snakes must sleep as soundly as I do as none of us are affected by lights going on and off, and I sleep in the bedroom where all my snakes are housed - perhaps I haven't noticed because I'm a psychological wreck too!

It is hardly surprising that the Martins do not use hide boxes considering that most of their collection is comprised of large boids. Hide boxes for those would need to be a cross between a dog kennel and a shed. I have always with the exception of the time when I too kept very large pythons and boas, used hide boxes of some description. They are essential - snakes in the wild don't lie out in the open in all weathers and at all hours of the day. They need shelter from the elements and safe refuge, especially when they feel most vulnerable such as when sloughing.

'Nuff said Kevin J. Hingley
Dudley

Editor's note. Due to space limitations we are unable to print the letters from Malcolm Carruthers and Kevin Hingley in full. Copies of the originals are available on request.

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