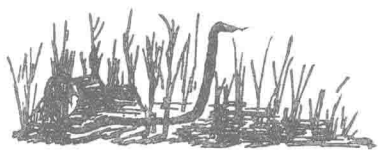
Carl Kauffeld

Snakes

AND SNAKE HUNTING



HANOVER HOUSE

Garden City, New York

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 57-6301

Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Joseph P. Ascherl

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Foreword

Some of my serious-minded colleagues may think it frivolous of me to chronicle my snake-hunting experiences, but it is a common failing of old hunters that they love to recount their former exploits on any pretext whatsoever. Such an inclination is only natural, for in this way they recapture the precious moments of their triumphs: the curtain of time rolls back, and old scenes and camp sites become fresh again in their memory.

I invite you to relive with me the scenes of the chase in southern swamps, in western mountains and deserts; to smell the aromatic smoke from a campfire burning live-oak branches, pine cones and Spanish moss; to watch a Carolina moon come up through moss-draped oaks; to sniff the fragrance of a swamp magnolia in the Jersey Barrens and to explore a swamp of white cedar; and finally, to share with me the excitement and thrill that is ours when we come upon our unusual game after hours or even days of dogged search—the rattler coiled in the trail or the rat snake resting on a tree limb.

The "old hunter" is prone to "pull the long bow," but however entertaining these tales may be, there has been no embellishment whatsoever. There is some suspense, much frustration, and often an ironical twist—all of which are considered good

elements in fiction. But this is not fiction. I have been as truthful as field notes and cherished memories of these events permit, and there are some observations, not recorded elsewhere, which might suggest subjects for serious study by students of herpetology.

Besides the satisfaction there is for me in relating these episodes of my field trips, it could help to dispel some of the misconceptions and fears harbored by most people where snakes are concerned. There are also some useful hints for those who have recently acquired a taste for snake hunting—that growing group of snake fanciers and young herpetologists. Some of the "old-timers" may enjoy drawing comparisons with their own experiences, and perhaps be led to record the highlights of their own days afield.

I do not feel that my snake-hunting stories, unlike tales of olden times, have to point a moral, but I believe they would justify being told if they help to develop a more healthy attitude in amateur herpetologists. If I can show that the pursuit can be an end in itself, that catching and placing the snake under restraint is often an anticlimax that brings little satisfaction—only oft-neglected responsibility—then I will feel that these tales have served a worthy purpose.

C. K.

CHAPTER ONE

The Natural History of the Hunter and the Hunted

The urge to hunt and collect is strong in most of us, but never stronger in any one group of people than in naturalists—the zoologists and botanists. However much they may be immersed in fascinating details of a research problem, none hesitates to cover his microscope, close the specimen jars, place the study skins back on the shelf, or whatever—gather up collecting paraphernalia, and take off to any region that time permits. Sometimes this might be for six months or a year, sometimes only for a long weekend. All of us have the same enthusiasm for "field work"—the anticipation of seeing the plants and creatures in their natural state, whether this be only a few miles from home during our "day off," or thousands of miles away on the other side of the globe. Usually the more remote the better. The attraction of the strange and unknown is undeniable, but there are still many thrills to be had close at hand.

The collecting of specimens is often the primary purpose of such excursions, whether in line of duty by the professional naturalist or merely for recreation, but even more important to the individual collector is the opportunity to get out of doors. As Washington Irving said, any change is welcome—

even if it's from bad to worse!—and in some instances it may be just that. The discomforts, not to say dangers, that some hunters will endure without a murmur are sometimes incredible, but I think an even more powerful reason is the strong desire within all proper naturalists to see the creatures which interest them most in the wild state.

A preserved specimen in a study collection has its undeniable value. The same may be true of the living specimens in the cages of a zoo, but there is no specimen like the one we come upon ourselves in its own environment, in its natural setting of plants and other animals that complete the picture of the "habitat niche." This is the sight that makes the hunter's heart beat faster, the thrill that hardly has an equal.

Many times I have been reluctant to catch a much sought-for snake or lizard, feeling that to remove it from its home would be sacrilege—like cutting an individual tree from a Corot. Finding the creature is enough. This is often a most difficult achievement in itself. Why carry it further? However, if there is justification for collecting the specimen once it has been found, we should do so, but we must be certain that our responsibility is fulfilled afterward, whether that be as a contribution to a study collection in some museum, a cage in a zoo, or even as a pet in our own home—provided we care for it adequately.

The bird observers have evolved the best practice and philosophy. Instead of shooting down their quarry with shotguns, as was done by all ornithologists in earlier times, collecting is now practiced only when specimens are required. It is true that the restraint of the "bird people" has been more or less imposed upon them by the restrictions of conservation laws. They have nevertheless been able to gain the greatest satisfaction from merely finding and observing the bird afield. Despite this elimination of a tangible souvenir of the chase,

the ornithologists number more amateur enthusiasts in their group than in any other natural-history pursuit.

If there are those among my readers who doubt that anything noteworthy can happen to a zoological collector in our own country, let me remind them that we still boast a good portion of the earth's wild areas, and that we possess one of the richest snake faunas anywhere in the world. All my narratives are of expeditions within the continental United States. The tropics have no monopoly of snakes. There are few—if any—places, even in the "snakiest" equatorial regions, where one can see a hundred snakes in one night, mostly venomous, as one can in Florida; or as many as twenty or twenty-five rattlesnakes in one day, as in New York or Pennsylvania.

And speaking of rattlesnakes, let me inform my non-herpetological readers that rattlesnakes are universally conceded to be among the world's most impressive beasts and, if we be permitted to verge on the sensational, our own, our very own, Diamondback Rattlesnakes are among the world's first four largest and most deadly snakes: the King Cobra, the Bushmaster, and the Fer-de-Lance are its only rivals. In addition, *personal* collecting in the tropics is reduced to a minimum. Professional museum and zoo collectors are often forced to employ natives to gather their specimens. The collectors set up clearing stations for receiving and housing the catch which is brought in to them. Usually the details of this tremendous task make it almost impossible for them to go about much themselves looking for special creatures or enjoying the charms of their surroundings. Only the permanent resident has the time to hunt without native help. We are the permanent residents of the United States, and to a herpetologist in India, a rattlesnake is every bit as "exotic" as a cobra is to us.

I have been chided at times for being overly preoccupied with rattlesnakes, and it must be confessed that the hero, or