



SNAKES
ALIVE

AND HOW
THEY LIVE



Snakes Alive

AND HOW THEY LIVE

BY CLIFFORD H. POPE

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS
AND INCLUDING AN ILLUSTRATED KEY
FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE
SNAKES OF THE UNITED STATES

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Ecology for Figs. 6, 8, and 9 of Vol. 16, No. 1, reproduced facing page 77 and following page 79.

Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters for Fig. 12, Pl. 56, Vol. 17, reproduced facing page 73.

Occasional Papers of the Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan, for Fig. 2 of Pl. 3, No. 287, and Figs. 1 and 3, of Pl. 2, No. 329, reproduced facing pages 72 and 105.

Publications of the University of California at Los Angeles in Biological Sciences for the illustration on page 60, Vol. 1, No. 3, reproduced facing page 105.

—C. H. P.

CONTENTS

I. A LOVER OF SNAKES	3
2. USEFULNESS	12
3. SIZE	19
4. AGE AND GROWTH	26
5. SENSES AND INTELLIGENCE	35
6. FEEDING	43
7. MORE ABOUT FEEDING	51
8. REPRODUCTION	61
9. LOCOMOTION	77
10. DEFENSE	85
11. ENEMIES	96
12. WHERE SNAKES LIVE	105
13. HIBERNATION	113
14. POPULAR BELIEFS	120
15. SNAKES AS MEDICINE	128

16.	SNAKE HUNTING	133
17.	SNAKES AS PETS	141
18.	VENOMS	152
19.	SNAKE-BITE AND ITS TREATMENT	163
20.	CLASSIFICATION	174
	APPENDIX: HOW TO IDENTIFY THE SNAKES OF THE UNITED STATES	183
	INDEX	227

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

THE RARE FOSSIL SNAKE "MADTSOIA BAI"	<i>facing page</i> 24
FOSSIL SITE (SOUTH AMERICA) OF "MADTSOIA BAI"	24
OLD PAINTING OF THE KING COBRA OR HAMADRYAD	25
WEIGHING A WESTERN DIAMOND-BACKED RATTLESNAKE	25
JOHN'S SEA SNAKE	32
A COMMON WATER SNAKE SWALLOWS A FROG	33
THE COMMON WATER SNAKE IS NOW REplete	33
MODERATE MEAL FOR A COMMON GARTER SNAKE	33
EASTERN RING-NECKED SNAKE NEST ON A BEACH	72
NEST OF FIVE EASTERN RINGED-NECKED SNAKES	72
"HALT!" SAYS THIS CHINESE PIT-VIPER	73
SMOOTH-SCALED GREEN SNAKE ON THRESHOLD OF LIFE	73
A STRIPED RACER FINISHES LAYING	76
BIRTH OF A COPPERHEAD	76
"HOW LONG IS A SIDEWINDER?"	<i>following page</i> 76
THE SIDEWINDER MAKES DOUBLE TRACKS	76
BOA CONSTRICTOR AS TIGHT-ROPE CRAWLER	76
GYMNASTICS OF A YOUNG BOA CONSTRICTOR	76
SPOOR OF A SNAKE	<i>facing page</i> 77
COMMON HOG-NOSED SNAKE MAKES TRACKS	77
YOUNG BOA CONSTRICTOR BRIDGES A GAP	80
PORTRAIT OF SCHLEGEL'S PIT-VIPER	81

HOW MANY SPECIMENS OF "IMANTODES GEMMISTRATUS"?	81
MR. HOG-NOSED SNAKE, PUBLIC BLUFFER NO. 1	84
COMMON HOG-NOSED SNAKE—DEAD OR ALIVE?	84
TEN INCHES OF BLUFFING HOG-NOSED SNAKE	84
THE BASHFUL HORN SNAKE	85
HORN SNAKE, BELLY UP	85
LOOK OUT FOR THIS PINE SNAKE!	90
"HISS—SS—SS!" SAYS THE ENRAGED PINE SNAKE	90
CHINESE COBRA SPREADS ITS HOOD	91
WEST INDIAN SNAKE—EXPANDED	94
CAMERA-SHY DIAMOND-BACKED RATTLER	95
DIAMOND-BACKED RATTLESNAKE, AROUSED	95
AUTOMOBILE, ENEMY OF SNAKES	100
MAN KILLS SNAKE	100
COMMON KING SNAKE—NOT A TRUE CANNIBAL	101
CALIFORNIA RACER KILLING RATTLER	101
DOES THIS MILK SNAKE DRINK MILK?	104
SNAKE OR LIZARD? (CHINESE "GLASS SNAKE")	104
SAND SHOVEL OF THE BANDED BURROWING SNAKE	105
BANDED BURROWING SNAKE, A DESERT SWIMMER	105
"CERASTES" VIPER BURIED ALIVE IN THE DESERT	105
DE KAY'S SNAKES IN CITY OF NEW YORK	112
COMMON WATER SNAKE IN WINTER	112
SNAKE DEN	113
CLOSER VIEW OF THE SNAKE DEN	113
BOY MEETS BULL SNAKE	132

THE INDIGO SNAKE MAKES A STUNNING PET	132
CATCHING A COMMON WATER SNAKE	133
BAGGING A SNAKE	133
PROPERLY INTRODUCED TO A CUBAN BOA	148
A PINE SNAKE STANDS ON ITS OWN FEET	148
BABY MEETS SNAKE	149
HOLDING A SNAKE	149
HARMLESS BEAUTY: THE ARIZONA KING SNAKE	150
DANGEROUS BEAUTY: THE SONORAN CORAL SNAKE	150
MALE AND FEMALE DIAMOND-BACKED WATER SNAKE	150
UNDER THE SKIN OF A PIT-VIPER	151
SNAKE TEETH	151
SKULL OF A GABOON VIPER	151
A PHILANTHROPIC WESTERN DIAMOND-BACKED RATTLESNAKE	162
MILKING A WESTERN DIAMOND-BACKED RATTLESNAKE	162
A SERPENTARIUM	163
MOAT OF A SERPENTARIUM	163

Illustrations in Appendix

FIGS. 1-3. TOP, SIDE, AND VENTRAL VIEWS OF BLACKSNAKE'S HEAD, WITH SCALES OR PLATES NUMBERED	page 189
FIG. 4. SECTION OF A SNAKE'S SKIN ILLUSTRATING HOW THE SCALE ROWS ARE COUNTED	191
FIG. 5. SECTION OF THE SKIN OF A KEELED-SCALED SNAKE	191
FIGS. 6, 7. ANAL REGION OF TWO SNAKES, SHOWING VENTRAL, ANAL, AND SUBCAUDAL PLATES	191

FIG. 8.	RUBBER SNAKE, TOP OF HEAD	199
FIG. 9.	RUBBER SNAKE, UNDER SIDE OF TAIL	199
FIG. 10.	COMMON HOG-NOSED SNAKE, SIDE AND TOP OF HEAD	200
FIG. 11.	GREEN WATER SNAKE, SIDE OF HEAD	203
FIG. 12.	PILOT BLACK SNAKE, SIDE OF HEAD	204
FIG. 13.	RED-BELLIED SNAKE, SIDE OF HEAD	205
FIG. 14.	GROUND SNAKE, SIDE OF HEAD	205
FIG. 15.	HORN SNAKE, TOP OF HEAD	206
FIG. 16.	RAINBOW SNAKE, TOP OF HEAD	206
FIG. 17.	GRAY SNAKE, SIDE OF HEAD	206
FIG. 18.	BULL SNAKE, TOP OF HEAD	207
FIG. 19.	PACIFIC BULL SNAKE, TOP OF HEAD	207
FIG. 20.	LYRE SNAKE, SIDE OF HEAD	211
FIG. 21.	SCARLET KING SNAKE, SIDE OF HEAD	213
FIG. 22.	PATCH-NOSED SNAKE, TOP OF HEAD	215
FIG. 23.	HOOK-NOSED SNAKE, SIDE AND TOP OF HEAD	219
FIG. 24.	CROWNED SNAKE, SIDE OF HEAD	219
FIG. 25.	CORAL SNAKE, SIDE OF HEAD	220
FIG. 26.	MASSASAUGA, TOP OF HEAD	221
FIGS. 27, 28.	PRAIRIE RATTLESNAKE, TOP AND SIDE OF HEAD WITH IM- PORTANT SCALES AND PARTS NUMBERED	224

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1

A LOVER OF SNAKES

SO FEW people like snakes that anyone who not only likes them but spends much of his time studying them is sure to be asked: "How did you come to like snakes and when did you first become interested in them?" Of all questions, I have had to answer the second of these most frequently; the first I cannot answer. My father says that when shown early one day a hole under our house and told that a snake had disappeared down it I spent the rest of the morning waiting for it to come out again. I was about five years old at the time and lived in the town of Washington, Georgia. When I was six we moved to Mt. Airy, a still smaller town in the northeastern part of the same state. My father had secured a fifty-acre farm with woods, peach orchards, fields, pasture, and garden. A stream flowed right across our land and along this stream I developed a love of snakes.

My earliest recollection of snakes at Mt. Airy takes me back to a walk to this stream with my mother. I killed a common garter snake, opened its mouth with two sticks, and said: "That's where its poison is." My mother's only reply was, "I'm sure it is harmless." Of course, she was right, but neither one of us actually knew anything about snakes, so we were glad to close the argument. My mother died soon afterward and I remember no other incident with snakes that involved her. The fact that I cannot recall that she ever said anything against snakes has always impressed me. She was sorry that I had killed the garter snake and was sure of its harmlessness, although she could not demonstrate her belief.

After my mother's death there was no one at Mt. Airy to encourage my interest in snakes. In fact, everyone discouraged or ridiculed or tried to frighten me. There was, however, one bright spot on the horizon; my mother's sister who lived in Savannah had given me a copy of Ditmars's *The Reptile Book*, and I was rapidly absorbing its contents. In spite of

this I always had a sneaking fear that Ditmars *might* be wrong or that I might make a mistake. This fear was strongest after one of my little snakes had nipped me. Then I trembled lest the bitten place really throb and swell and everyone say: "I told you so." My imagination would go still further and I could see myself deathly sick with the deaf Mt. Airy doctor shaking his head and all my friends telling how they had warned me over and over again. These fears always wore off rapidly and I would find myself on the way back to the stream to search for more snakes.

I was ever alone with my pets for few boys lived near us and no one of them shared my interest. Common water snakes were easily found on our place, so it was with these that I played chiefly at first. My initial bit of real success happened one afternoon. I had a small specimen in a wire-fronted box of my own construction. Rocks, sticks, and a pan of water were in the box to make the snake feel at home, and a lone tadpole hid among the rocks in the pan. While I lay on the ground in front of the box the snake crawled into the water. This pleased me greatly, for was it not a water snake? My gaze followed its movements. The tadpole remained motionless as the snake's head slowly approached. I was all agog; was the snake actually interested in the tadpole? No snake had ever eaten for me up to this time. My excitement increased far more rapidly than the distance between snake and pollywog decreased. Didn't the tadpole realize that an enemy was approaching? Although on the point of being touched by the reptile's snout the tadpole did not move. A mouth deliberately opened and closed; a few movements of the jaws and the tadpole had vanished. Apparently far more emotion had been aroused in me than in the victim. I rushed off to find somebody to tell. I soon found my brother and sister busy with a game and, suppressing my excitement as much as possible, I told them what had happened. They thought the incident worth hearing about, but neither wanted to see the snake and so I returned greatly disappointed. Nobody else in my world really cared about snakes—I would have to love them all alone!

One morning at six o'clock my father called: "Clifford, get up, there's a snake down here for you." Excitement ran through me as always at that word and I dressed with lightning speed. The sight that met my

eyes thrilled and warmed and chilled me all at once, for there in a box lay a shining ball of black and gold—a beautiful common king snake rolled up the way king snakes sometimes do when frightened. I couldn't take my eyes away from it, and eating breakfast was a trial. Life was wonderful with a brand-new kind of snake in my possession. There was a box to be made for it, food to be secured, its life history to be read about in *Ditmars*, and, best of all, there was the creature itself to be carried about in my pocket from daylight to dark. In fact I was so delighted with the snake that it was some hours before I stopped to learn how it had been caught. Our Negro cook, on her way to the cellar to get some stove-wood, had seen a snake halfway under the cellar door. She had seized its tail, slowly worked its body out, and got it into the box without hurting it or being bitten herself. Thus I had found a new and true friend! To this day I have seldom seen such a display of courage, for our cook was afraid of snakes, daring to catch this one only because she knew how much I would like to have it.

At the age of eleven I went to Tome School, Port Deposit, Maryland. My interest in snakes was perfectly fixed by then, and there I found boys who also liked snakes. The snake craze that developed finally required the most severe disciplinary measures to curb. It so happened that a railroad watchman only two or three miles from Tome caught snakes as a pastime and usually kept some at his watch-box. It was from him that we drew our supply until our dormitory had become a good place in which to observe and even hunt snakes. If the aged mother of the director had not lived in our dormitory, severe rules might not have been thought necessary. Anyway, the director was afraid that the sight of a snake might seriously frighten so old a person and we were told that possession of one in the dormitory meant instant dismissal. This merely forced us to keep our boxes out of doors and our snakes out of sight. No one ever knew how many got loose in that dormitory, but I recall that one visiting girl fainted at a school dance when a snake dropped upon her from some overhead decorations.

In the fall of 1915, at the age of sixteen, I went to Marienfeld Plantation, Dr. C. Hanford Henderson's outdoor school near Pinehurst, North

Carolina. There for the first time in my life my interest in snakes was unrestrained. In fact, during the spring I fear that I spent more time hunting and playing with snakes than studying. Davis Merwin and I made a cement pit which we bordered on three sides with boards and on the fourth with a large box. The resulting pen measured about six feet on a side and was securely covered with wire. Into it we put any and every snake that we could find and no one objected or made special rules to disturb us. Dr. Henderson himself often came to see our catch. He looked at the specimens with interest, but steadfastly refused to hold them; we were always amused at this and asked why he was afraid. He denied being afraid but we were never fully convinced. We had among other kinds common king snakes, blacksnakes, common water snakes, coachwhips, and a fine pine snake. One afternoon we found a water moccasin which we caught with some misgivings and brought back. It did not take us long to decide to kill and skin it. At the end of the year I took the whole lot down to a wild valley and watched them crawl deliberately away to freedom.

The same aunt who had given me *The Reptile Book* had decided to do what she could to enable me to become a naturalist. She had seen Dr. Ditmars and persuaded him to permit me to work in his reptile house in the Bronx Zoological Park after leaving Marienfeld. The very thought of doing this thrilled me beyond measure, and I wasted no time in reaching New York and renting a room in the Bronx. I had never before known anyone who talked seriously about reptiles and actually received money for working with them as the keepers did. Keepers Toomey, Palmer, and Deckert did everything to encourage my interest, and the days flew by. This summer at the Bronx was the turning point of my life, for not till then did I learn that an interest in reptiles could be pursued seriously.

This interest in snakes never waned during the years I spent in college, but I did not acquire very much new information about them there. Many of my friends had advised me to learn about other things as well, and doubtless this good advice had its effect. I spent two summers at William Beebe's Tropical Research Station, Kartabo, British Guiana, but as