

OBSERVATIONS ON GUNTHER'S GARTER OR CORAL SNAKE,
ELAPSOIDEA SUNDEVALII GUNTHERI Loveridge

By

JAMES ASHE

This is a small Elapid snake, which seldom grows over 2 feet in length, though occasionally specimens are taken over that size. In colour it is commonly blue-black with pairs of narrow white bars running round the dorsal part of the body. Sometimes the two white bars enclose a red, orange or yellow one. The stomach is a pearly grey. The head is not very distinct from the neck, the nose horizontally chisel-shaped, and the eyes small.

Gunther's Garter Snake moves in short sharp bursts, remaining perfectly still between each such burst. One has been observed stalking a frog in this manner, and the last lap of this movement terminated in a very fast strike at the frog. The frog in question was very much too large for the snake to have eaten. Stalking, however, is not the only way a Garter Snake is able to get its food. One in captivity actually caught a frog in mid-jump at a height of about four inches above the floor level of the cage.

The diet of the Garter Snake is very interesting. A. Loveridge - "A Guide to the Snakes of the Nairobi District" J.E.Afr.Nat.Hist.Soc. Vol. XVIII, 3 & 4, p. 97 (1945), reprinted March 1962. Page 17 (1)-records lizards eggs, and a skink has been removed from the stomach of one that was killed on the road. The skink was very much reduced by digestion, but it appeared to be a Riopa sp.

Several times I have experimented by placing a number of different reptiles in the cage with Elapsoidea, and have found they show a marked preference for small snakes, of which Aparallactus and Lycophidion seem to head the list of preferences. They, however, would not take a very young Dasypeltis scaber Linn.

When Elapsoidea takes a small snake, it usually gets a firm grip on the middle of its prey, and slowly chews towards the head, quite heedless of the bites it receives, and finally swallowing it head first. It must be fairly venom-proof, as when one found its way into a cage containing a Spitting Cobra - Naja nigricollis Reinhardt - it received a bite from a four foot specimen. It bled from the nose for over a week, but now, over two months after the incident, it is still alive and in quite good shape.

Other snakes seem to be aware of the snake eating tendencies of Elapsoidea, as once when I placed one in a cage full of Sand-Snakes, Psammophis sp., they became greatly alarmed, and remained much agitated for some time.

Some authorities say that after a short time in captivity the Elapsoidea becomes trusting and mild. This should not be taken seriously, as the following observations refer to a snake which I have had for some long time and first appears in my records on 4.6.62. but was captured well before that date. Other authorities maintain

that the Garter or Coral Snake cannot open its mouth wide enough to admit any portion of a human body. The marks at present on the top joint of my index finger, and the scores on the nail, adequately belie this.

Summary of observations on a bite by Elapsoidea sundevalii guntheri.

Weight	-	65.4 gms.
Length	-	64 cms.
Phase	-	White.
Condition	-	Good, but a little thin.
Last fed	-	About 2.6.64. Therefore well stocked with venom.
Venom	-	Neurotoxic.

James Ashe - Bitten - at 5.15 p.m. on 6.8.64.

Weight	-	159 lbs.
Age	-	39.
Height	-	5 ft. 10 ins.
Health	-	Good.
Immunity	-	Bitten by Spitting Cobra about 18 months earlier. Ineffectual bite, one fang only, the symptoms were slight. A number of bites from non Elapid snakes of low potency. Immunity can be considered negligible.

When replacing the Garter Snake in its case it bit the ball of my forefinger, striking and holding with both fangs. Not wishing to injure the snake, I lowered it to the ground and removed it. It was thus able to give me a full bite. I made a shallow cut and for a very short time sucked the wound, but realising that little was known of the bite of this snake, and also that it was unlikely to be dangerous, stopped sucking and took notes of the result.

- 5.15 p.m. Bitten, fang marks 7.5 mm. apart. Right index finger above top joint. The effect of the bite was immediate; a tingling sensation moved up the back of the hand, and a slight pain was felt in the forefinger and the lower joint of the second finger. The pain left the site of the bite at -
- 5.29 p.m. But was conscious of pain at elbow. By this time the finger was very stiff; had insufficient control of the right arm to be able to write clearly; Mr. Norman Mitton continued the account.
- 5.34 p.m. Discomfort felt at armpit.
- 6.10 p.m. Rode 7 miles home on motor-cycle and on arrival took a hot bath. No change in condition until -
- 7.30 p.m. A check showed the following:-
Finger, dull pain. Slight pain in armpit which became intense when arm was moved.

- 8.00 p.m. Right armpit appeared only half as deep as left; gland was very much swollen. Pulse in two counts - 86 and 89. Dull pain and severe throbbing in finger. Forearm normal, but upper arm very painful if touched. No apparent change in pupils. Breathing normal.
- 8.30 p.m. Acute pain in finger, also in upper arm and armpit when coughing, although swelling seemed to have subsided slightly.
- 9.00 p.m. No change.
- 10.00 p.m. Armpit slightly more painful.
- 11.00 p.m. No change, and a good nights' sleep.

7.8.64.

- 7.10 a.m. On waking conscious of pain in finger and armpit.
- 1.30 p.m. Forefinger and armpit slightly swollen and still painful.
- 11.30 p.m. No change but a feeling of discomfort rather than of pain.

8.8.64.

- 7.30 a.m. Site of bite just a little tender, slight stiffness in first finger. Observations discontinued.

The only other reference I can find of a bite from Elapsoidea appears on page 33, para. (5) of "Snakes of Southern Africa," by V.F.M. FitzSimons, Purnell, Cape Town - 1962., which reads as follows - "Contrary to the moderate swelling following after bites of Elapid snakes, a young European male experienced considerable pain and swelling, which extended from the site of the bite on the forefinger into the upper arm and armpit."

I, however, did not experience intense pain unless the arm was moved. The venom was very quick in its action, and the rapidity with which it spread was alarming. Although my arm was not unduly painful, I was unable to write after a very short time, which would seem to suggest that the venom secreted by Elapsoidea is potent.

In view of the experience described above, I would consider that a bite from this snake should not be taken lightly, particularly in the case of children.

(Received 8th. September 1964)