

ELAPHE CARINATA.

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INTRODUCTION

This large, strikingly handsome snake of China is somewhat of a rarity among private collections, and is only occasionally seen in small quantities for offer through retail outlets. As very little is written on the subject of Chinese snakes, apart from Pope's "The Reptiles of China" and a small book by Reitingner, I hope the following will be of interest to members considering *Elaphe carinata* as a part of their collection.

Elaphe carinata is an exceptionally heavily built snake for the genus *Elaphe*, reaching a length of about 2.5 m (Wall, 1903). A cross section of the body would reveal that the shape is far more triangular than the usual rounded form of other snakes of this genus.

To describe a general pattern and colouration would be somewhat misleading to the reader, as of the four specimens that I have seen, each has been distinctly different in colour and shade. Pope states that *Elaphe carinata* has been renamed no fewer than five times due to extreme colour and pattern variations.

DESCRIPTION

The following is a description of the pair that I obtained through an importer of reptiles. The eyes

are rather large and deep orange. The tongue is also orange, and the inside of the mouth is a very bright pink, and far more colourful than that of other species of *Elaphe* that I have seen. The head is of light green and each scale is heavily outlined in black creating the effect of a web. The first two thirds of the upper body is heavily flecked with green, black and yellow, not unlike the Florida Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getulus floridana*), the three colours forming dark saddles down the back, the remaining pattern to the tip of the tail changes dramatically to a single yellow dot in the centre of each scale outlined with black. The entire underside is of unbroken yellow. The two body patterns are so entirely different that when *Elaphe carinata* is coiled in a vivarium, it almost appears to be two different species sharing the tank.

The female is overall a lot darker and the underbelly is more lemon than the pale yellow of the male.

DISTRIBUTION

The species is confined to China and Taiwan, and is found mainly in mountainous areas and specimens have been observed at elevations of up to 2700 m. *Elaphe carinata* is also very common in grassland and fields on Taiwan (Maki, 1931).

OBSERVATIONS IN CAPTIVITY

Contrary to Pope's description of the species being docile and easily handled, I have found them to be nervy, unpredictable, and ready to bite if disturbed. They are very fast moving creatures, and their favourite trick seems to be to act very relaxed when removed from their tank and without warning, turn back on the handler and deliver a



Fig. 1. *Elaphe carinata*. Foto: C.A.P. van Riel.

very purposeful bite. They will also secrete a surprisingly foul smelling brown fluid from the anal gland if particularly upset. This fluid is a very unpleasant substance to get onto ones clothes as the odour is so pungent that the garment has to be well washed to rid it of the smell, fortunately this happens only on rare occasions, and if approached with care, I have found that they will usually tolerate the minimum of disturbance, although they always show a strong dislike of being handled.

Although a shy, secretive creature in captivity and emerging mainly at night, I have experienced no feeding or health problems with the pair that I own, and they will readily feed on dead mice or day old chicks if they are previously smeared with a little mouse blood or entrails. Food is rarely accepted while I am present and is usually consumed at night. Maki (1931) states that *Elaphe*

carinata feeds on snakes and one would be well advised to house separately from other species, although I have not personally witnessed any aggression between the pair when left with food, but have now taken the precaution of feeding separately.

BREEDING

I have no reference to captive breeding of this species and can only state that Pope (1929) claims them to be an egg laying snake.

CONCLUSION

Owing to the fact that *Elaphe carinata* seems to be available only in limited quantity through importation, one may be led to believe that the practice of snake being acceptable as a source of food in China could make the species more desirable to be retained for culinary purposes, whereas the smaller snakes of the same localities such as *Elaphe rufodorsata* and *Elaphe bimaculata* are often found to be imported in large numbers. This of course is only a personal opinion and may have no bearing at all on the scarcity of specimens.

I have recently been told by a Dutch acquaintance that *Elaphe carinata* is also considered a rarity on the Continent.

I would be very interested to hear from any members who have had experience keeping these interesting snakes and would very much appreciate any information on records of captive breeding also.

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