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## SOME EXPERIENCES WITH *BOIGA IRREGULARIS*

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CONTENTS: Introduction - The species -  
Sexual differences - Habits - Behaviour -  
Diseases - Epilogue

### INTRODUCTION

At the end of October 1988 I purchased some specimens of the Brown Tree Snake (*Boiga irregularis*), a snake I hardly knew and about which I was curious. I only knew that Renaldo Noordman had bred this snake, and I had seen some specimens at the snake exhibition Serpo, but I had not been able to see them well as they were hid behind some branches.

When they arrived, they appeared to be very slenderly build, elongated snakes, much more so for instance than the (in my opinion) much more handsome *Boiga dendrophila*. The colour was predominantly brown, with oblique dark crossbands along part of the body. The head was characteristically Boigalike: broad and round with rather large eyes and a vertical pupil.

In the following article I have gathered data found in older articles and some details about the animals which I kept for some time.

### THE SPECIES

The genus *Boiga* consists of about 14 species, most of which live in the woods of South-East Asia, e.g. *Boiga dendrophila*. Remarkably, there are also two species of

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*Boiga* in Africa and in Australia lives only one species, viz. *Boiga irregularis*.

*Boiga irregularis* is widely distributed in the Indo-Australian Archipelago, from which it migrated via New Guinea to Australia.

This happened presumably in the Tertiary Period, about 1 million years ago.

The species belongs to the larger species of the genus, having an average length of 1.25 to 1.5 metres and a maximum of about 2.5 metres.

In Australia *Boiga irregularis* occurs in the northern and eastern coastal regions. Common names are 'Doll's Eyes Snake', 'Red Tiger' and 'Night Tiger'.

The colour is variable. In Queensland predominantly brown, red or grey specimens occur with dark cross bands. In the Northern Territory white or yellow animals are found, with vividly red cross bands. In New South Wales the animals are mostly reddish or brownish with black markings or cross bands. From other parts of Australia specimens are known with still other colour varieties. The belly usually is yellowish to pinkish.

Some authors described a subspecies, *Boiga fusca*, which differs from *Boiga irregularis* in dentition. Others demonstrated however that these differences belong to the normal variation within the species *Boiga irregularis*.

The characteristic scalation is as follows: scales smooth; 19-23 middorsal rows (according to Cogger, 19 according to Zwinenberg); 225-265 ventrals (229-259 according to Zwinenberg); ana undivided; 85-130 subcaudals (Zwinenberg: 87-104), all paired. Average length 1.40 m; maximum length about 2.0 m.

Characteristic is the sharp edge of the ventral scales, like those of *Chrysopelea*.

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These snakes are back-fanged, with venom glands and elongated, grooved maxillary teeth under the eyes. According to Cogger, the venom would work strongly on prey animals. Zwinenberg mentions the fact that the venom of the smaller *Boiga* species is too weak to kill the prey, and that these species not only bite their prey but constrict it also. *Boiga irregularis* belongs to the larger species of the genus. For human beings the venom is not dangerous. There have never been reported cases of envenomation, but it would be wise to be careful with larger specimens (sometimes longer than 2 meters).

This species is oviparous. There have been reported clutches of up to 12 eggs, but usually the number seems to be 4 to 8. The eggs are usually layed in deep cavities. The young are 25-30 cm at hatching.

#### SEXUAL DIFFERENCES

I had three specimens. When I probed them, it seemed to me that they were clearly all males (probing to a depth of about 10 scales). According to some people females of this species probe very deep too, but I was not inclined to believe this.

I talked to Mr. Renaldo Noordman on the phone, whose opinion it appeared to be that the sex of this species can easily be determined by looking at the tail base, just like in rat snakes. With this in mind I examined a dead specimen, and it indeed appeared to be a male. The hemipenes were notably long and slender, somewhat like in the genera *Malpolon* and *Psammophis*. Of course I made some photographs of the dissected tail base on which this can be seen clearly.

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## HABITS

This snake is nocturnal and arboreal. Like all *Boiga*, they awake late in the evening when it is dark. They are active for about 2 to 5 hours a day.

In spite of this liking for climbing, *Boiga irregularis* often hunts on the ground. During the day it hides in hollow trees, rock crevices, holes and sometimes under stones. During the night they are often found on roads, profiting from the the heat of the hot surface.

In Australia, *Boiga irregularis* is often found at dawn together in small groups, gathered in hollow trees or crevices. In a hollow tree in eastern Queensland they found in 1972 20 to 30 specimens together, rolled up like a ball of spaghetti. They are also found in unused barns, hidden in the garret.

Food consists of birds, small mammals, eggs and lizards (especially geckonids).

As a result of its liking for birds and bird's eggs, it may happen that the Brown Tree Snake finds itself in the position of Winnie the Pooh after his visit to the rabbit: although thin enough to get into the cage, it cannot leave this after its meal!

## BEHAVIOUR

Cogger states that this species strikes violently when bothered, throwing its body in coils and lifting it high above the ground, which enables it to strike from some distance. Zwinenberg too calls its behaviour very aggressive.

This was not what I observed in my animals. These were indeed very shy, but there was never any aggression, not even when they

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were handled for medical treatment. Of course it is possible that Cogger encountered the animals in the wild when they were very hot. In their cage my animals never got any warmer than 30 to 32°C. During the first days my specimens tended to coil up in the back of their cage when they noticed an observer, drawing back their heads between the coils. This coiling up was the result of an extremely supple movement, the front and the back sides moving reversely. This reminded of the typical way of moving of *Malpolon monspessulanus*, or even of horn vipers.

The animals were almost always lying on the ground and not in the branches. I had noticed this with the specimens at Serpo. I have the impression that this behaviour was partially due to stress: they acted this way during the first days and later when they had been handled. Also, the specimen that became ill, kept lying on the ground during the last days of its life. Only at night were they active.

At the least sign of danger they retreated immediately. I always took care to disturb them as little as possible when they were feeding.

## DISEASES

One of the new specimens had many worms and a slight cold, presumably due to the transportation. For the worms I used Panacur. I did not treat the cold, except for the dripping of a little Biosol-M (containing neomycinesulphate) in its mouth to prevent an infection. The animals were kept warm. The cold passed off. The animal shed and started to feed on nestling rats. The smallest specimen did not start eating

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pinky rats before the beginning of December.

The daily temperature was kept at 32-34°C. During the night a ground heating kept the temperature at about 24-25°C. Under these circumstances the animals seemed to do well.

Specimen 2 was lying on the bottom of the cage more often than the others. On January 6th, 1989, the animal clearly had shedding problems: a hard and dry skin, that could only be removed through a warm bath. When handled, the animal seemed to have a lung problem (puffed up lung area, slackness). Later on it was lying with open mouth and some mucous secretion. The next morning it was dead. On dissection no parasites were found, but the stomach seemed a little discoloured and 'dirty'. Also, there were small bleeding point all through the body, especially in the fat corpuscles. I presume the death was caused by blood-poisoning due to a bacterial infection.

The other two animals were doing very well. Pinky rats were eaten regularly from a tray on the cage floor. The sloughings were excellent.

#### EPILOGUE

At the end of February 1989 I sold both animals to another snake keeper, as I had to 'reorganize' my collection.

#### LITTERATURE

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