

***CALABARIA REINHARDTII*, THE CALABAR GROUND PYTHON**

By: Paul Klein Kiskamp, Cleopatraadreef 285, 3561 RL Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Contents: Introduction - Obtaining specimens - Terrarium - Feeding - Peculiarity - References.

INTRODUCTION

As described by John van der Pols in 1983, *Calabaria reinhardtii* is a small python species from West Afrika with a distribution from Liberia to the Congo (Stimson, 1969).

In the past I have occasionally seen these snakes at dealers, but they have not been so common recently. In private collections they are rarely seen at all. Perhaps the reason is that, on their outward appearance, this species is not very spectacular. On the other hand, their behaviour is very interesting.

OBTAINING SPECIMENS

In september 1991 I found one snake at a dealers. It was on the point of sloughing and at the time I could only guess at its colour. This specimen appears to be a male. One month later I heard that a dealer in Belgium had some *Calabaria*. The animals I saw there were in a very bad condition but despite this I could not resist the temptation to buy them. In this way I became the owner of two more *Calabaria*. The length of these animals is between 60 and 80 centimetres, with a weight of 200 - 350 grams. The head is coffee-coloured and their are irregular yellow-brown to red-brown spots on their backs. From the colour it is possible to recognise which area they come from (Lehmann, 1971). The animals with red spots are typically from Camaroon, whereas the ones with yellow-brown spots are from the countries in the western part of the range. After examining all the animals I found out that they were infested with flagellates and worms. Probably, all the animals were from the same importation.

TERRARIUM

All of my animals are kept separately in terraria of different sizes. All of the tanks are arranged in a plain and sterile manner. The temperature is about 28-29°C by day and 22°C by night. They have a flat terracotta pot with an opening at the side as a hide-box and feeding place and an additional plastic container with sand. In addition, they have a piece of wood to help with sloughing and an artificial plant to help give them some security. In the beginning, they burrowed in the sand often but after a while used it less. After giving the animals some time to acclimatize I started to experiment with substrates. I started with leaf-litter that had been sterilized in a microwave to kill possible parasites. This was a nice alternative to the newspapers I had used until then. After a while, however, it seemed to be rather impractical because it was almost impossible to see or to remove faeces. It was also very difficult to check the cage after feeding, to see if there were any rodents left. These were the reasons to change the substrate for something new. As a second alternative I used peat. At first I did not sterilize the peat because I thought that the acidity would be enough to kill possible parasites but after a day I saw that the tank had become



Foto 1: *Calabaria reinhardtii*.
Foto P. Klein Kiskamp.



Foto 2: *Calabaria reinhardtii*, opgerold met kop verscholen tussen het lichaam, coiled up with head hidden between the body.
Foto P. Klein Kiskamp.

full of tiny worms, overnight. I then changed this peat for more which I did sterilize. The animals liked the peat as much as the leaf-litter because they could hide away.

FEEDING

After having treated the flagellates and the worms, I checked if the animals wanted to eat. In spite of my expectations, this did not give any problems at all. They accepted young mice and rats, although not too big. I also tried adult mice, although they were interested, this prey was simply too big for the snakes. Prey is usually accepted in large quantities: 5 or 6 nest rats is no exception. When I feed the snakes I first remove them from beneath the terracotta pot and place them somewhere in the cage. I then put the prey under the same pot. After a few minutes coiled up, the snakes begin to smell their prey and become interested. At this time they start to move around the cage in search of the prey. After coming back to the pot they find the prey and examine the situation before attacking the "nest". During the attack the opening of the pot is carefully blocked by the snake so that there is no escape for the prey. Usually the prey are constricted by being crushed against the side wall of the pot. In the meantime, the snake starts to eat the first prey.

During the peat period, all of the snakes stopped feeding. It is possible that, in nature, they have a fasting period, like *Python regius*. I was unable to make comparisons with previous experience or with other owners of *Calabaria*. During the peat period, one of my animals started to have feeding problems. A few days after I changed the leaf-litter for peat, this animal regurgitated the prey that it had eaten a few days previously. A possible cause could be that this prey was slightly too big. It is also possible that the dust from the peat produced an irritation, causing the animal to start regurgitating its food. This animal regurgitated its food several more times. Even after changing the substrate back to newspapers, it continued regurgitating, possibly as a result of enteritis which started after the first regurgitation.

PECULIARITY

Apart from strange feeding habits, this snake also has a strange defense behaviour. I think that its protective colouration is its best defence but if, in spite of this, it is attacked, the reason for its strange body-shape becomes apparent. Between the neck and the head there is almost no distinction, which gives the snake a plump outline despite its small size.

There is almost no visible tail, and little difference between the head and the tail. On the tail there are irregular white spots which attract the attention when the tail is in a raised position. The first reaction of the snake to a possible attack is to coil its body into a ball with its head hidden in the coils. If the enemy persists, it will be discouraged by striking movements of the tail. During such a feigned attack, the snake also hits the aggressor or holds it for a short time. I made this observation during a visit to a veterinary surgeon when one of the snakes was lying on the consulting table and an interested person wanted to touch it. This attack happens only rarely. After the incident at the veterinary surgeon's, I observed it only a few more times. On most occasions the snake will react passively to a possible attack.

I hope to be able to report on breeding results in the coming years.

REFERENCES

- Gartlan, J.S. & T.T. Struhsaker, 1969. Notes on the habits of the Calabar Ground Python (*Calabaria reinhardtii* Schlegel) in Camaroon, West Afrika. *British Journal of Herpetology*, Volume 4(8): 201-202.
- Lehman, Hans Dieter, 1971. Notes about the feeding and defense behaviour of *Calabaria reinhardtii* (Serpentes, Boidae). *Salamandra* Volume 7(2): 55-60.
- Pols, J.J. van der, 1981. Feeding habits of *Calabaria reinhardtii*. *Litteratura Serpentium*, Volume 1(5): 183-185, in Dutch, English summary.
- , 1983. Eggs of the Calabar ground python *Calabaria reinhardtii*. *Litteratura Serpentium*, Volume 3(5): 153-156.

Vertaling: Fons Sleijpen