

# EXPERIENCES WITH A FOOD REFUSING SNAKE



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## ■ THE COMMON EXPERIENCE

Nearly every snake-keeper has experienced this once or more: a snake that refuses to eat. This article deals with such a case. I am not saying that I took the right actions or that this is the solution to the problem, but it might be of any help to other snake-keepers encountering this problem.

## ■ THE SUBJECT

It concerns a *Lampropeltis getulus goini*, (Or *Lampropeltis getulus floridana goini*, I don't care too much for the precise name). In 1994 I bought a new-born couple of this species. From the beginning the male ate very well and continued to do so. The female however, stubbornly refused to eat anything. She had no interest at all in a living pinky, a dead one, neither from the freezer or freshly killed, in a wounded pinky, washed pinkies (dead or alive) or a multi-mammate mouse. Many non-feeding young snakes would have already taken something from this list, but not this stubborn

woman as she was already called.

Since she had to eat something, I tried to force-feed her. It worked reasonably well with mice-tails, but with pinkies it was a disaster. Firstly, her mouth could not be opened and secondly, a pinky could not be forced inside at all. When I returned her in her cage with a pinky in her mouth or partly in her throat, she spitted it out right away. Even after many attempts.

Finally the following treatments were the result, and not only the snake, but also I had something to swallow down my throat. Using a darning-needle (blunt ended) I carefully opened the mouth of the snake and the pinky was placed and clamped into the mouth. Using a pair of tweezers (blunt-ended!) the mouse was literally pushed into her throat until it had disappeared. After this the mouth was closed as good as possible until the mouse had moved a little bit into the direction of her stomach. Since this is not a task to fulfill for fun, neither for the snake nor for myself, I only did this once every two or three weeks and most of the time not even every three weeks. The snake hardly grew. I think that the stress the snake had to deal with took so much energy that the mouse was hardly used to grow.

## ■ THE SOLUTION

Meanwhile I continued with attempts to feed her normally. At a certain point I could borrow a panther-gecko to try something to do with it. After all, the diet of Kingsnakes exists partly of reptiles. Rubbing rinsed mice against this gecko was without any success. Also other kinds of geckoes gave no different result. Even pieces of these animals were not taken. Since in nature they also eat other snakes, I rubbed the mice against my other snakes or I packed them in a shedded skin (you have to try something!), but without any success.

The snake also needed help with the sheddings that occurred only sporadically. At that time, five months had already passed. She was dull and remained dull. She undertook no attempt to get rid of the sheddings and in the meantime she felt weak and apathetic. By wettening her the sheddings could be removed quite easily, except for pieces on her head. Since I already spend to much time with stressing this snake, it happened that two pieces of skin were on her head which should have already been removed. Finally, I took a piece of tape with not much glue on it and I removed the skin from her head. That worked very well. Sometimes I felt like giving up all these attempts. When she really does not want to eat, everything stops. Anyway, I continued since one never knows what will happen.

I kept on looking for other species of geckoes and I obtained a frozen gecko from Eddy Even. The only thing I know about this specimen was that it concerned a specimen from Chili, probably a *Liolemus*. I rubbed a pinky with a piece of this specimen and just put the pinky near the snake

with the idea 'this won't work either'. It was unbelievable, but the snake smelled the mouse and started to eat it as if she had not done anything differently before. It was incredible! Afterwards, every mouse was treated in the same way and

*Lampropeltis getulus goini.*  
Male (above) and female (below), both one year old



Photo: Eddy Even.

the snake did not hesitate at all to take the prey. I decreased the smell of the gecko gradually. After seven months she finally ate untreated mice. Now, she feeds even better than some of my other snakes.

Last autumn two Hognose Snakes (*Heterodon nasicus nasicus*) stayed with me. They only ate when they were irritated by tapping the prey on their head. This took quite some time. Also these snakes were offered mice treated with the above mentioned gecko and they were eaten without any hesitation.



Photo: Eddy Even.

*Lampropeltis getulus goini*. Female, one year old and eating well.

I will not claim that this particular gecko is the egg of Columbus. To my opinion there are many species of geckoes who can start a snake to eat and this specimen was one of them. I do like to point out that it is worthwhile to try different species of geckoes and not to give up to soon.