

EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES



WITH AN ADULT FEMALE BURMESE PYTHON (*PYTHON MOLURUS BIVITTATUS*).

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In May 1994 we obtained an adult Burmese Python. She measured approximately 5 metres, weighed 125 kg and had a midbody diameter of 50 cm (23 inches). She was then only 7 years old.

The former owner had bought her 6 years previously from a pet-shop. At that time the snake measured about 1 metre and was very aggressive. From the start she was frequently fed. In one year, for example, she ate 40 rabbits, 12 guinea-pigs and a couple of chickens. The snake was growing well and shed 6 times a year. After 3 years she was over 3 metres long and was getting fatter and tamer.

Python molurus bivittatus

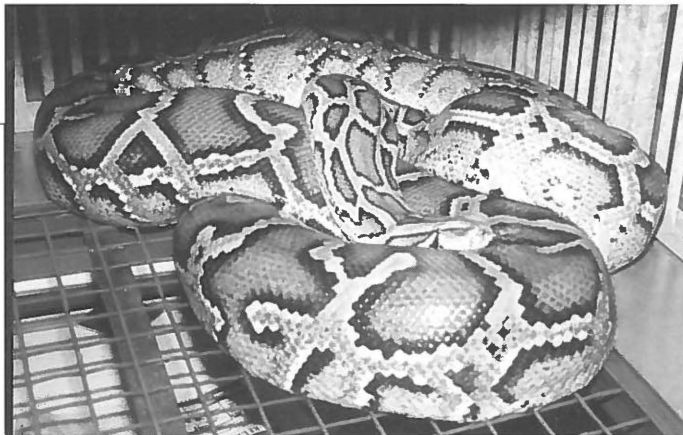


Photo by Marcel van der Voort

By the time she was 5 years old she had grown enormous and we could clearly see she felt a certain affection for her owner. But the handling and care of such a large snake was not without its minor 'inconveniences'. On one occasion the owner decided to hang the snake around his neck as he had often done before. After a while he experienced a severe pain in his chest and a visit to the hospital revealed that his ribs were bruised.

Her cage was constantly having to be enlarged. If she felt the urge to move around she simply forced the panels of the cage apart and slithered cheerfully through the house. After several escapes the police of Eindhoven demanded that the cage, and the room in which it was accommodated, be made escape-proof. Such a large reptile was after all a risk.

The owner regarded the large snake as his pet and treated her with a love and affection we have seldom seen in pet-lovers. The most remarkable occurrence we witnessed was as follows: When the owner scratched the lower half of the snake's back and rubbed her cloaca, she actually lifted her tail. If anyone else tried this, the snake would not react. She behaved very aggressively towards other people, hissing and thrashing about. The owner, on the other hand, could sleep next to

her without incident - something many people in and around Eindhoven were witness to.

One day the happy snake owner called us. After thirteen childless years of marriage, he had heard that he was going to be a father. From that moment on, the troubles began - for the snake. Because she was used to having free run of the house, the snake posed a threat to the future baby. That this threat was indeed real, is something that has been documented often enough. So there was nothing else to do but find a good home for the snake, which at this point had grown to about 5 m and weighed roughly 125 kg, as quickly as possible.

With one exception, zoos did not seem to be interested in such a large snake. The interested zoo would only take the snake if we could deliver her. Disappointed, we helped the owner to search further. We called four pet-shops that dealt with snakes but the highest bid was only 300 guilders - hardly enough for seven years of care and devotion. We knew a python breeder, who bred about 180 young Burmese Pythons a year, and thought he may well be interested in a beautiful and healthy female Python. He unfortunately found her too big and aggressive but felt for trading purposes she may be worth 500 guilders to him. Eventually Serpo, (a reptile exhibit in the city of Delft) put in a more reasonable bid but the owner, by this time bitterly disappointed by all these tiresome experiences, refused to part with her and almost sacrificed his marriage for the snake!

After serious consideration we decided ourselves to give the snake a home. We promised the owner we would never get rid of her and he was very happy with this solution. But then we were confronted with a few logistical problems: how do you transport an animal of such 'generous' proportion and how do you prevent an escape in transit? Three of us went to collect her,

still unaware of the mammoth task that lay ahead.

The four of us lifted the snake out of the cage and brought her downstairs. The sight of her lying fully stretched out in the livingroom made an enormous impression on us. The snake, however, stayed very calm and did not object to being handled. The owner again demonstrated how tame she was by opening her mouth for a quick inspection - something he did weekly. Finally we put the Python inside two double bed duvet-covers and transported her in the back of a big Citroën BX. When we arrived home we sat for two hours with the snake on our lap. She was still very calm.

We have now designed our own cage which measures almost 2 x 2m, with an approximate height of 1.8m. The bars are welded at 2 cm intervals and we have installed underfloor heating. Once a week she is given water from a bucket. Feeding is not a problem. She once ate about 50 kg of Flemish rabbits. After this discovery we have fed her on Flemish rabbits weekly ever since.

Now, two years later, we have ourselves experienced how large Burmese Pythons can show their attendants affection and recognition. We too have developed a particular bond with this special animal. It is a pity that these snakes are regularly bought by people who do not realise how large they can get, as the size they reach often has dire consequences for the snake. In the end they are dumped, however well they feed or healthy they may be.

Translation from Dutch by Pedro Jansen.

English corrections by Graeme Blem.