

# IS IT A MALE OR A FEMALE?

*J. Van Tessel,*

*Tijmstraat 3, 3551 GK Utrecht, The Netherlands*

Determining the sex of young snakes is generally not an easy task. Usually there is little or no reliable sexual dimorphism and 'popping', which is only allowed with newborn snakes, can also easily lead to a wrong conclusion. 'Popping' is a technique in which the tail of a newborn snake is bend slightly upwards while at the same time gentle pressure is applied at the base of the tail with the thumb which is slowly rolled upwards. If the animal is a male two hemipenes may appear. However, if no hemipenes appear this does not mean that the animal is not a male. Therefore this method is considered unreliable to determine the sex of a young snake.

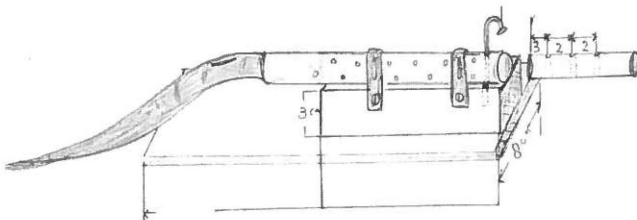
Probing is a second method to determine the sex of (young) snakes and is generally considered to be much more reliable. In probing a small blunt rod, lubricated with petroleum jelly or an aseptic oiment, is inserted in the cloaca at the base of the tail. Then the probe is gently moved toward the end of the tail. It may be helpful to slowly turn the probe between the thumb and the first finger when it is inserted. If the animal is a male the probe may be inserted into one of the inverted hemipenes somewhere between the sixth and the ninth subcaudal scale. In a female the probe may only be inserted as much as two or three subcaudal scales.

It will be clear that all this should all be done with great care. The big problem however, is that most snakes will not stay perfectly calm during the whole procedure. The more the snake will twist and turn the bigger the chance will be that something inside the cloaca may get damaged. It would be a big advantage if the snake could be held still during probing. I believe I may have found a solution for this.

Based on the instrument I described earlier to aid in force-feeding (J. van Tessel, 1997) I believe that the following instrument may be a big help in determining the sex of (young) snakes.

Take a plastic tube (suited to the snakes girth and length) and attach it to a piece of wood. If you use an transparent tube this will have the advantage that when you handle a venomous snake you will always be able to see the head. Put some small holes in the tube to allow the snake to breath. To prevent the snake from crawling to far down the tube use a round piece of wood as a plug. By drilling holes both in the tube and in the wooden plug you can easily lock the plug in the tube at any desired depth and make sure that the cloaca of the snake stays outside the tube. This way the snake is immobilised and you can now easily and safely (which is quit important in the case of a venomous snake) insert the probe to determine the sex of the snake.

I have used my limited drawing skills and I hope that the accompanying drawing will visually supplement what I have described above.



## ■ LITERATURE

- Van Tessel, J. (1997). *Force-feeding. Litteratura Serpentina* 17: 15-17.

*Translation to English by René van der Vlugt*