



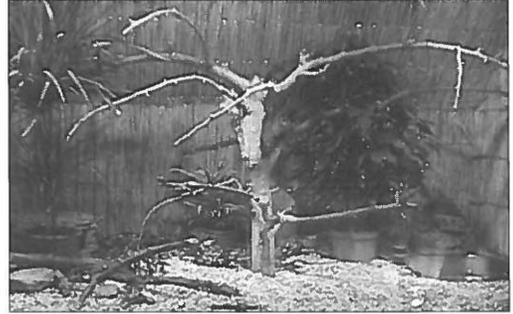
THE VIRUS : 'A SNAKE KEEPING PASSION'

J. Ramaker, Simonshaven.

Since my twelfth birthday I have kept snakes as my hobby. I am now 40, and have had this tremendous hobby for 28 years. It was a cousin of mine who passed the virus on to me. He had an enclosure in which, among others, he kept beautiful coloured day-geckos. After that first encounter I was hooked.

My father built my first enclosure based on a construction drawing from 'Wat houd ik in mijn terrarium' ('What do I keep in my terrarium'), a book by Mr. Aleven. In this book we found everything about sizes, materials to use and construction. The enclosure was made of wood, the front and right side were of glass. On the left side was a door with a glass window in it. By removing the top, which contained the lights and some gauze, you can also gain access from above. It measured 1.0 x 0.5 x 0.6 m (wide x deep x high), and was put in a central position in my room in the attic.

From my desk I couldn't see into it because it was behind me. This was of course to keep me from getting distracted while doing my homework. I kept various animals together, blue tailed skinks, wall-lizards, an ordinary gecko and tree-frogs. Later on I



gained a red cheeked turtle for which I had to reconstruct the enclosure. The plants that used to be on the floor were raised, so the turtle wouldn't eat them.

Several years later my previously mentioned cousin bought himself some garter snakes. I visited him and fell in love at first sight, but it took several years before I bought one myself. When my parents had double glazing installed I asked the crafts men to cut the old glass into suitable sizes so I could build a new enclosure. They did and I then constructed a full glass enclosure, 0.6 x 0.4 x 0.4 m and finally bought a garter snake. At that time we lived in Spijkenisse and the nearest place to buy reptiles was at Mr. van Mourik's. First in the attic at the Noordsingel, and later at the Noordplein. I've had years of pleasure with my snake but strangely I felt more attracted by lizards.

At the age of 28 I left the house to live on my own (kind of late but building your own house takes some time in order to save enough money). I had a drain built in my living room so the wet part of my enclosure was directly connected to the sewer system. Lizards and frogs went in and I enjoyed myself.

Three years later, the building urge started again and I built a snake enclosure in the book case. I bought a garter snake and 'due to a miracle' it gave birth to 9 young after a couple of months. Unfortunately I only managed to keep one alive. At the time I did not have many books and had trouble feeding the juveniles. But seven years later I still have those two in my living room.

The large cage in the room was replaced about 6 years ago by a smaller one that fits precisely behind the glass kitchen door. You can see the entire glass front of the enclosure through the open door. The rest is made of solid wood so it matches our decor. The back of the cage is styled with PUR-foam and is painted. This creates a rocky impression.



In this cage I have again, created an aquarium section with goldfish and roaches. As we noticed the day-gecko's that fell into the water couldn't get themselves out and the chameleons didn't live more than 6 months, I decided to move on to the real thing. I'd read in 'Thieme's Terrariumgids' about the ball python, a relatively small, easy to tame snake. A tradesman in Schiedam also contributed: he handed me my first large snake to hold. I loved it. Before long, on the Queen's anniversary (1995), I bought myself a beautiful baby snake at Reptilia in The Hague.

She indeed was very easy to handle and extremely tame, my children had no problems holding her. She moved into the large cage in the living room. From that moment on the desire to keep snakes began. I joined the 'Tilburgse Terrarium Vereniging' and the 'Europese Slangenvereniging' and bought some books to read.

One year later I bought a baby *Boa constrictor*, again at Reptilia. This one I placed in the attic in the old cage from downstairs. During the Christmas holidays 96-97 I divided a large playing room in the attic into a bedroom for my eldest daughter, and a study for me. I had long foreseen that this would create a large cove in my study in which I could place some big cages. The cove was 1.80 m wide, over 2.00 m tall and 1.00 m deep. In there I built 2 enclosures with glass fronts. The other sides I covered with reed mats. The water bowls were connected to the drain. In the upper I housed the boa and in March 1997 I bought

an *Epicrates cenchria cenchria* privately which went in the other one.

Reading about snakes I felt the urge to maintain pairs. That's why I bought a male *Python regius* at Dragons in Breda in August 1997 and at the expo in Houten a *Boa constrictor* and an *Epicrates cenchria cenchria* of the opposite sex. Unfortunately the Rainbow boa died in February 1998. Two visits to a specialised vet in Rotterdam couldn't help. The cause was unknown.

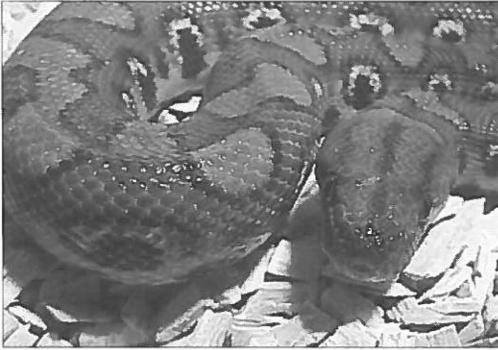
If you have counted so far you can confirm I've got seven snakes at this moment. Five of these (originally six) I have bought in the last three years. That's why I titled this piece: 'The virus :A snake keeping passion'.

The eldest boa is currently 2 years of age, weighs over 6 kg and is 1.75 m long. All snakes eat and grow well, though the Rainbow boa has had a cold for some time and this worries me. He does eat well but you can regularly hear him 'peep'. Increasing the temperature to 35 degrees Celsius has not helped.



All of my snakes are tame, and I regularly handle them without any problems. I believe the feeding of the snakes is easier than the feeding of lizards and frogs, for which I always had to buy maggots and crickets and this became very costly. My wife also got tired of the noise of escaped crickets under the fridge. Now I breed my own food; mice and rats. For that purpose I created 12 cages in the garage. I've got 8 breeding females and 1 male. Every two weeks I alternately put one or two females with the male. This way I can precisely cater for the needs of my animals. I only feed the ball-pythons mice. The largest one doesn't like rats but he can be tricked into it by being fed a mouse first. The youngest boa is really voracious. At this point I feed it 3 sub-adult rats every week and I get the impression it would like another 3, though it doesn't get them. During the last May holiday I built a new enclosure, on top of my computer cabinet: 1.5 m wide, 0.6 m deep and 1.0 m tall. Again in my study, but I am having trouble deciding what species to put in, it'll probably be carpet pythons.

Because of my mid-grade math-teaching in Spijkenisse I have the opportunity to make children acquainted with my hobby. Each year at the hobby afternoon I've got a table and lots of public attention. During the yearly week of action for a good cause, children can get their picture taken with a boa or python for NLG 4.-- or 5.--. With these I've collected NLG 1,950.-- in the last 3 years. I have even interested a couple of students in this wonderful hobby.



As soon as the students are interested I first advise them to buy or borrow a book and think about the consequences of buying a snake. Some of them decided to go further and this leads to making new friends. For example: exchanging books and above all, chatting about snakes. In the shop I regularly visit, Jungle Corner in Rotterdam, I occasionally see students and former students.

I hope I've been able to make clear to you that I'm crazy about our hobby and maybe you recognise something about the 'virus' aspect of it.

*Translated from Dutch by Henriëtte Bakker
English corrections by Lawrence Smith*