

THE SNAKE OBSERVED

Marilyn Nissenson & Susan Jonas

From Snake charm, page 90-91.

As the North American continent was colonized from the Atlantic to the Rockies, explorers came across peoples, animals, and plants that no European had ever seen before. They often recorded what they saw in journals and in paintings so that the Europeans and, later, the settled colonists on the East Coast could share their excitement. To disseminate these images more widely, their

works were reproduced as prints, engraved and bound in books.

Mark Catesby (1682/3-1749) spent ten years in the colonies, first as a traveler and collector, then as a commissioned scientific recorder and painter. In 1712, he arrived in Williamsburg to explore the surrounding region and to gather specimens and seeds, which he shipped back to England. He returned with sponsorship in 1722 and spent four years collecting and painting along the Eastern seaboard and in the Bahamas. He ran into trou-



'Vipercaudis minor', hand-colored etching by Mark Catesby in his The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands, vol. 2, plate 42. London, 1743. From: Nissenson & Jonas, page 96.



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ble when sailors opened jars of his animal specimens and drank the rum in which they were preserved for the voyage home.

While working in South Carolina, Catesby came up against many rattlesnakes, one of which was eighteen feet long. In a letter to a friend during the winter of 1722-23, he recounted a close call:

A Negro woman making my bed, a few minutes after I was out of it, cryed out a Rattle Snake. We being drinking Tea in the next room, which was a ground flore, and being surprised with the vehemence of the wenches bauling, went to see the cause, and found, as the wench had said, a Rattle Snake actually between the sheets in the very place I lay, vigorous and full of ire, biting at everything that approach'd him. Probably it crept in for warmth; in the Night; but how long I had the company of [the] charming Bedfellow I am not able to say.

Catesby tried to dispel folklore and myths about snakes. His sponsors insisted he send back plants reputed to cure snakebites, but he understood that the severity of a bite depended more on the location of the wound and the species of snake than on any remedy. *'Where a vein or Artery is pricked by the bite of a Rattle Snake,' he wrote, 'no Antidote will*

avail anything, but Death certainly and Suddainly ensues sometimes in two or three minutes, which I have more than once seen.' He also observed that the Indians 'know their destiny the minute they are bit; and when they perceive it mortal, apply no other remedy, concluding all efforts [to be] in vain.'

Catesby attacked other herpetological apocrypha. He said he had never seen, anything to support the belief, common to Linnaeus and others, that the North American rattlesnake bewitched birds and squirrels with its eyes so that they fell from the limb of a tree into its open mouth. He also denied that the tail of a water moccasin was as deadly as its head or that a 'coach-whip snake' could rip a man in half by the lash of its tail.

In the 1730s, Catesby made etchings of his watercolors of plants and wildlife, which were eventually published in *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*-the first general work on American flora and fauna published in English. He also wrote the text and, in the first edition, hand-colored most of the rints. In the book's preface, he wrote, 'As I was not bred a Painter, I hope some faults in Perspective, and other niceties, may be more readily excused.' Catesby's modesty was unwarranted; his work was unmatched for nearly a century.