

BOOK REVIEW

**ROBERT TWIGGER,
BIG SNAKE. THE HUNT FOR THE
WORLD'S LONGEST PYTHON.**

London, 1999. ISBN 0575066288. Price: £ 15.99.

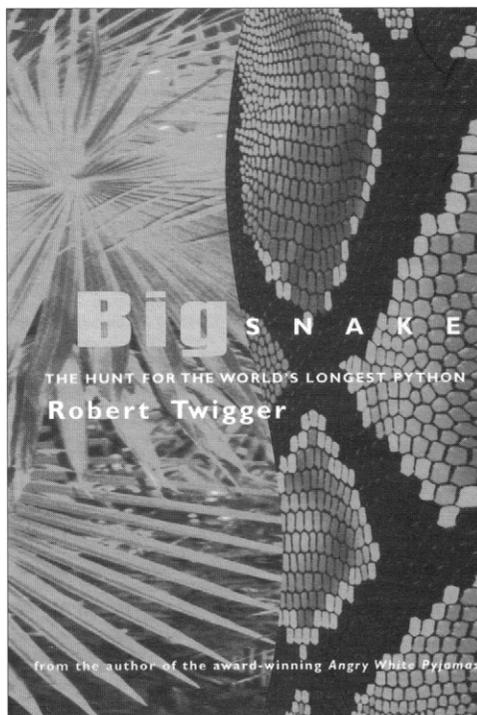
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*Never go to look for snakes.
Wait until they find you!*

C.J. Ionides

Man's imagination has always distorted the dimensions of giant snakes. What zoo would not be proud to parade a 30 or 40 metre long python? Despite all of the old story's about gigantic monster-like snakes the expectations of the maximum lengths, are to the contrary more realistic these days. There are still huge rewards waiting for the person who catches a living snake of 'only' 30 feet (± 9 metres) or more. The Zoological Society of New York (Grzimek VI, 451), has promised \$5,000, whilst the Roosevelt Prize is \$ 50,000. As none of the prizes have been awarded, it seems that the size of around 10 metres is pure speculation, let alone that there could be longer snakes.

Robert Twigger – not particularly a snake enthusiast – had by chance heard of the Roosevelt Prize. And because his wedding was approaching, he decided to round off his bachelor life by making an attempt to capture the world's longest snake and claim the prizes. He studied in depth herpetology and came across the story from Plinius, over which I digress, further elsewhere. His journey did not lead him to South-America, to the biotope of the anaconda's. Someone had let him know that although there were long snakes there, these were mostly heavy ones and certainly not long enough for his purpose. So he



Cover of the book Robert Twigger:
"Big snake. The hunt for the world's longest python".

directed his attention to the area where the *Python reticulatus* could be found. He had read some very interesting information about this species. Those who know about the heroic fights, that the Ancient and Brazilian snake catchers had to put up against the giant snakes, will find it rather courageous that Twigger, with a limited number of guides and seemingly very poorly equipped, set off into the Malaysian and Kalimantan jungle.

Big snake is about more than just the quest, the adventure of a hero, in search of the world's longest snake. *Big snake* is especially about the people. During Twigger's preparation and also during his





search, he had the indispensable support from numerous people. Beginning with the sympathetic Ernie Theford, snake attendant at Howlett's Zoo, right down to the comprehensively described advisors, the host families and the guides in Malaysia, on Kalimantan and Buru. Twigger comprehensively described all these people, just as he did with their 'biotope' and their daily chores, which they had in plenty of. With the exception of the passages that directly concerned the search for the world's longest snake, *Big snake* includes a number of elaborate, anthropologic side roads, that Twigger also had to follow, including a murder investigation in the jungle at Long Dao, to a cocktail party, at which Miss Revlon Asia was present. This also produced a most interesting story, though many snake enthusiasts will only resume interest in reading, as Twigger finally heads back into the bush.

Twigger had a special departure from his bachelor life. In passing he had told me interesting and intriguing information. He often gave me extra and additional information, about various subjects, which I had heard from different sources, or that gave a nice variation, although in my mind these were not all considered as the 'latest developments' in pure herpetological terms. Here I've picked out some passages that I have underlined in my copy of his book:

- Nicotine is a suitable substance to kill snakes (page 24). From time immemorial there were stories circulating, that human saliva could be deadly to snakes. There are reports from travellers, where it is said that snake charmers used the special effect from their saliva on their animals. Aggressive snakes become from one second to another, apathetic – even cataleptic – after the charmer had spat in their mouths (Keimer, 51; Van der Voort, Literatuur, 143-146).
- Anton van Woerkom informed me, in another context, about a possible explanation for the 'effects of saliva' that Prof. dr. L. Brongersma had told him. This herpetologist from Leiden (the Netherlands) used to go snake hunting for the National Museum in Leiden, to increase their collection. He ascertained that his native helpers used a simple method to capture and perform euthanasia on the snakes, without damaging them. They chewed a piece of tobacco and placed this in the mouth of the snake. She then died quite quickly from nicotine poisoning. The notion that if someone chews tobacco and then spits in the snakes mouth, can cause a temporary paralysis from the animal, from the quick absorption of nicotine (a nerve toxin) through the mouthmembrane, is easy to believe. It is possible that a similar result can be achieved by chewing other sorts of herbs.
- *Python reticulatus* is amongst other things, known for its ability to swim across oceans. After the devastating volcano eruption from Krakatau in 1888, the first to inhabit the island were yet again from these species. To reach there they had to cover hundreds of miles of open oceans (page 74).
- It's well known that snakes can go for a long time without eating. But I was still impressed that Twiggers information, again confirmed that a *Python reticulatus* had gone a remarkable 679 days without food (page 75). Twigger had said that this capability is most welcome, if you're a snake that has an ocean to cross.
- For as long as man can remember, there have circulated stories about snakestones. Snakestones (also called bezoar and draconites) are stones that some snake species carry around in their

head. To possess such a stone was no small matter and demanded a certain ritual. This had to be removed from a living specimen, otherwise it lost its effect. The effects were such, that if you laid the stone on a snake bite for two or three days the venom was sucked out (Ameling, 102; Egli, 22; Van der Voort, 35). In former days some had used this to combat the effects of dropsy (Van der Voort, 101). Twigger also mentioned the snake-stones (page 81). A native tried to palm him off with one and told him that the stone was made from concentrated snake venom and that it would become a glowing red colour if a snake should approach its vicinity (there is a bezoar to admire in a glass showcase at the Boerhaave-Museum in Leiden (the Netherlands)).

- Just as intriguing, are the continuous stories about milk drinking snakes. That suck the milk from a cows udders (the ancient 'boa', supposed to live in early days in Calabry, in Italy, got its name from the Latin word 'bos' that means 'cattle'. These snakes are supposed to have drunk the cows dry and then devoured them after. In this manner they could wipe out complete herds – Van der Voort, 56-62). Twigger (page 106) mentioned that a witness claimed to have seen snakes drinking from goats udders. For the 'milk drinking' snakes, he gave the possible explanation, that after a venomous snake is milked, they can be given milk to help them regain their strength. He put this down to sympathetic magic. Milk is a problem for the digestion process for snakes and sometimes they refuse to drink the milk, even when the snakes are not given water. Nevertheless in many cultures there is some talk of milk offerings to snakes, this varies from tribes in Africa, Hindus in India, to snake handling believers in the United States (la Barre, 23 and note 10).

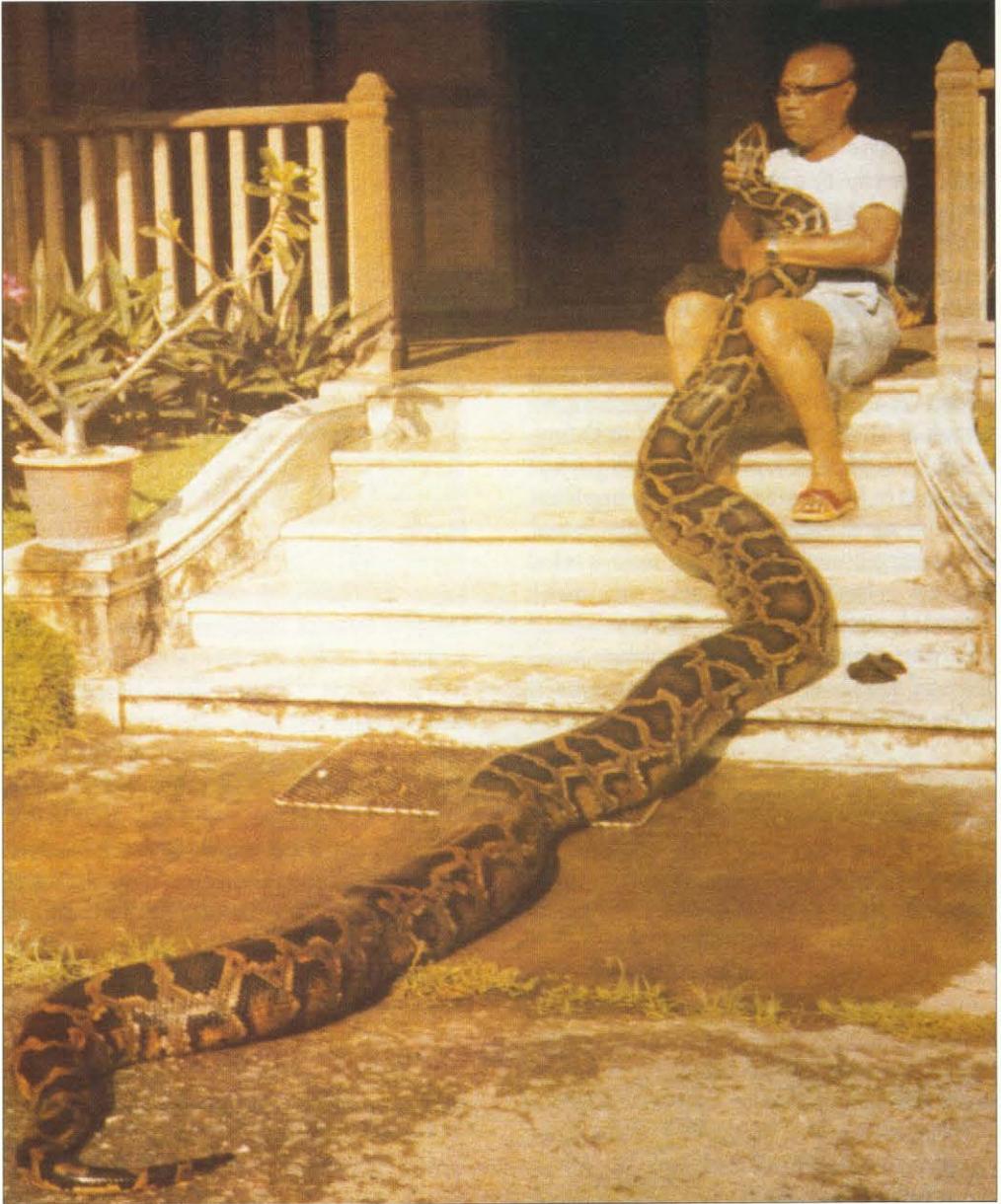
- An old cowboy trick in the Wild West was (maybe still used) to lay a ring of human hair around the camp. This kept the snakes away, or so they thought because snakes do not like to crawl over hairy obstacles. In reality, according to Twigger (page 24), the snakes will avoid a reasonably protected camp because they do not like the odour from people.

After Twigger's searches had drawn a blank at a number of places, he left for his last expedition on the island of Buru. Somewhere, there must be a really large snake to be found. A guide did indeed bring him to a giant snake, which sat in a hill. The snake was not to be tempted in to devouring a special prey and in the end, the unlucky hunters had to dig up half the hill and still came to discover that this was an impossible task.

Twigger had to go back home before he had seen the world's longest snake, let alone catch one. Even so, his quest was not wasted because it is true, that he had not found the snake that he was looking for but he had in any case found himself. Once home he received telegrams that mentioned that his Indonesian friends had caught a Python, that came close to the required length. Twigger could not really return and it seemed that his friends on Buru were stuck with the dangerous problem of a decent length in their house. The reward from the Zoological Society as well as the one from president Roosevelt are still available...

It is indeed not nice to read here and there in *Big Snake*, about the sort of things that happen to snakes in Asian lands. In the jungle, people have to put their hunger first, even if that means eating snakes. If this is not necessary, they have simple methods to get rid of them. Picture a living *Python reticulatus*, a container, petrol and a match? You





*A Python molurus bivittatus as a pet of a businessman in Bangkok.
From: Engelmann en Obst, Mit gespaltener Zunge (Leipzig, 1981), page 194*

may have often seen broadcasts from Discovery and National Geographic, where parts of snakes are used because of their healing properties (Even, 114-115). I myself possess a recording where the bile is removed from a living snake, after it has been 'wound up' by a mongoose. Snake blood also has medicinal uses, it is especially renowned for its quality to increase 'potency'. In the streets of some large Asian towns you can find specialised restaurants and brothels that, as neighbours, form a remarkable symbiosis.

Twigger has a pleasant and sometimes a rather ironic manner of writing. His wide use of the vocabulary, meant that I did not always feel like looking everything up in an English dictionary, so in my translation I gave the overall meaning from the passages instead of translating it word for word. *Big snake* is not a handbook on how to keep large snakes and - which I had already mentioned in passing - is also not a book with recent information in pure herpetology terms. This is still a nice book for those who are interested in snakes and in people.

Translation: Marjon Jaskers
Corrections: Mark Wootten

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