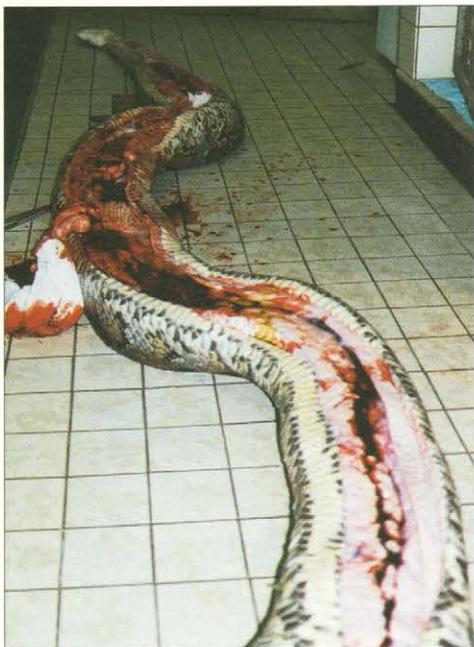


RABBIT KILLS TIGER PYTHON

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When we first began to keep snakes (about nineteen years ago), the idea was, that someday we would have a pair of tiger pythons in our collection. At the snake day in 1994 we saw a pair that seemed suitable and for a reasonable price. They were a captive bred pair from 1994, which were also heterozygous for albinism.

Once we were home, we placed the snakes in a terrarium that we had ready. This was a terrarium of 100x60x60 cm, fitted out with lighting, something to climb on, floor heating and a water dish that was so big, that the snakes could lay down in it.



Python molurus bivittatus: The start of the autopsy.
Photo: André Robben

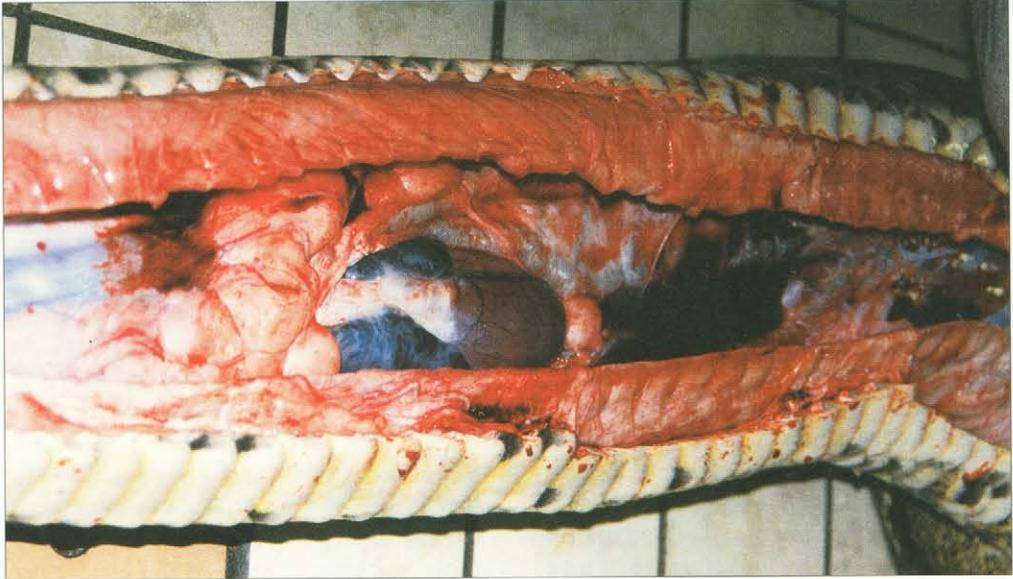
In the beginning we gave the snakes full-grown mice and then later this became rats. We breed the mice and rats ourselves, so we were in control of the type of food that the mice and rats got. After about two years we went over to rabbits, that we also bred in the beginning. By then the snakes were already moved to two separate terrariums of 250x100x100 cm each.

Breeding rabbits ourselves, worked out more expensive than buying them in. So until mid 1997 we bought rabbits from people that needed to get rid of them, or people that breed rabbits for pleasure. There were times that we could not always find rabbits, until we spoke to a large rabbit breeder who assured us that he could always deliver the rabbits, even during Christmas if we needed them. So from mid 1997 we started to give our pythons rabbits from this breeder.

Our female python began to grow at a great rate that year. The male on the other hand, often refused his food. Now and again he found a large rat more than enough. We fed the female a large rabbit, ordered from 'our' breeder, every two weeks. She grew like wildfire and was often aggressive with hunger, despite the regular feeding. That year we decided to cool her off for a winter sleep. She was very large and thick. Given her weight a winter sleep or pregnancy should be no problem for her.

We made sure that she was 'empty', lowered the temperature and dimmed the light. The cooling took about four weeks. After a few weeks of building up the temperature we placed her back with her partner. The female showed great interest in the male, he found her also interesting but did not understand what she wanted. This was a strange situation, the female tried to stimulate the male instead of the other way around. She tried everything, with the end result that the male laid down in the corner passively. Her follicles were swollen and also her cloaca but still

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Heart and lungs embedded in fat. Photo: André Robben

nothing happened. Eventually she gave up. For the male this was the signal to start. Suddenly the situation was turned around, he tried to seduce her. Finally they began mating but this was much too late.

At first we thought that the female was pregnant because she suddenly began to eat like there was no tomorrow. We had once called her aggressive but this was much worse. Around the time that the books said that she should lay her eggs, she was gigantic. Monstrously fat. After waiting awhile, it appeared that she did not have any eggs inside her but she suffered from fatty degeneration. So this meant a diet. Every four weeks she was fed with a rabbit of about 3-4 kg. At the end of 1999 she went into her winter sleep at 26-27° C, at half her previous weight. After a while we brought the temperature slowly up. After this, our male knew then what he had to do: mate.

We kept an eye on our snakes during and after their winter sleep. This also included the pythons. Several times during the day we looked in to check that everything was going okay. We began to give the snakes food, only when they began to move around normally. The female was almost back to normal. One Sunday afternoon we had checked her on several occasions and discovered nothing unusual. She reacted as we moved around outside the terrarium but was still not very active. We checked her early in the evening and again around ten o'clock. Everything was fine both times.

She laid peacefully and moved now and again, to make herself comfortable. Every now and again she stuck her head against the glass, from where we fed her. Before we go to sleep, we do the rounds along all the animals, including the pythons...

That night we saw something awful. The whole terrarium was covered in blood, it seemed like a rabbit had been slaughtered in the terrarium. There was a blood clot in her mouth as big as a liver. Her breathing gave a rattling sound, as bubbles came out of her nose. Shocked I (André) opened the terrarium and lifted her head up. At the time there was one question in my head, what has happened in here? It took a few moments after discovering this to come back to reality. Just as I was about to phone the vets to put her out of her misery (it was obvious that she was dying), she gave her final breath.

It was not until the following day that the fact that she was dead hit us. But how? Because of the costs we decided not to carry out a post-mortem. As far as we could see she died from a lung haemorrhage. For this reason we offered her to a vet, you do not see a python of almost 6 m that weighs 80 kg every day!

He turned down our offer. So we called his colleague and asked if he could dispose of the snake. We borrowed a trailer from the company and dropped the snake at his practice. There we found a vet, who had, during his study, found the chapter about reptiles interesting, but had never had the chance to follow this up. This vet was even more curious than we were to find the cause of death and suggested to conduct a small autopsy- for free!

He gave us the opportunity to be present, armed with a camera. The autopsy took around one and a half hours and confirmed our suspicions, a lung haemorrhage. But also something else. The snake suffered from an abnormal build up of fatty tissue. Her whole body was full with lumps of fat! Her liver was hidden between the fat and also her heart. Her lungs were also yellow. Cause of death:- a lung haemorrhage brought about by an abnormal build up of fatty tissue.



What's left of the lung. Photo: André Robben

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When we got home we could still not make heads nor tails of it. Why did she die this year? She was a lot fatter last year! She lost so much weight this year and it was only now fatal? It took an hour before all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. As you think logically, the fatty degeneration lies with the food. Next question: what did we feed her? Rabbit. Eight week old rabbits. The rabbits that we regularly bought from our supplier were ripe for slaughter and all that in eight weeks! Next question: how do you get a rabbit ripe for slaughter in eight weeks? Answer: special food. Food that brings them up to weight in eight weeks. Suddenly a lamp began to go on. Just as livestock are fed hormones to bring them up to weight, then this must be the same for the rabbits in this case. But the body cannot break down hormone produced fat on its own. Putting the snake on a diet caused the snakes body to become disoriented. The 'bodies' waste products were probably contained in the fat and were

released and caused a general poisoning of the snake. Reptiles do not lose much weight during the winter sleep and maybe this was the last straw. This could be one of the reasons why she grew so quickly and grew so heavy. In comparison our male snake remained a very lean specimen, he never really wanted rabbit.

We wrote this account because we hope that no one will make the same mistake. In this case the rabbits have killed the beast of prey in the end. It cannot be stated enough, be careful in future, what you feed your animals. We hope that every reader realises that 'our' rabbit breeder had supplied the market with 10,000 rabbits... for our Christmas dinners!

Translation: Marjon Jaskers

Corrections: Mark Wootten.



Close-up of abnormal amounts of fatty tissue. Photo: André Robben