

# BOOK-ABSTRACT

## THE GREEN TREE PYTHON & EMERALD TREE BOA THEIR CAPTIVE HUSBANDRY AND REPRODUCTION

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### CORALLUS CANINUS; A NATURAL HISTORY

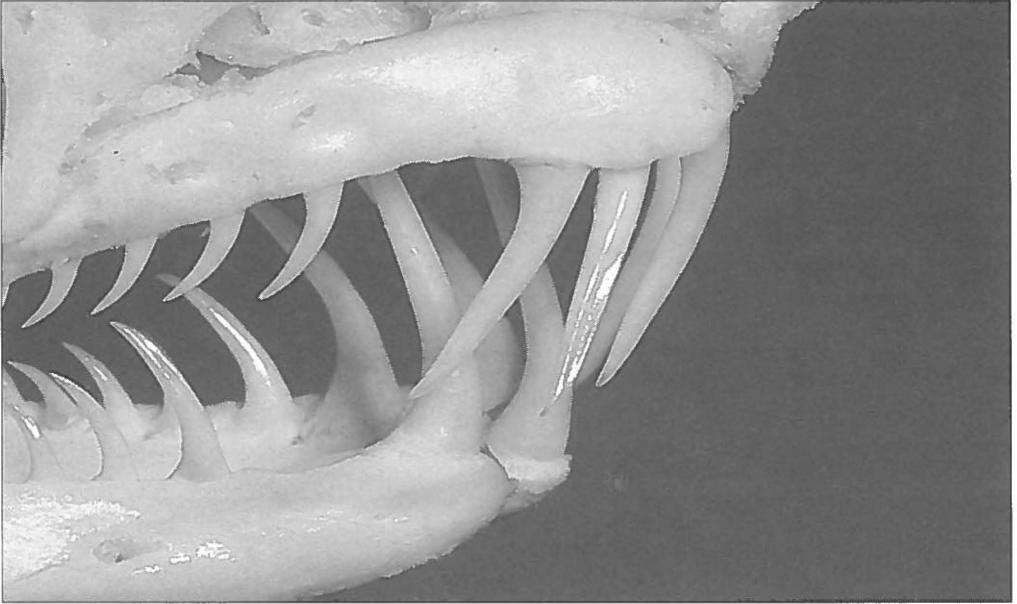
living almost exclusively in canopy foliage the Emerald Tree Boa has also been recorded 'basking' on the ground in bright sunlight (DUELLMAN 1978) an unusual pastime for a nocturnal animal! Although often found alongside rivers, this may be an anomaly of collecting as these linear routes are often used by the Emerald hunter. Another supposition, arising from the ratio of males to females found in importers holding rooms, is that the latter is commoner! This could be because gravid females are more valuable and therefore imported before males in times of glut. It could be that females spent more time at lower levels in the canopy thus being easier to catch. Captive breeding data would suggest however that sexes exist in equal ratio.

The most recent available population density data estimated by SCHULTE (1988) suggests *Corallus caninus* every 2.7 km<sup>2</sup>, although this is considered tentative as more precise data concerning movement in terms of home range was, and still needs to be collected. SCHULTE (1988) also considered that persecution through similarity to a potentially lethal 'look alike' Two-striped forest pit viper *Bothriopsis bilinea* a cause for concern. The pit viper ranges over much the same area as the Emerald and, as so often the case, the philosophy persists of 'if in doubt kill first - ask questions

later'! Lying by day draped over branches with the head resting gracefully between its coils, the Emerald appears more decorative than deadly. Simply by loosening the coils and hanging down as night falls, this effective predator waits to ambush its prey.

Living in the rainforest under-storey it is easy to accept that Emeralds live on a diet of birds and possibly bats. Their long front 'fangs' impaling a winged creature as it flies past, a swift coil placed around and death follows quickly; however field observation has shown that mammals, mostly arboreal, are the primary source of nourishment. HENDERSON (1993b) found that ten out of eleven prey items recovered from Emeralds' stomach contents were mammals, with the murid Rice rat (*Oryzomys [Oecomys] bicolor*) featuring high on the menu. Interestingly enough, the smallest snake (38 cm Snout-Vent-Length) examined had eaten a gekkonid lizard (*Thecadactylus rapicauda*), which may indicate a preference for lizards at an early age or may just coincide with food availability of digestible size. Although Emeralds do spend many hours waiting for food to come to them they are also adept at active hunting. Using sight and, more importantly, their infra red heat receptors located on the labials, they have been seen slowly moving through branches alternately searching above and below their position for endothermic prey. These heat sensitive pits allow them to detect changes in temperature of 0.026°C (BULLOCK & BARRETT 1968)! In turn, through the food web of life, what eats can also be eaten!





*Corallus caninus has long sharp front teeth; with these teeth it is capable of catching flying prey.*



*Emerald in its typical ambush manner.*



*Corallus caninus* is an excellent climber, even bolt-upright tree trunks are no problem at all (Panguana, East Peru)!



Although more fieldwork would add to the list, only one predator has been identified - the Guianan Crested eagle (*Morphnus guianensis*). Small carnivorous mammals probably enjoy Emerald flesh on occasion and certainly some primates have been noted through excited 'mobbing' not to kill the snake but to draw attention to it, perhaps a fatal attraction.

A healthy Emerald Tree Boa will be one that has hunted well and avoided predators and disease. The next obvious step will be for that animal to find a mate and reproduce. Like many other Boids it would appear that the main breeding period is seasonal, with December to April preferred. However, gravid females have been

found in the wild at all times of the year, although of course the stage of pregnancy, which can extend to six months, is difficult to assess until parturition. In colloquial language, the terms 'bear live' or 'birth' are frequently used. Both expressions are, however, misleading and not quite correct for, in contrast to *Morelia viridis*, *Corallus caninus* does not lay eggs but 'hatching' young. The scientific term for this is 'ovovivipar' (giving birth to living young) or better, according to PETZOLD (1984), 'viviopar'. When newly born the young, without any parental care, must soon hunt for their diet of small lizards and rodents. Their colours of brick red or red marbled with green giving them added concealment in the dark patches of under-storey.

