

## AFRICAN HERP NEWS

NO. 13 AUG 1990

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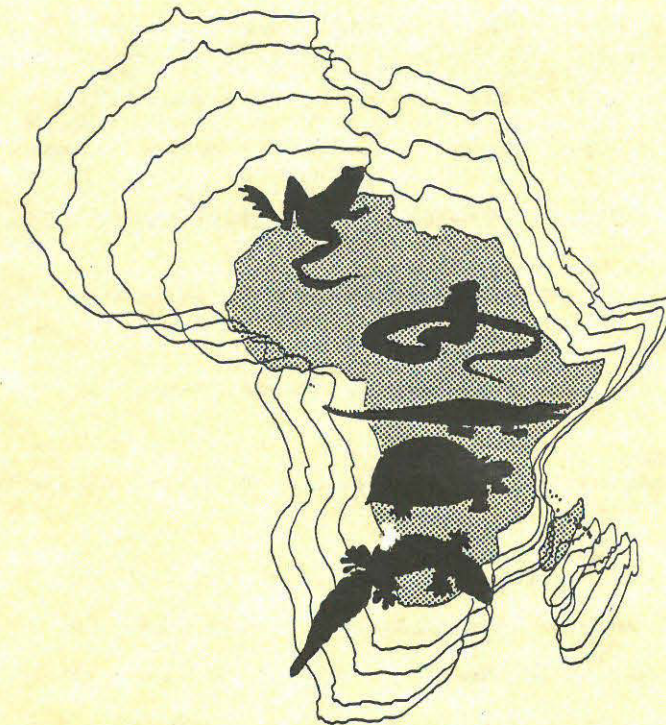
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# AFRICAN HERP NEWS

HERPETOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF AFRICA

NEWSLETTER



AUGUST 1990

NO. 13

## HERPETOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF AFRICA

### Founded 1965

The HAA is dedicated to the study and conservation of African reptiles and amphibians. Membership is open to anyone with an interest in the African herpetofauna. Members receive the *Journal of the Herpetological Association of Africa* (which publishes technical articles- subject to peer review, notes, book reviews and bibliographies) and *African Herp News* (HAA Newsletter), which includes news items, husbandry hints, announcements, etc).

The closing date for the recent HAA Committee Election was 30 April 1990, but due to a tie in votes, this date was extended to 2 May. Only 14% of the membership (paid-up African members (persons) completed and returned their ballot papers. Votes were independently counted by the Electoral Officer and two persons not affiliated with the HAA, namely Mrs G. Bester and Ms E.A. de Villiers, both at the National Museum, Bloemfontein. All counts corresponded. The new Committee became functional in May 1990.

### COMMITTEE OF THE HERPETOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF AFRICA

#### Chairman and Newsletter Editor

M.F. Bates, Herpetology Department, National Museum, P.O. Box 266, Bloemfontein, 9300.

#### Secretary and Treasurer

R.M. Douglas, Herpetology Department, National Museum, P.O. Box 266, Bloemfontein, 9300.

#### Journal Editor

W.R. Branch, Curator of Herpetology, Port Elizabeth Museum, P.O. Box 13147, Humewood, 6013.

#### Additional Committee Members

N.H.G. Jacobsen, Nature Conservation Division, P. Bag X209, Pretoria, 0001.

V.C. Carruthers, Windover Mountain Reserve, P.O. Box 368, Rivonia, 2128.

E.H.W. Baard, Jonkershoek Nature Conservation Station, Stellenbosch, 7600.

O. Bourquin, Natal Parks Board, P.O. Box 622, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.

#### Co-opted Journal Subeditor

R.C. Boycott, Malolotja Nature Reserve, P.O. Box 1797, Mbabane, Swaziland.

Honorary Life Members: Prof. J.C. Poynton, Dr Carl Gans, Dr D.G. Broadley.

## EDITORIAL

I would like to start by thanking our past Chairman Johan Marais and his Committee for their hard work and dedication. During their term (1987-90), four Journals and three Newsletters were produced, and the Husbandry '88 Symposium was held at Delta Park. It is perhaps appropriate here to acknowledge the dedication of Bill Branch (Journal Editor since 1983) and Rod Douglas (Secretary and Treasurer since 1985).

As Chairman, I feel that my prime objective at this stage is to ensure that the *Journal* and *Newsletter* appear more frequently. At an HAA Committee meeting held on 4th August 1990 in Bloemfontein, a number of important decisions were made regarding the frequency and quality of HAA publications. Members can now look forward to receiving three Newsletters and two Journals per year for the 1990-92 period. I must point out, however, that the success of the *Journal* in particular, depends on the number and quality of contributions sent for publication. The quality of the *Journal* has improved enormously since the HAA was founded in 1965, and will continue to do so if herpetologists use it more regularly.

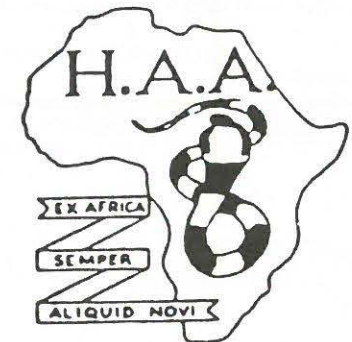
Members will be pleased to know that the *Proceedings of the Reptile Husbandry Symposium* (Delta Park, 1988) will be published in HAA Journal no. 38 and posted later this year. Dr Branch has prepared Journal no. 39, to be sent to members early next year. The next Newsletter will be posted in Nov/Dec.

More good news! The second *HAA Symposium on African Herpetology* will take place at the University of the Orange Free State in Bloemfontein from 8-11 April 1991 (see announcement on page 3). This is our second major Symposium and I sincerely hope that members will take this somewhat infrequent opportunity to be seen and heard.

*African Herp News* will be published tri-annually. Please do not hesitate to submit articles, notes or newspaper clippings (with the name of the paper, date and page) for inclusion. Hope you like the new format.

Mike Bates

Chairman/Newsletter Editor



Article reprinted from *Herpetological Review* 20(3): 59-60 [1989].

#### ANALYSIS OF A *PYTHON ANCHIETAE* FAECAL SAMPLE

Only a single report on the natural diet of the Angolan dwarf python, *Python anchietae* appears in the literature (Steyn and Els 1963). Additional information on the feeding habits of this species is therefore of considerable value.

*Python anchietae* is a small, rare python associated with the hills and mountains of the Namibian and southern Angolan escarpment. The southern limit of its range is 22°S. The only available record on the natural diet of this species (Steyn and Els 1963) reports recovery of the head of a gerbil, *Tatera schinzi* (= *T. leucogaster*, the bushveld gerbil; see Meester et al. 1986) from the stomach of a dead specimen.

Steyn and Els (1963) also reported feeding a captive specimen on the sparrow, *Passer jagoensis motilensis*. Since no sparrow with this species name has been described, the author (or publisher) may have misspelled *iagoensis*. Also the subspecies, *motilensis* does not appear to have been formally described. Howard and Moore (1984) give the distribution of *Passer iagoensis* as the Cape Verde islands, so it would appear that the referred-to species is most probably the great sparrow, *P. motilensis benguellensis* (Howard and Moore 1984; Maclean 1985). The main diet of specimens at the Transvaal Snake Park, where a captive breeding programme is in operation, is the multimammate mouse, *Mastomys natalensis* which is readily taken (Morgan, pers. comm.).

On 25 June 1985, a female *Python anchietae* (snout-vent length = 915 mm; tail length 106 mm) was donated to the Transvaal Snake Park after being collected in southern Angola and confiscated by the Directorate of Nature Conservation. Shortly after its arrival at the Park the specimen defecated and the sample was stored in 70% alcohol until analysis in November 1988.

Analysis of the faeces at X16 revealed the following:

**Feathers:** The bulk of the sample consisted of feather remains which were very broken up by digestive action. As no reference collection for this type of material was known to the author, detailed chemical and electron microscopic analysis were not carried out. Day (1966) considered the nodes on the downy barbules of covert feathers to be diagnostic to order level. An examination of covert feathers from orders such as Galliformes, Columbiformes and Passeriformes showed that there were distinct differences in the nodes and the pigmentation at the nodes of the barbules. Microscopic comparisons with the feather remains in the faecal sample indicated that these remains were Passeriformes and of the genus *Passer* (Ploceidae).

**Hair:** Identification was based on the negative cuticular scale patterns of hairs which were produced on gelatin-coated slides after Day (1966), Brunner and Coman (1974), Douglas (1985 and 1988 unpublished) and Keogh (1985). Final identification was based on a negative cuticular scale pattern reference collection, compiled from hairs in the National Museum Mammalogy Department study skin collection. Work being done on

other species by the author has shown that a large amount of dietary information may be lost in studies of this type by not identifying the hair portion and that up to 70% of this information may be lost, particularly from intestinal and stomach remains. Examination of the sample revealed only 11 individual pieces of hair. Owing to the fact that the majority of the hairs were only pieces of hair or not guard hairs (on which this type of identification is based), only one positive identification was possible, namely that of an elephant shrew, Macroscelididae. It was not possible to be more specific because: (a) R. Parker (1985, pers. comm.) found that while working on Macroscelididae guard hairs, there were no defining morphological characters which enabled identification to below family level, and (b) Distribution records for Macroscelididae in southern Angola are very incomplete.

Other recognizable items: Twelve teeth of the python were found in the sample and were either swallowed during tooth replacement or were lodged in the prey items when these were caught or swallowed.

A portion of chitinous insect remains was also present, but these were regarded as secondary items, possibly from the Macroscelididae specimen.

Fairly large amounts of very fine quartz gravel were evident and were most probably ingested while swallowing prey or were present in the digestive tracts of prey items.

The results of this analysis indicate that birds and small mammals are eaten by *Python anchietae* in the wild. The feather, mammal hair and other limited feeding data available, would also imply that *Python anchietae* is an opportunistic feeder.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank R. Boycott, formerly of Transvaal Snake Park, for supplying the sample; D. Morgan, present Curator of Transvaal Snake Park, for information relating to the specimen; and R. Parker, formerly of the Mammal Research Institute, University of Pretoria, for his valuable information on Macroscelididae hair identification. I would also like to thank S. Louw and M. Bates of the National Museum for commenting on the manuscript.

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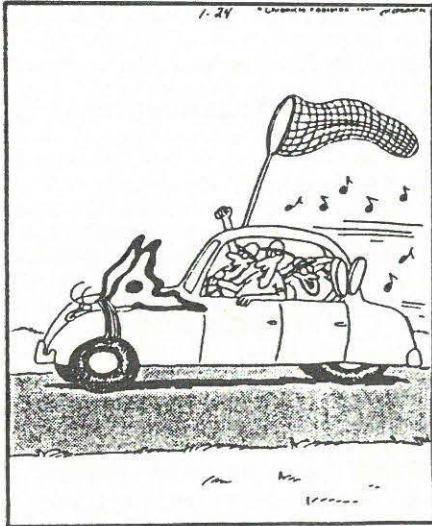
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**NEW SNAKE RECORDS FOR BOTSWANA, SOUTHERN AFRICA**

Up-to-date information on snake distribution in Botswana is summarized in Broadley's "FitzSimons Snakes" (1983. Delta Books, Johannesburg). The authors have been collecting in southern Botswana from 1985 through March 1987. This paper details new records and range extensions in that area. Many of these species are listed from southeast Botswana (Auerbach 1985. The Reptiles of Gaborone. Botswana Book Centre. 48 pp.), but are speculative, without precise locality citations. To avoid repetition, coordinates of the two major localities are given here: Otse village (25°02'S, 25°45'E); Molepolole - Letlhakeng road = paved road running NW SE between Molepolole (24°26'S, 25°34'E) and Letlhakeng (24°03'S, 25°04'E). Specimens were deposited in the Natural History Museum of Zimbabwe (NMZB) and identifications were verified by D.G. Broadley, unless otherwise noted.

*TYPHLOPS S. SCHLEGELII*

(Schlegel's Blind Snake). Moeding College, Otse. 17 March 1987. S. Spawls. (NMZB 8761). Southernmost record in Botswana, westernmost record in southern Africa, extends range 100 km SW.

*TYPHLOPS LALANDEI*

(Delalande's Blind Snake). Moeding College, Otse. 24 February 1985. S. Spawls. (NMZB 7849). First record for Botswana S of 23°S, fitting in the gap between the Mafeking, South Africa (80 km S) and Shoshong (250 km N) records.

*TYPHLOPS BIBRONII*

(Bibron's Blind Snake) 5 km S of Otse. 19 March 1986. S. Spawls. (NMZB 8401). First record for Botswana, extends range 100km N.

*LYCOPHIDION C. CAPENSE*

(Cape Wolf Snake). 8 km SSW of Otse. 10 December 1985. S. Spawls. Verified by R.C. Drewes. California Academy of Sciences (CAS 160793). First record for Botswana S of 25°S. Fits in the gap between the Madibogo, South Africa (150km S) and Molepolole (80km N) records.

*MEHELYA C. CAPENSIS*

(Cape File Snake). Moeding College, Otse. 14 January 1986. S. Spawls. (NMZB 8582). First record S of 25°S in Botswana, extends range 80km S; 13km NW of Molepolole, Molepolole-Letlhakeng road. 20 November 1986. J. de Graff. (NMZB 8621). Extends range 50 km W. First record for Kalahari sand area.

*PSAMMOPHIS LEIGHTONI TRINASALIS*

(Fork-marked Sand Snake). Jwaneng (24°30'S, 24°50'E). 9 May 1985. S. Spawls. (NMZB 7831). Fits in the gap between the Pretoria, South Africa, area (300km SE) and western Kweneng (200km W); Molepolole village. 28 August 1986. J. de Graff. (NMZB 8747). Extends range 100km NE from previous record.

*APARALLACTUS CAPENSIS*

(Cape Centipede-eater). Maladiepe Hill, 1km NE of Otse village. 21 June 1985. S. Spawls. (NMZB 7844). First record S of 25°S in Botswana. Extends range 50km S.