

**Water snake (*Xenochrophis piscator*) imitates cobra**

(Reptilia: Serpentes: Colubridae)

During a stay in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in February 1981, a remarkable type of aggressive behaviour of the Fishing Snake, *Xenochrophis piscator asperrimus* (BOULENGER), was observed.

The Fishing Snake is a common species in Sri Lanka, usually occurring in the water. Catching these snakes is simple by hanging a small fish on a fishing-rod and moving it on the water surface. The snake, often lying on the look-out with its head just above the water, tries to catch the fish and swims after the bait. In this way the animal can be lured towards the edge and then caught by hand.

One of the snakes (medium sized, about 50 cm, sex unknown) was caught in late afternoon in a natural pond close to the Dehiwala canal in Wellawatta (Colombo). It was kept in a moist linen bag until the next day, in order to be photographed. When the snake was taken out of the bag and put on the ground,

it raised the front part of its body to a height of approximately 20 cm, flattened the first 10 cm of the trunk strongly horizontally, hissed loudly, and beat fiercely with opened mouth towards me for several times. Afterwards the snake tried to crawl away quickly. This ritual was repeated for several times. Another larger snake of the same species, caught at the same time, and kept in another bag at the same temperature, did not show this behaviour and kept very quiet.

It is true that the Fishing Snake is known to be very willing to bite (e. g. RIEGER 1971), but the high raising with horizontally flattened trunk combined with the biting with short butts is strange for a natricine species. MERTENS (1946) gives detailed data about these separate behavioural aspects on aglyphous and opisthoglyphous snakes, but does not mention the combination I observed. PETZOLD (1962) writes about repeated 'symbolic' butts of the Fishing Snake, but does not mention the opened mouth.

The behaviour of *Xenochrophis piscator asperrimus* reminds very much the threatening and attacking behaviour of the Indian Cobra, *Naja naja naja* (L.), which is common too in Sri Lanka. As imitation is a common phenomenon in evolution, it is possible that the Fishing Snake adopted this kind of behaviour from the Indian Cobra, which lives in the same areas, and imitates it deliberately as an effective means to scare and to chase away its enemies. Furthermore it was remarkable that on the snakes I observed, the colour pattern of the hindmost part of their backs resembled that of the Indian Cobras very much.

When the snakes were released, both of them were aggressive and tried to bite seriously.

In Sri Lanka wurde ein bemerkenswert aggressives Verhalten an einer colubriden Wasserschlange beobachtet. Dieses Verhalten ist dem der einheimischen Kobra sehr ähnlich.

#### References

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