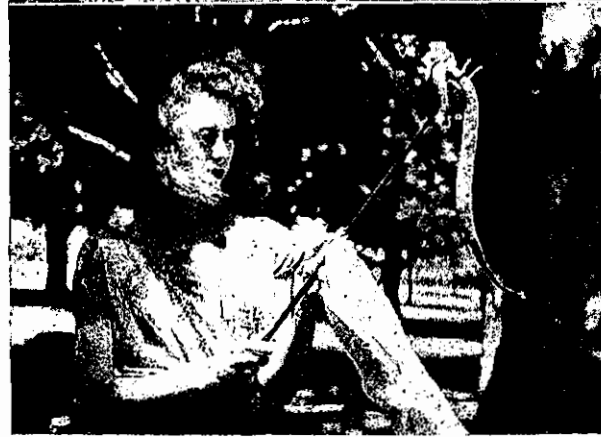
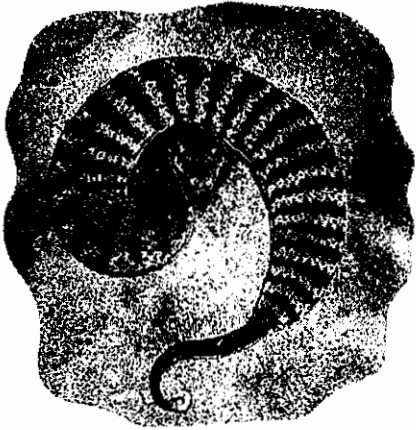


SNAKE CATCHING . .

BY ERIC W



AS a reptile hunter, it is my livelihood to supply Australian and overseas Zoos with crocodiles, snakes, lizards, tortoises and other reptiles. This work entails constant travelling around Australia by train, aeroplane, car, boat, or even miles by native dugout canoes. It also entails more than its share of foot walking.

To hunt snakes, it is first necessary to have a fairly comprehensive knowledge of their habits, and an ability to distinguish between venomous and non-venomous snakes.

Snakes are only active on a grand scale during the warmer months of the year. During the colder months they hibernate, existing on fats stored in their body through the warmer months. Food consists of mammals, birds, reptiles or insects, according to the individual requirements of the various species, and in some cases other snakes are eaten.

With the exception of sea-snakes, there are about 120 species and sub-species of snakes in Australia. Of these, roughly 90 species may be said to be either entirely harmless or incapable of delivering a lethal bite. The only satisfactory method of distinguishing venomous from non-venomous snakes is to know the individual species as it is not practical for the average person to examine dentition and head scalation.

In the far north of Australia, my work is one constant search for pythons. Other snakes, figuratively speaking, are by-products of the chase.

Pythons usually live within fairly easy access of water, in caves or rock-crevices which are in almost utterly inaccessible positions. At times, huge rock pythons up to eighteen feet or more are captured on cloudy days sunning themselves in the sparse sunshine beside their crevices. Reluctant to leave the warm sunshine the python suspiciously watches the approach of a potential aggressor, and then at the last moment, slowly uncoils to slide to the safety of the rocks.

Immediately the snake is on the move, it is pounced upon by two or more men. One man securely grabs just behind the head to prevent the reptile biting, while another man firmly grasps the body to prevent it coiling around and crushing the man holding the head. Naturally the more men available the easier

Carrol Hawkins, using the "Gadget," gives a three-lesson demonstration on how to catch a Death-adder.

a Lively Occupation

ELL



George Cann, famous snake catcher of La Perouse, taunts a Tigersnake—one of Australia's deadliest reptiles.

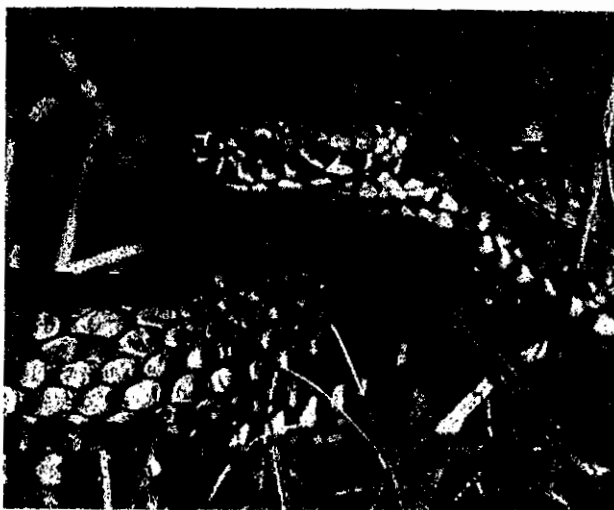
it is to capture the python and bundle it into a sack. Care is always taken to ensure that the tail of a python is always free and a no time is covered by coiled parts of its body, as in the event of a large python imprisoning a man, the only way it can be unwound is tail first. Should the python contrive to get any more than two or three feet of its length into the crevice, then rather than damage the snake on the rocks during extraction, it is let go.

On other occasions, pythons are captured on river banks or on ledges of rocks or old logs overhanging rivers. The hunters themselves approach by dinghy or dugout canoe.

One of our favourite and less strenuous methods of catching alive pythons in the Northern Territory was to motor along the Stuart Highway and its side-tracks on warm summer nights. Some of our most thrilling ruses occurred on these occasions.

Early in 1945 as "Snow," Bert and I were driving past the limestone caves south of Katherine, the truck's headlights outlined an Olive-python stretched across the road. "Snow" applied the brakes, and I jumped from the vehicle with the over-confident intention of securing a neck-hold and wrestling the python single-handed. Unfortunately the python had other ideas.

As deadly as it looks. The Copperhead family is noted for being aggressive and highly venomous.



It gathered its coils and struck out with widely gaping jaws. I tried several approaches, but each time the snake was vigorously prepared to defend itself. Pythons are not venomous, but can inflict ugly wounds with their long re-curved needle-like teeth, so after a short discussion we decided to noose the snake.

Bert cut a sapling eleven feet in length and on the thin end tied a cord noose. "Snow" and Bert then held the heavy end of the sapling to balance it while I advanced on the snake and guided the noose end. While all these preparations were taking place the python regarded us warily from the centre of the roadway.

We shuffled towards the reptile and as it lashed out, lassooed its head. The power of the snake was terrific. I quickly released my hold on the sapling and grabbed the python behind the head. "Snow" and Bert rushed over to assist and in a few moments we were a struggling tangle of legs, arms and snake coils. We eventually managed to extricate ourselves, remove the noose from the reptile and tie our specimen in a canvas bag.

Although weeks often passed without even sighting a python, we frequently caught golden-tree snakes as we paddled our canoe beneath thick tropical undergrowth that overhangs the length of most northern rivers. The golden tree-snake is actually a northern colour variation of the southern green-tree-snake and varies from a delicate golden colour to an olive yellow with leaden-blue head. Quite harmless, the golden tree-snake feeds on frogs and lizards. Their colouring harmonises so perfectly with their natural background of green and yellow pandanus palms that they are practically invisible unless one's attention is attracted by the slither of their scaly bodies among the trees and creepers.

It was principally by the use of our ears that we located golden-tree-snakes. Then we would carefully scrutinise the branches and leaves until we located a thin bluish head thrust enquiringly from the foliage. At times we had to climb trees to bag our specimens, but usually grabbed them among the lower limbs. Bites from these snakes were ignored as their fine small teeth rarely drew blood.

Australian snakes are divided into three dental

groups. The Front-Fanged group which embraces all our deadly snakes and quite a number of mildly venomous snakes; the Back-Fanged group, containing the brown tree snake family and certain northern water-snakes, all of which are harmless despite the fangs; and the Solid-toothed group, entirely harmless, consisting of the Python and green-tree-snake families.

Death adders are a popular zoo-exhibit but when it comes to catching them they are not as common as is ordinarily supposed. Death adders are the villains of the snake world. Non-aggressive, they may lay doggo for hours making little attempt to avoid intruders, human or otherwise. Then, unsuspectingly, one may place one's foot or hand on a Death-adder and—snap!

Although one of our deadliest snakes, the Death-adder is also the victim of much superstition. Many believe that a Death-adder stings with the thorn on the tip of its tail. This belief is an utter fallacy. Death-adders certainly have a strange looking tail, like a caterpillar with a thorn on the end, but the tail consists merely of a series of modified scales which are absolutely harmless. After the same manner as any other Australian snake, the Death-adder has its venom-glands behind and below the eyes, the venom being converged by muscular action from the gland through a duct each side of the upper lip, down a groove in front of the fangs (the enlarged front teeth) to the wound.

Another fallacy is the exaggerated story of the Death-adder's spring. Death-adders and other Australian snakes are capable of leaping, or rather throwing themselves, no farther than the length of their own bodies.

We capture most deadly snakes, Tigersnakes, Blacksnakes, Brownsnakes, Copperheads, etc., by grasping them by the tails, holding them helpless at armslength, then dumping them into bags, but this method is not always satisfactory with Death-adders. Bites are easily enough acquired, without taking unnecessary risks, so while I usually catch Death-adders by the necks, my less experienced assistants use various snake catching contrivances by which the snake is secured without actually touching the reptile.

The author gets a "tail hold" on a harmless, 11ft. Olive Python, in Arnhem Land.



Close-up of the deadly Copperhead snake (Denisonia Superba). Note the unusual head markings which continue, in a slightly altered pattern, along its body.



The most popular contrivance is an instrument popularly known as the "gadget." Normally used for extracting snakes from logs, rock crevices and other inaccessible positions, the "gadget" consists of a hooked rod sliding inside a fork-ended tube. The hook is placed over the snake, the handle pulled and the writhing serpent finds itself held firmly by the hook against the fork. The snake is then dropped into a sack.

Tigersnakes and Blacksnakes are hunted in reed-swamps, the most popular areas being the various Murray River swamps. During the late afternoon, Tigersnakes lay out on the flattened reeds to sun themselves and must be quickly snapped up by the tail before they slip into the water. Most snakes are excellent swimmers, and once a Tigersnake or Blacksnake dives under the water, all hope of capture can be abandoned. Quite often these snakes are found in hollow logs near water, but although they have similar habits and live in similar localities, they are very rarely found together, a fact which cannot be satisfactorily explained.

The venom of a Blacksnake is hardly potent enough to kill an adult, although a bite is usually followed by intense pain and severe local swelling.

Tigersnake venom, however, is a different proposition. Tigersnake venom, weight for weight, is considered the most potent of any known snake; however, the Taipan, Death-adder and Blacksnake inject a greater quantity of venom.

The aggressiveness of Tigersnakes has been greatly exaggerated. It has been my experience that Tigersnakes, like the majority of Australian snakes, will avoid when avoided. No doubt remote instances of attack do occur, but usually through provocation. On one occasion near Mt. Tomah, Blue Mountains, I was attacked by a four feet green "Tiger" I had attempted to capture. It expended its fury to such an extent that I was forced to fence off the striking flattened head with a short stick. The same snake died this year after almost six years at Taronga Zoo.

Some of my narrowest escapes have been from Tigersnakes, one of the closest occurring out from Tocumwal, on the Murray River. I had just managed to catch a Tigersnake's tail when I slipped in the

(Continued on page 442)

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ANTHONY HORDERNS'

YOU CAN'T HOLD A HARRIER BACK

From page 411.

but Phil and Len, viewing the scene from their hide-out on the hill, were waiting, excited and impatient for their part in the chase.

Very soon I heard the sound of a shot and then another, and I knew at once a really game run had ended and that "paid" had been placed against the account of another poultry thief.

This may not be as spectacular as the English form of hunting, but it is equally as thrilling and far more satisfactory for conditions in this country.

The dogs develop amazing powers of endurance. The pack we used on the fox hunt have run a wallaby for a known distance of nineteen miles before turning him.

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It is this gameness that endears the hound to the growing band of enthusiasts, and if ever you feel the urge to hunt, line up a pack of harriers and experience the thrill of a real chase for, once on a trail, you can't hold a harrier back.

SNAKE CATCHING... A LIVELY OCCUPATION

From page 424.

mud and fell on my side. The enraged snake flattened its neck and struck at my face, the strike luckily being deflected by a piece of reed stubble. I was on my feet and had the reptile bagged before a second strike was possible.

A bite on the face or body can have serious consequences as it is not possible to apply a ligature. All that can be done is to make an incision as deeply as possible to promote the flow of blood, rub in potassium permanganate (Condy's Crystals) not too much, and contact the nearest doctor as early as possible. The Commonwealth Serum Laboratories have prepared an anti-venom from tigersnake venom that appears to be effective against the bites of most Australian snakes.

George Cann, the famous snake-catcher of La Perouse, was bitten several years ago as he was placing in a bag a Tiger he had just captured. With barely time to secure the bag he lost consciousness. Four days later he was found where he had fallen by an elderly Russian who rushed him to hospital. He spent a further fortnight entirely paralysed. George has also recovered from several death-adder bites. Fred Wade, a travelling snake-showman, has been bitten several times by death-adders.

With snakes caught and bagged the battle sounds to be over, but that is not the case. The battle is over when the snakes are comfortably established in their respective zoos to the full satisfaction of zoo authorities and the reptile keepers themselves.

The snakes must first be transported from their place of capture to my Sydney headquarters, care being taken to ensure that snakes of similar sizes are kept