

**Book Review: A Complete Guide to the Snakes of Southern Africa. Johan Marais. For Air Botswana by Barry Baxter.**

marung library

by Barry Baxter

## Snakes in perspective

ARE SNAKES WET AND SLIMY? Can the forked tongue of a snake sting? If I kill a snake, will its mate come looking for me?

So you know all the answers when it comes to snakes, or do you? John Marais' second edition of *A complete guide to the snakes of southern Africa* gives the facts and dispels the fallacies surrounding these creatures - traditionally looked upon as being slimy, repulsive, aggressive and ready to attack people at every opportunity.

"If cornered or hurt, a snake may well defend itself but, even then, most prefer to move off quickly and quietly if given the chance. Others will remain motionless, hoping that their camouflage will enable them to remain undetected," Marais corrects us.

But for its own survival, the snake is without doubt one of nature's most efficient and skilful predators. "A rodent, once it disappears down its network of burrows, is safe from most predators - except snakes. With its elongate, limbless body a snake can easily move through the burrows and in many cases eradicate an entire rodent family in one session," writes Marais.

"Some snakes rely on muscle power to kill their prey while others have evolved a venom apparatus. Not only does venom enable the snake to kill its prey, but it also assists with digestion, snakes cannot chew their food."

All very well, and nice to know, but what about the snakes likely to be in my garden? There are 170-odd species and subspecies of snakes in southern Africa, fewer than 10 percent of them are dangerously venomous. Not all of them will be in your area - and this book will help you get to know the ones that are.

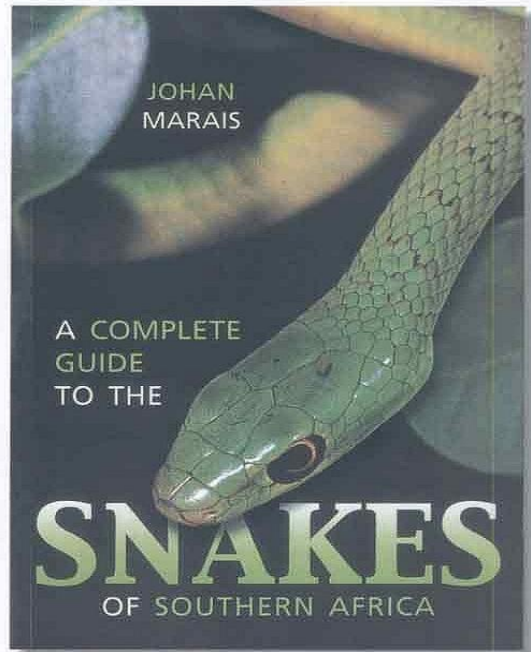
Of the 312 pages of the book, 240 are devoted to classifying southern African snakes. The colour illustrations aid identification and Marais adds tips of what to look out for. Habitat, habits, whether or not the snake is venomous or dangerous, are clearly listed and described.

For instance, the cross-barred tree snake may strike viciously when threatened, but, says Marais, its venom is of no consequence to humans, it is not dangerous.

At the Very Dangerous end of the scale, three pages are devoted to the Black Mamba, described as one of the most deadly snakes in the world. It injects its victim with a venom that paralyses the nervous system and causes death within six to 15 hours or much sooner in serious cases.

Marais gives first aid procedures for each class of snake bite - and a list of sensible precautions to stop bites happening in the first place.

"Snakebite is a rare accident and very few victims die. It is important that you keep your wits about you and obtain help in a logical way. Remember the snake may even have been harmless," - is one of the many prominent footnotes which feature in the book.



*A complete guide to snakes of southern Africa - Johan Marais. Struik, +27 11 807 2292 email nicolam@struik.co.za ISBN 1 86872 932 X 312 pages, 400 colour photographs, softcover. 189.95 rands in South Africa (around 135 Botswana pula).*

Marais successfully puts the whole business of snakebites in perspective, but stresses throughout that you have to be aware and not underestimate the possible consequences of a serious bite, but as he says:

"The aim of this book is not only to assist in identifying southern Africa's diverse range of snakes, but also to give the layperson, including snake enthusiasts, a fresh understanding and appreciation of these fascinating creatures.

"With the rapid advance of herpetology in southern Africa, new data has also come to light. Herpetologists now have greater contact with colleagues worldwide and more research is being conducted than before, both locally and overseas."

The book avoids technical terminology and is a more general and practical guide that will appeal to the layperson:

---

farmer, housewife, gardener, hiker, hunter, fisherman or anyone else who spends time outdoors.

Says Marais: "We humans pose a far greater threat to snakes than they do to us. Urban development, industrialisation and mass destruction of natural habitats have seriously threatened

a number of species. Further study of the impact of these activities on snake populations is urgently required. I hope that this book will contribute to a more respectful attitude to these sensitive and skilled predators and to a better understanding of their importance in nature." ■

# Fact and Fallacy

*From A complete guide to the snakes of southern Africa – second edition*

Have you heard about the man on horseback who was chased by a Black Mamba for kilometres on end? Or the snake that was so long it stretched from one side of the road to the other? Another favourite is that Puff Adders eat their babies. Some of the most commonly asked questions about snakes:

Are snakes wet and slimy?

No, perfectly dry. The shiny, highly reflective skin may give the impression that a dry snake is wet.

Do all snakes spit their venom?

The majority of snakes in the world and in southern Africa, including the cobras, cannot spit their venom.

Can the forked tongue of a snake sting?

The forked tongue is used only for smelling and cannot sting or harm in any way.

Does the Puff Adder strike backwards?

The Puff Adder cannot strike backwards. Its habit of

snapping into a coiled or striking position may have given the impression it does.

Do snakes lick their prey before swallowing?

A snake may inspect a dead prey item with flickering tongue, but does not lick it.

Does a python need to anchor its tail before or during a kill?

The tail does not have to be anchored, although it may be an advantage when constricting large prey.

Do snakes move in pairs?

Snakes are loners. If you happen to kill a snake you certainly do not need to fear a mate coming to take revenge.

Do snakes have nests?

Many eggs may hatch from a clutch laid in a hole or other suitable spot, but there is no such thing as a nest of snakes.

There is one exception, the King Cobra, found in Asia.

Do snakes only die after sunset?

A snake dies the moment it is killed.