
Occurrence of the rare Checkerbelly snake, *Siphlophis cervinus* in the Nariva Swamp, Trinidad

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THE Checkerbelly, *Siphlophis cervinus* (Laurenti) is one of the rarest of the snakes of Trinidad. The last published record is of a specimen collected by Mole on Ortinola Estate, Maracas Valley in 1925 (Boos, 1975), although Professor Julien Kenny reports finding one near the Manzanilla Road about twenty years ago. Emsley (1977) comments that "Little is known of this secretive snake. Specimens have been taken from the top of a very tall coconut palm, and also from the ground. They probably feed on frogs and lizards." In Emsley's drawings of scale patterns of Trinidadian snakes *S. cervinus* is the only species which had to be drawn from a museum specimen, thus indicating the rarity of the species. The snake is found in tropical South America but appears to be rare even on the mainland; the only published record in the past twenty years is from the Upper Amazon (Fukada, 1964).

Hence it was with some excitement that we identified a specimen found on 12th May 1978 in the Nariva Swamp. We came across the snake between 08.30 and 09.00 on a bright sunny day while it was basking on the concrete base of the radio mast on Brigand Hill. It was bright and sunny on Brigand Hill, although the morning mist still hung over the surrounding swamp. We did not know then what species we had found, but it was obviously not a Mapepire or a Coral and so we were happy to take close-up photographs and to bring the snake back to the University for identification using the key in Emsley (1977).

The snake was a juvenile, approximately 35 cm long (adults are from 75 to 125 cm long) and very beautiful in appearance. The back was a pinkish-red colour and the sides and belly were bright yellow with black, zig-zag bars (see photograph). Apart from coloration, the shape of the snake was very distinctive since the body was very thin relative to the length. The dimensions of the body may have been responsible for the characteristic movement of the snake which involved an exaggerated looping

of the body, throwing itself in a manner reminiscent of a sidewinder. A long, thin snake will have a smaller proportion of muscle in cross section than a stout one and so may need to form large loops in order to generate sufficient power to propel itself along at a reasonable speed. The snake was not at all aggressive and did not threaten or strike in the way that many harmless snakes do, imitating venomous species, and in fact it often hid its head under its coiled body. A distinct diel activity rhythm was observed during the three days that the snake was kept before being released; the snake was fairly inactive during the day and much more active between dusk and dawn, so perhaps we were lucky to find a specimen so late in the day.

The fact that we found a juvenile indicates that the species is still present and breeding in the Nariva Swamp, although like many other species it may not survive the proposed draining and reclamation project. It would be a pity if this rare and beautiful snake was to disappear from Trinidad with so little known about it, and we hope that this record will stimulate an interested naturalist to find more specimens and discover something of the biology of the species.

REFERENCES

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