

NOTES ON THE LEOPARD SNAKE, *ELAPHE SITULA*, WITH COMMENTS ON THE MAINTENANCE OF THIS SPECIES IN CAPTIVITY

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Though it is without doubt the most attractive of the European Ratsnakes, the Leopard Snake has been seldom imported into this country over the last few years.

The colour pattern of both the young and adult snake consists of numerous black spots on a grey background with a series of brownish-red blotches or saddles along the spine. A more uncommon pattern also exists, in which the red blotches join together to form two longitudinal stripes. Maximum length is about 90 cms, but average adult size is nearer to 75 cms.

The range of this slender snake includes Southern Italy, Sicily, Malta, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey and parts of Russia (Steward 1971), where it inhabits dry stony or grassy areas, often near to human habitation (Clark 1967). In Yugoslavia, I have found it basking on top of, or near to the many stone-walls intersecting dry, overgrown fields, probably seeking refuge from the numerous Glass Lizards, *Ophisaurus apodus*, inhabiting these areas and which certainly include it in their diet, should the opportunity arise.

Temperament is said to vary, but I have found that the Leopard Snake always bites when handled and remains somewhat nervous, even after a long period in captivity. In spite of this fact, provided feeding commences from the start and undue disturbance is kept to a minimum, the snake will adapt readily to captive conditions. In my experience, specimens that do not commence feeding immediately fast until death and force-feeding appears only to hasten the end and is certainly not recommended.

Food appears to consist solely of mice and numerous attempts to tempt different individuals with rats, small birds and lizards have all ended in failure.

Longevity records for this species are unavailable, but I have had one specimen in my collection for the past three years and it was of adult size when first obtained.

For housing I use standard aquarium tanks with one 5-8w standard bulb providing lighting and heating. Newspaper is used on the floor and a hide-box, branch and water-dish complete the cage. I keep all of my specimens on a light-cycle varying from 15 hours daylight in summer to 9 hours in winter and under this regime, winter-fasting normally occurs from the end of August until early April, perhaps indicating a lengthy hibernation period under natural conditions. Temperatures in the cage vary from 56°F in winter to 90°F in summer. The snakes often immerse themselves in their water-bowls when the temperature exceeds 85°F, but it would appear to do them no harm. Bathing also frequently occurs before sloughing.

On June 15th 1980, I purchased a wild-caught adult female of the more unusual 'striped-phase' and this snake was subsequently found to be gravid. It was housed in the manner previously described and a plastic box containing sphagnum moss was also added to the cage.

The pre-laying slough occurred on July 1st and 14 days later, on the evening of July 15th, the female laid first one egg in the water-bowl and then a further three in the sphagnum moss. The four eggs were removed from the cage and placed in damp vermiculite in an incubator set at 79°F.

Unfortunately, the female did not commence feeding after laying and died on July 24th of an unknown cause.

Owing to excessive intake of water, the first egg was abnormally large when laid and it was found to be bad six days later. Details of the eggs and results are given in the following table:—

Egg Number	Size (mms)	Hatch date	Incubation (days)	Sex	Colour Pattern	Length (mms)
1	60 x 19	Failed 21-7-80	—	—	—	—
2	51 x 15	19.9.80	66	♂	Spotted	332
3	46 x 18	22.9.80	68	♀	Spotted	321
4	48 x 16	23.9.80	69	♀	Striped	326

Much to my surprise, the first baby ate one pink mouse the morning after hatching. Sloughing occurred 12 days later and feeding recommenced the next day.

After much difficulty, I have finally obtained another female which is approaching maturity and it is hoped that 1981 might see my first serious attempt at breeding this beautiful snake in captivity.

REFERENCES

- Clark, R.J. (1967) Herpetofauna of the islands of the Argo-Sarconic Gulf, Greece. *Proc. of the Cal. Acad. Sciences* Vol. XXXV No. 2 pp 23-26.
- Steward, J.W. (1971) *The Snakes of Europe*. David Charles, Newton Abbot.