

A NOTE ON THE 18.5 ft. BOA CONSTRICTOR FROM TRINIDAD

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James A. Oliver started it all, or at least his book "Snakes in Fact and Fiction" published in 1958 carried the account which I think is worthy of a full quote

"The true Boa Constrictor has a wide distribution in the American tropics and subtropics, occurring from northern Mexico to northern Argentina. The species has several races of geographic subspecies that differ from each other in minor details. Members of most of these races rarely reach a length of more than 10 feet. The form occurring in the tropical sections of northern South America occasionally reaches a length of 12 to 14 feet, but the average is much smaller than this. The record for the race - and for the species - is 18 feet 6 inches. This length was obtained from an unusually large individual killed and measured in Trinidad by Colin F. Pittendrigh while he was on the island doing malaria-control work during World War II. He was working with a crew of men in the thick forest of Trinidad's Central Range. To go from their camp to where they were working, the crew had to cross a swampy area by walking along the trunk of a fallen tree. One morning, they saw a huge snake resting on the tree and, believing it was giant Bushmaster, refused to go out until the snake was killed. Pittendrigh got his gun and went to the spot where the snake had been reported. It was gone. He urged them to go on with their work, but they refused to cross the area until the snake was found and killed. After a careful search, the snake was discovered coiled up on the hollow end of the tree trunk. Pittendrigh said it appeared to be a monstrous creature. With long poles it was moved part way out of the log and shot. Then it was dragged out to where its true identity and length could be determined. It was measured in the flesh at 18½ feet, but the skin after being stretched was much longer. This maximum length for the widely framed Boa places it barely above the maximum of 18 feet 4 inches recorded for the longest venomous snake, the King Cobra or Hamadryad."

This 18.5 ft Boa constrictor became to me what the reported 37.5 ft Anaconda is to herpetologists all over the world. Living all my life in Trinidad (except for a 4½ year stint in Australia) I searched in vain for any specimen larger or even approaching the length reported by Pittendrigh.

The biggest I could discover was perhaps a little over 11 feet. One enormous Boa, stretched along a cross-bar in a cage in the Georgetown Zoo, in what was still British Guyana in 1967, even with a stretch of my imagination, could not have been more than 12 feet.

The Pittendrigh/Oliver story has been accepted, and repeated and printed in several publications as the years passed.

Clifford H. Page in 1961 in his "Giant Snakes" quoted the essence of Oliver's story and added:- "After it was shot, Pittendrigh determined its length in the flesh as 18½ feet. This is the kind of field observation which cannot be lightly discredited".

In 1973 Sherman A. Minton Jr. and Madge Rutherford Minton published their "Giant Reptiles" and once more repeated the story ending with, "It measured 18.5 feet and is by far the biggest specimen reliably reported".

As recent as 1987 John M. Mehrtens, in his "Living Snakes of the World" and 1991 Scott Weidensaul in his "Snakes of the World" state that the maximum size of the Boa constrictor is 18.5 feet.

Chris Mattison in his 1986 version of "Snakes of the World" went even one better, rounding off the maximum measurement to "6m (20 ft)".

But how reliable was this original report?

I have had an autographed copy of Oliver's "Snakes in Fact and Fiction" in my library for many years, and every time I read the account it worried me. Then one day in 1980 while going through the index on an ongoing series of publications on the Flora of Trinidad and Tobago I saw a paper on the Bromiliads, written by a Colin F. Pittendrigh. This galvanized me into writing to James Oliver, asking him about the story, and if he knew the present whereabouts of Pittendrigh.

Oliver replied giving me the last known address he had for Pittendrigh and added that he had met him occasionally at the American Museum of Natural History after World War II and that he had repeated his story essentially as it was printed in "Snakes in Fact and Fiction".

A letter to Pittendrigh soon brought a reply dated March 12th, 1980. He was now the Harold A. Millar Professor of Biology and Director of the Hopkins Marine Station of Stanford University in California.

What he wrote was, that on that fateful day, alerted by his field-crew he shot what he describes as a "Boa Constrictor", which was sunning itself on a felled tree trunk. So heavy that it took two men to carry it back to their camp in the Guico/Tamana area of Eastern Trinidad, where, he then stated, he skinned it, so that it stretched completely across the back of their laboratory building which measured 30 feet long. He also said that "The animal was about 18 feet long".

That night the unprotected skin was destroyed and partially eaten by stray dogs and unfortunately no pictures were taken. Apparently, no pieces of skin were preserved either. He ends by saying "However, my memory is clear on it all – it was truly an immense snake!"

In my reply to Pittendrigh I pointed out to him the confusion caused by the common use of the name "Boa Constrictor" to mean both the Anaconda and Boa in South America (which is noted by the Mintons on p 202 of the 1975 paperback – edition of their "Giant Reptiles") and pressed him for more details that he may have remembered about the appearance, colour, pattern and scalation of the snake, and suggested to him that in fact it may have been an Anaconda – *Eunectes murinus* (which is fairly common in the area) that was shot that day in 1944, and not a Boa Constrictor.

His reply was stunning to me. He admitted that "I certainly cannot exclude the possibility that the snake I shot in Tamana was an Anaconda ("Huilla") because I am no herpetologist". He added that he had assumed that since Anacondas were swamp inhabitants and that there were no swamps in the Guico/Tamana area, that it must have been a Boa Constrictor. He ends his letter "However, there is no doubt that I cannot attest, with any scientific authority, that it was *not* an Anaconda. Nevertheless, I seriously doubt that".

Like a blood hound on a trail I found it difficult to accept his negative admission and once more wrote him sending him a map of the area with capture and sighting-locations of Anacondas that I had recorded over the years, and requested that he pinpoint for me the exact location of the camp where the snake was killed.

Back came the map with his location circled in red near the village of Mamon, only a few miles from the edge of the Nariva Swamp and almost equidistant from both coastal and inland locations of the collection-sites I had noted. And to cap it all, is his final admission, in his handwriting, in the margin of the map – "Many thanks for your letter. It *does* seem reasonable that my snake was an Anaconda. I have marked the location". That map and the letters are in my files.

I felt I was finally home.

But, as ever, there was always a nagging, "What if?"

Several years later, unannounced, and with what prompting I may never discover, Yussuf Khan came to see me. He said he lived at Alfonso St. in the town of Sangre Grande, and had once worked on the malaria-eradication project with Colin F. Pitendrigh. He remembered him well, and he remembered the killing of the huge snake just as vividly. Trying not to 'lead' him I asked him to describe what he remembered of it. He said it was huge, greenish, and shining, and he thought at the time it looked like a "Huille".

'Huille' or 'Huillia' is the local name for the Anaconda. I held my breath as I showed him slide transparencies of both species and asked him if he recognized which one had been killed that day.

He did not hesitate, and simply pointed to the Anaconda and said in perfect Trinidadian "Dat is it".

He left after a while promising to return. That was in the mid-80's and he was not visited me again. I have not gone to search for him, nor have I seriously searched any more for a Boa Constrictor to equal or exceed 18.5 feet. However I do hope, one day I will perhaps see or collect an Anaconda of such a length, or larger, from our fast disappearing wild places.

CORRECTION

Please note the following errors appeared in the article "A Note on the 18.5 ft. Boa Constrictor from Trinidad" by Hans Boos, published in the British Herpetological Society Bulletin No. 40, Summer 1992.

Page 15

Line 5 "races of" should read "races or".

Line 25 "framed" should read "famed".

Line 35 "Page" should read "Pope".

Page 17

Line 13 "was not visited" should read "has not visited".