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## NOTES AND COMMENTS

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### **Non-venomous bite from a Lowland Swamp Viper, *Proatheris superciliaris***

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On October 11<sup>th</sup> 2003, during a photographic session at the Pretoria Zoological Gardens, I was bitten by an adult female Lowland Swamp Viper. One fang penetrated the third finger on the right hand midway between the first and second joint. Apart from the initial sting of the actual bite there was no pain, tingling or burning sensation that one would normally associate with a viper bite. However, one symptom was very notable in that the puncture wound bled freely, in fact it dripped like a tap for ten minutes then abated a little but continued to bleed for a further twenty minutes. The wound was bathed liberally with a strong antiseptic solution and dressed. My right arm was then kept immobile by my side. Immediately after the bite the local A&E was alerted and several people who had experience with this species were contacted, including Dave Morgan who had some information with regard to a recent case history. Dave liaised with hospital staff and emphasised the species concerned, and also that there was no antiserum cover.

After an hour although still a bit shaken, I was feeling well and just sat quietly in a comfortable chair in the office being checked by the head keeper Lauren Nels every five minutes or so. Lauren had been on the telephone with regard to the recent case history and stated that there had been initial pain and burning but more importantly there had been a delayed reaction where the patient had experienced dizziness and nausea some six hours after the initial bite. So it was decided that I should sit it out for a while, but after four hours it was obvious that I had received a dry bite, and rightly or wrongly, I went on to photograph another little viper, *Bitis cornuta*, without any further mishap.

Els (1988) describes an account of one case history where a twenty four year old male was bitten by a 20 cm neonate, one fang penetrating the left index finger. There was immediate intense burning and only slight bleeding from the site of the bite. After fifteen minutes the site of the bite was blue-black and blistered. On day two the pain was reduced but the bite area was sensitive. Recovery was complete within just over a week.

The captive *Proatheris* at Pretoria was an adult female originally from Lake Chilwa in Malawi and measured 68 cm, which is very large compared to wild specimens which average 40–50 cm with a maximum of 60 cm (Mallow et al., 2003; Morgan 1988). It has also been stated that more serious bites could be expected from larger specimens of *Proatheris* (Spawls & Branch, 1985).



*Proatheris superciliaris*. Photograph by author.

During forty years of handling venomous snakes I have suffered three what I consider to be serious bites, all from vipers namely, *Vipera berus*, *Bitis arietans*, and *Crotalus atrox*. I have also received a number of bites which have had less serious effects, again *V. berus*, but also *Bothreichis schlegelii* and *Trimeresurus albolabris*. Without exception all these incidents have one thing in common; they were the result of silly mistakes.

This most recent incident was no exception really. The snake was being photographed on a table top which had been dressed to resemble its natural habitat. I was being assisted by Lauren and when placed on the table the snake was active but non-aggressive. The camera was on a tripod and the front of the lens was 60 cm away from the coiled snake. The first part of the shoot went without incident and then I switched to a hand held digital camera. Again the camera was about the same distance away, but I was concentrating on the viewing screen, and not the snake. The viper struck without warning, literally launching itself the full length of its body, and after biting, fell to the floor. The range of that strike was amazing and it took me completely by surprise. I have photographed hundreds of similar-sized vipers in the same manner without incident. These have included some notoriously aggressive

species, such as saw-scaled vipers, *Echis* spp. and young Puff Adders, *Bitis arietans*. But this species was new to me and I forgot the golden rule, always expect the unexpected, so there is no excuse, just another mark on that learning curve.

*Information:* The Lowland Swamp Viper was until quite recently included as a terrestrial species of *Atheris* (bush vipers), along with another terrestrial form, the Kenyan Mountain Viper, *Montatheris hindii*. Broadley (1996) created the two new genera in his review

of the Atherini group. *Proatheris superciliaris* is an eastern African species found on the Mozambique plain from Biera northward and following the Zambezi River floodplain to Lake Malawi and Tanzania (see Branch, 1988).

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