

BOOK REVIEW: *Snake keeping - Proven Techniques Everyone Can Use*, by Barry C. Neilsen. Published in 1996 by Best Pets, P.O. Box 200, North Billerica, MA 01862, USA. Available in Australia through the "Herp Shop" and other specialist booksellers for about AUS\$14. Soft Cover, 21.7 cm high X 13.8 cm wide. 64 pp. All text only except two b/w photos. No ISBN number.

Herpetology has advanced so much over recent years, that many people, particularly those new to the hobby are faced with a constant overload of information. For example how is a novice snake keeper meant to read and digest all the information in Hal Cogger's "bible" in their first attempt. Likewise for many other larger books about reptiles. Furthermore, without degrading Hal Cogger's book, how much use will it be to the person who decides to keep one or more snakes as pets for the first time in their life? The answer is probably very little.

Even many books specifically aimed at the keeper market are often so large and broad in their coverage, that easy digestion of the information is sometimes difficult. Many of these books also have another problem. This is that they are written in such a way that things assumed to be common sense to any veteran herper are not mentioned, due to the presumed knowledge of the reader. As a result, in spite of the best intentions of these authors, the first time snake keepers can still come unstuck over the most "obvious" of errors.

Neilsen's book tackles the subject from a slightly different angle. The book is written on the assumption that the reader's knowledge of snakes is minimal and their keeping experience is nil. In other words nothing is taken for granted.

While this may sound condescending to many of us, Neilsen's approach to the subject is eminently sensible. He starts with logical questions such as how large the snake will be or grow to be, potential pitfalls in keeping snakes (e.g. food supply) and other factors that may be overlooked by the first-time snake keeper, who often gets these animals on impulse.

He then tackles the housing and keeping of snakes in a logical and systematic way, without getting bogged down in (in this case) useless information such as taxonomy, etc. The only concern of this author is summarizing the best, most effective ways to keep snakes in a simple manner.

The book is ordered into several chapters and sub-chapters, with main chapter headings including 'Pet Snake I'm not so sure', 'Selecting the right species for you', 'Properly housing a snake', 'Feeding', 'Skin shedding', 'Purchasing a snake', 'My snake won't eat. So now what?', and 'Do's and don'ts'. While describing these various facets of snake keeping, Neilsen systematically tackles the most common pitfalls (mistakes by novices) and how to avoid them. These include things like, snakes attacking one another when housed together as well as domination problems, hazards of live food (e.g. a mouse attacking a snake), mites and quarantining animals, causes and cures of anorexia, etc..

Neilsen has avoided getting involved with venomous

and specialised snakes, which is probably a good move. To have added these groups to his book would have tipped the scales from it being small and easily readable into the size bracket that makes it harder to get through. Furthermore adding information relevant to these groups would have possibly confused things for readers grappling with their first ever foray into keeping snakes. It took me about an hour to read the book from cover to cover and I can say that in doing so it gave me a good overview of the best way to look after snakes and the most common pitfalls.

Many of the points Neilsen emphasized were those I've been advocating for years and in many parts of the book it was as if I'd written it myself. Neilsen is very adamant about the perils of mites and sloppy quarantining of new snakes. He also makes clear his preference for one snake per cage as a preferred option in a large collection. Most of the most successful herp keepers practice these and the other methods advocated in the book. Neilsen's mention on page 29 of the risks of government agencies being a potential problem that should not be aided and abetted by stupidity on the hobbyist's side echoes my own sentiments. Nielsen brought up this topic while talking of potential risks posed by large constricting snakes. Most of us have seen the occasional news clipping of the young man killed and/or eaten by his pet Burmese or Retic. These incidents should be avoided.

My misgivings about this book include the large number of typographical errors. Some of these grated on me, even though they didn't in any way adversely affect the factual material in the book. Failure of the author/publisher to get an ISBN number or equivalent makes the book harder to track down for those who may have trouble getting hold of a copy. The contents page was badly laid out, with chapter heads and subheads all in the same type font. These should have been different (like in the book), so as to make it easier to understand what is covered where in the book.

Neilsen's comment on page 4, that 'You can have a pet snake without watching it eat.' is reckless, as most experienced snake keepers will tell you that such a proposition is both unlikely and potentially risky. However this was probably the only bit of advice in the whole book I disagreed with - the rest I thought was SPOT ON.

The methods described by Neilsen to kill mice were not necessarily in my view the best available for most people. For numbers of mice he advocated gassing them with CO₂. In this I have no problem. For single mice, he advocated striking or crushing the back of the head. While this usually works, I found a more effective method is by holding the mouse and with two fingers squeezing the neck/upper spinal chord between the fingers thereby breaking/severing the spinal chord/neck. When this occurs there is a distinct click and all

injury is internal. Death is instant and unlike the method described by Neilsen, there is usually no dripping of blood from the snout or external bleeding, nor is there a risk of missing the possibly moving target, getting bitten and so on.

A final grievance I had with this book was the author's failure to deal with breeding. Although his omission of this was on the basis that novice keepers are usually more concerned with keeping snakes alive rather than breeding them, the fact remains that many novice keepers do for one reason or another end up with snakes having babies or laying eggs. This can arise from purchase of a recently mated snake or other factors. Therefore I believe that the book would have been greatly enhanced with a few extra pages dealing with care of gravid (pregnant) snakes, care of young and basic egg incubation methods, (see note below).

If you want pretty pictures, then this book isn't for you. The only photos are a pair of poor quality black and white scans near the rear. However, this is not a picture book and should not be disregarded on that basis. It is simply a guide to the keeping of snakes and in this role it has succeeded admirably. For a book of this size and print quality it is probably a few dollars dearer than might be expected. However as its cost is still minimal it is an excellent investment for any novice and not-so-novice snake keeper. A number of similarly priced books have far more in the way of colour photos but don't come close to this book in terms of useful practical information on snake keeping. The book's purchase cost is minor compared to the potential later costs that may be incurred by not buying the book, particularly in view of the fact that a snake usually costs between \$50-500 in Australia and a single unnecessarily lost snake is several orders of magnitude dearer.

REVIEW BY RAYMOND HOSER

Postscript dated November 1996: Recently some keepers at a well-known government-run zoo got some eggs from two pythons in their care. For reasons not entirely certain they failed to successfully incubate the eggs, even though most if not all were fertile when laid. It is likely that well known basic incubation methods/instructions were not followed. Also in 1996 an acquaintance of mine obtained a single adult Children's Python (*Anteresia childreni*) (Nth. N.T. Form), which later produced 8 fertile eggs. This person (whom I'll refer to here as "Little Steve") had effectively no experience with snakes or their breeding. He was referred to Brian Barnett for the best method to incubate the eggs. He was fortunate in that 1) Brian Barnett gave him accurate instructions to hatch the eggs and 2) He had the intelligence to follow the instructions to the letter. As a result all eggs hatched.

Specifications were: eggs placed in nearly sealed container/incubator with 50-55% vermiculite X 45-50 % water by weight (vermiculite totally dry at start), not using fine grade vermiculite at a fairly stable 30 degrees celcius, making sure never to turn eggs (preferably not to look at eggs).

The moral here is that you don't need complicated or high-tech instructions to have success in snake keeping. Also the mere fact that a person has "experience" in keeping reptiles does not necessarily make them the best keeper. Often a little common sense and the right attitude is a better indicator and all that is needed. The above reviewed book gives the sort of instructions and guidelines that will usually ensure success.

RAYMOND HOSER

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HERP MAGAZINES - WHERE ARE THEY HEADING?

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The following was written in 1996. There have been minor changes to the herp' magazine scene since then, most notably being new publications emanating from the USA and Europe. In 1998, there has been talk of a new reptile magazine for the Australian "market" being released.

Recently Brian Barnett passed me a new American herp magazine to review. However instead of writing a review of this magazine, based on a single issue, I've instead decided to write a broad account of where herp magazines in general stand, highlighting this 'new kid on the block' as well as where they are heading.

Herp societies have been in existence for a long time. However they had a surge in popularity and number in the post war years as people became more affluent, had more leisure time and tended to become more environmentally aware. As in most things, it was the Americans who led the way.

Most major cities formed herpetological societies and as memberships grew, these societies started to put out newsletters. In a few cases, these societies started to put out 'Bulletins', like the Chicago and Philadelphia Herpetological Societies, while others even put out 'Journals', like the Northern Ohio Association of

Herpetologists. These publications were a more specialised form of magazine than previous natural history society journals which, while similar in format, tended to cover a much wider subject matter. In Australia we have seen a similar trend. Fifty years ago, many herpetological articles were found in Linnean Society journals and so on, due to the lack of specialised journals for this material.

Herpetological Societies for the 'professional' publishing herpetologist, such as the Herpetologists League and Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles (S.S.A.R.) are relatively recent in their origins also. For example S.S.A.R. formed in 1958 as the Ohio Herpetological Society, later changing it's name to S.S.A.R. in 1967 due to the increasingly non-regional nature of the society. In other words a state-based society became one of the major herpetological societies in the U.S.A. and ultimately the world. The main publication of S.S.A.R. is the *Journal of Herpetology*, while that of the Herpetologist's League is *Herpetologica*. Another major herp publication is *Copeia*, published by the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, although that publication also encompasses fish.

While the three above publications have expanded and over the years published a vast amount of new and exciting herpetological literature, particularly from 'professional' academic herpetologists, these magazines have in many respects been eclipsed by the material emanating from the amateur societies or a mutated form.

Herpetofauna and *Monitor* are probably the two most well known herpetological magazines in Australia. Both had their origins as society newsletters. That is, their first few issues were simply black and white photocopied sheets with low circulation and little in the way of major articles. Both have expanded. *Herpetofauna* has become a true scientific journal, relatively unusual in that most of it's content comes from 'amateurs' or those who are not paid by the government to be herpetologists. It's layout is in many ways like that of the journals referred to above.

Monitor on the other hand reflects perhaps the most rapidly expanding part of the herpetological magazine market, namely the colour magazines.

The trend towards colour magazines is most strongly seen in the United States and Britain where society-based publications have on the whole suffered at the hands of Nationally circulated colour magazines.

Publications like the *Bulletin of the Chicago Herpetological Society* and *Notes From N.O.A.H.*, have in large part been superseded by *The Vivarium*, *Reptiles* and *Reptile and Amphibian Magazine*. The latter ones not only have a broader circulation, appearing in pet shops, newsstands and other high traffic areas but also have far more customer appeal with their glossy colour photos to go with their articles.

While the hard-core scientific community has for many

years tended to shy away from glossy colour publications, in favour of largely text based publications, limited to very few black and white photos, the non-scientific community has had no such constraints and taken to these more attractive publications with gusto. However, with reptiles, perhaps more than most things, the saying 'a picture is worth more than a thousand words' is especially true.

The first ever colour magazine for reptiles was *The Vivarium*, and in it's premier (1st) issue it had an article by Bob Clark on breeding albino Burmese Pythons (*Python molurus*) which at the time were rare and sought after. No amount of words could have described what he showed in the photos. As a result of that and later similar articles in that magazine, it became a huge hit and circulation soon exceeded that of all herpetological society publications by several orders of magnitude. Since the initial release of the *Vivarium*, there have been other colour magazines released, all bar one (*Captive Breeding*) seeming to have enjoyed phenomenal success.

Within the United States and elsewhere, few, if any society based publications seem to have taken that further step from being a black and white publication into a full colour magazine. As a result, subscriptions to societies have declined (in relative terms) and so have their magazine circulations. Perhaps the biggest factor causing this decline has been the exodus of authors away from Society based publications to the colour magazines. The readers of the contemporary herp literature want the state of the art reports of breeding successes and so on, so go where the contributors are going, and so the cycle goes on. As one who contributes to many herp publications, I can say that I'd prefer to have an article on breeding Death Adders graced with 50 colour photos rather than just have 10,000 words of boring text on two dozen pages. A lot of readers think likewise. I'm not alone here. Major regular contributors to American Magazines like *Reptiles*, and *The Vivarium*, such as Dick Bartlett, Alan Zulich and Robert Sprackland, used to publish in the Society journals, notes, newsletters and bulletins. They don't any more.

The scene in the U.K. is similar. *The Reptilian Magazine*, a colour magazine from there has given British and European Society publications a hiding in that Society publications are no longer the preferred place of publication.

Within Australia, the mutation of *Herpetofauna* and more particularly *Monitor* into the colour magazine format, have kept these magazines as the preferred publication points for local authors, a scenario likely to continue for some time. In spite of incredibly restrictive keeping laws and other obstacles, Australian reptile people are up there with the best with their publications, in terms of journals, books and so on. A good example is the publication *Chondro*, put out by the Cape York Herpetological Society (C.Y.H.S.). It's size and format is nearly good as *Monitor* (in terms of production - I

can't compare content), and it comes from a society of just 50 members (approx.). The amount of original research results published there is on a per-member basis as good as anyone.

Although *The Vivarium* was the original colour reptile magazine in the U.S.A., it recently appears to have had a battering (in commercial terms) by *Reptiles*, a relative newcomer. A large part of this is due to who the publishers were. *Reptiles* is backed by a group called 'Fancy Publications', who market a large number of specialist magazines (including *Bird Talk*, and *American Cage Bird Magazine*) through newsstands across the United States and elsewhere. With this superior distribution, *Reptiles* soon became the most read reptile publication in the world.

However the publishers of *Reptiles* have not had it all their way. 1996 has seen yet another colour reptile magazine hit the streets. This one is called *Reptile Hobbyist*. Published by Herb Axelrod and T.F.H. Publications, perhaps the most surprising thing about the magazine is that it didn't come out sooner. This magazine is modelled after the very successful (in commercial terms) *Tropical Fish Hobbyist* magazine. That magazine has been around for over 40 years and has a print run in excess of 60,000 copies. By virtue of the fact that T.F.H. has had near total domination of the pet shop reptile, frog and fish books for many years (at least until the A.V.S. books came out in the late 1980's early 1990's), it is surprising that this latest magazine didn't come out the day after *Vivarium* was launched.

Like *Tropical Fish Hobbyist*, *Reptile Hobbyist* is clearly designed to be marketed through pet shops. Virtually all the advertising in the magazine is devoted to material found inside American pet shops, usually those items put out by the major companies. Although I have only seen the first issue, small and private advertisers, were noticeably absent. The articles in the first issue were of similar format and clearly aimed at the novice and first time reptile keeper. These covered, among other things, Carpet Snakes (*Morelia spilota*), Frill-necked Lizards (*Clamydosaurus kingii*) and Bluetongue Skinks (*Tiliqua* spp.). These are all fashionable in the United States at the moment. While none of these articles reported anything new in terms of what's known, the factual information was up-to-date and correct. The authors of the articles and photos in the magazine were well known contributors to other magazines and books, including names like Jerry Walls and Karl Switak. The contents, format and style of articles, was very similar to that of *Reptile and Amphibian Magazine*, which up until now has also been heavily marketed through pet shops in the U.S.A.. The colour photos are well produced, the cover well designed and on the surface the magazine is extremely attractive.

A downer is the huge number of advertisements throughout the magazine, which I estimated at about half it's contents. Most of these are (quite predictably) for T.F.H. products, which are mainly reptile-related books (although I must say, some are excellent titles).

However, by ignoring all the ads, I found that this magazine still compared well with its competition, in that it started with nearly twice as many pages anyway. Furthermore the U.S.A. cover price is \$3.95 which makes it incredibly cheap. It will probably sell for between 5-6 dollars in Australia, which is still reasonable.

In terms of faults, some which grated on me were as follows: There was no information on the albino Carpet Snake on the cover; that is no caption, photo credit, anything, (or at least I couldn't find it)! I cannot excuse that. There were far too many full-page ads for books about fish. The publisher would have been better off filling this space with reptile books (all were T.F.H.). I can state quite firmly that over 90 per cent of reptile people have no interest in fish or atlases on them.

Having said this, the first issue of a magazine is always difficult for a publisher. While I found none of the articles earth shattering in terms of 'new' information, the fact is the information was sound and there was a very good balance of articles. The editors were particularly wise in running an article stressing the importance in keeping records on reptiles (and I don't mean D.C.N.R./N.P.W.S./F.W.S. paperwork either). They have also got a degree of room to move in later editions with sections for book reviews, letters to the editor, reviews of articles from journals and so on. Over the next few years, *Reptile Hobbyist* will almost certainly be a magazine worth keeping an eye on. In fact it might also pay to keep an eye on all the colour reptile magazines coming from the United States as there have recently been a spate of rumours of an impending shake-up in that market.

Getting back to mutating magazines and journals, I expect the established 'professional' herp journals like *Journal of Herpetology*, *Herpetologica*, etc., to become more user friendly in appearance. This change will probably include greater use of colour photos, greater variety in style of presenting material and so on. While there is/will be some conservative resistance to this style of change, it will come if for no other reason, to counter rapidly declining (in relative terms) circulation. *Herpetologica* which has been an established journal for many years has an approximate circulation (in 1996) of 1639 copies. *Reptile Hobbyist* in it's first printing will probably outdo that by a factor of ten. A number of prominent scientists also seem to have taken to publishing original findings in these wider circulation magazines, rather than in the established journals or more commonly putting articles in both. With the same information available from two or more sources, the 'black and whites', usually lose out in terms of 'sales'. Signs of change here are already visible. *Herp Review* recently dropped its plain cover for a full colour cover with featuring a herp on every issue. Internally the layout has also been updated. Another example is *Traffic Bulletin*. In their case, they seem to have ripped-off the style Brian Barnett uses on *Monitor*, yes he was first! Although they probably arrived at the design layout independently.

And in the longer term... a place to watch is the internet. While at the moment the internet is only regularly used by about 3 per cent of the population, it's use is expanding exponentially and perhaps most importantly people are climbing over one another to publish 'on-line'. The costs of publishing on the internet are far cheaper than conventional means, while potential circulations are far greater. For example in a matter of days I was able to upload onto the internet about 100,000 words of reptile papers (equal to several issues

anyone to post a question - any question, on the net and wait for the answer, which usually arrives within 24 hours. The only draw-backs of the internet is the sheer information overload and the 'junk' factor. For example I subscribed to all the herp related list servers and left my computer for just one day. I had about 2,000 incoming e-mails the next! As for the 'junk' factor, the sheer speed and ease with which material can be published on the internet, as well as the fact that many people post material anonymously and under false



of *Monitor* or a book like *Smuggled*) for next to no cost. To pay for a conventional print run would have been 10,000 to 20,000 dollars. Then of course there's the distribution costs. Again the internet is cheaper.

Virtually all major journals have sites on the internet and some publish their entire contents on line. For example David Williams launched on 5th October 1996 his '*Far North Queensland Journal of Herpetology*' on the internet which featured a detailed article on Snakebite in PNG. It would be interesting to see how many people download this and other on-line journals to compare the results with print-based media.

I've lost count of the sites on the internet that have answers to Frequently Asked Questions (F.A.Q.'s) on all sorts of herp-related topics. These may well make print-based media redundant to some. To find out price-lists or details of herp products, a few clicks on the net will bring the information to hand.

There are (in 1996) two major 'newsgroups' for herpetology as well as about a dozen 'list servers', such as 'slither', 'uromastyx', etc.. These make it easy for

names, results in a vast amount of inaccurate information appearing. While I'm not saying what appears in print is always accurate either, the internet is slightly worse and for herpetological matters, accurate information is an absolute necessity.

R A Y M O N D
H O S E R has been a herpetologist for many years. He's also written for and read most of the well-known herpetological publications. He has edited this publication for the last three issues.

