

Note: In the "Catalogue of the Neotropical Squamata: Part I. Snakes" there is a listing for Trinidad as follows:—

Family: Anomalapididae.

Typhlophis squamosus (Schlegel)

1893 *Typhlophis squamosus* — Boulenger, Cat. Sn. Brit. Mus., 1:57. This is the first indication in any list, that either this Family of Genus is to be found on Trinidad. A search in the reference literature, which is not readily available, for the origin of this listing will have to be conducted and verification that a specimen from Trinidad island does exist must be produced before consideration can be given to including this species in the list of the Snakes of Trinidad.

REPORT ON THE EFFECT OF THE VENOM OF THE COLUBRID SNAKE THE 'RATONEL' *PSEUDOBOA NEUWIEDII*

by Hans Boos

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The Ratonel or Ratonero, *Pseudoboa neuwiedii* is a fairly common snake in Trinidad. The young are distinctly marked, being bright pink or red on the body, having a dark brown or black head, and there is a collar of dirty-white or yellow separating the head and body colours. The belly is white. In the adult, the colours fade to a pinkish-brown on the body with a dark brown head. The pale collar is missing.

It belongs to a group of the Colubrids, the Boiginae, which are known to have some degree of venom which is delivered from modified, enlarged, grooved teeth situated in the back of the upper jaw.

Very little is known of the amount of venom these snakes can inject in a bite or the effect on animals other than the usual prey.

The Ratonel as well as the Cat-Eyed Night Snake, *Leptodeira annulata* and the Horse Whip, *Oxybelis aeneus*, immobilize their prey quite quickly by using their venom. The lizards of the Genus *Anolis* are killed within 30–60 seconds by the venom.

To effect a venomous bite, these back-fanged snakes, the *Opisthophis*, seize their prey and begin to swallow immediately, then bringing the enlarged teeth into play, they inject venom. The struggles of the lizard are seen to cease within seconds of this bite.

In my experience, bites on the fingers of humans caused an itching sensation. It is fairly certain in these cases that the back-fangs were used, as in one instance, the whole of the index finger was swallowed by the rapid feeding habits of the Ratonel.

There have been human deaths caused by back-fanged snakes. The famous herpetologist, Dr. Karl Schmidt was bitten by the African Boomslang, *Dispholidus typus* and died. The East African Vine Snake, *Thelotornis kirtlandi* is known to be capable of killing a man.

An indication of the potency of the venom of the Ratonel, and thereby of two of its closest relatives in Trinidad, the Black Cribbo, *Clelia clelia*, and the False Coral, *Oxyrhopus petola*, is suggested by the following events.

Mr. Charlie Forde of Cutucupano Road, La Pastora, Santa Cruz, reported to me that at 2.00 a.m., on the morning of the 23rd April, 1974, the noise of a cat in distress woke him. He investigated and saw that there was a snake in his yard with its head through the one-inch mesh wire fence, biting into the neck of the neighbour's cat in the yard next door. The cat was "squawling" and was pulled up against the wire by the strength of the snake's grip. The snake was alive and was seen to be writhing about. He did not interfere with the animals and went back to bed. The noise of the cat continued for some time and then stopped.

In the morning, in the drain on his side of the fence was the snake he had seen the night before. It was dead. On the other side of the fence was the cat, also dead.

I examined and identified the snake as a Ratonel, *Pseudoboa neuwiedii*. It was 37½ inches long. There was clotted blood obscuring the teeth rows in the upper as well as the lower jaw.

There was a series of holes 2 inches behind the head in a pattern conforming to the placing of the canines of a large house cat. There were three holes in an arc over the dorsal surface, the pivotal point being another single hole an inch anterior to the other three. These had pierced the body cavity of the snake.

There were several more punctures in pairs conforming to the bite of a cat, in locations along the rest of the body. These also had punctured the body cavity. Autopsy of the snake showed blood in the body cavity from several punctures, one being in the heart. The cat was not available for examination.

A reconstruction of what might have happened is given here, using the evidence given by Mr. Forde, and the condition of the snake.

The snake was possibly seized by the cat about 2 inches behind the head. It was able to turn enough of its neck area and to bite into the cat's neck, catching in its jaws the carotid artery. This possibly carried enough venom to the brain of the cat to eventually kill it. The amount of clotted blood in the mouth of the snake points to a bite directly into a large blood vessel and not from the furry skin of the cat alone. The cat then possibly released its first hold and proceeded to bite at the snake's body. The Ratonel is a powerful constrictor and was probably wrapped around the cat's neck and head. At one point in the struggle one of these bites pierced the heart and other internal organs causing the eventual death of the snake. In the death throes, the tail of the snake, seeking purchase, threaded itself through the wire fence against which it held the cat until it could no longer retain its grip on the neck. The cat was very weakened from the venom by this time and died not far from where it was first seen being held by the snake, which itself died of its injuries in the drain near the fence.

Very little research has ever been done with the venoms of the Opisthoglyphs, as compared with the Vipers and Elapids, but competent herpetologists know to treat any potential poisonous snake with the respect that is its due.

The three largest of these snakes in Trinidad, the Ratonel, the Black Cribo and the False Coral are very gentle and retiring snakes and only the Ratonel has been known to bite when in a frenzy of feeding. Then it will bite any nearby object. Its feeding behaviour is so inept that it is a wonder how this snake catches its prey in the wild.

The chances of a person being bitten and perhaps affected by the venom of these snakes are therefore restricted to those who maintain them in captivity and who take no precautions while feeding them.