

# JOTTINGS BY THE WAY

by **Ludolf Weheking**

Looking for bats one day in the hills near Tunapuna in Trinidad, I came across a Silk-cotton tree with a large hollow in it. I don't remember the date but it must have been Friday 13th, because entering the hollow I came face to face with a big tarantula (migale), an animal I loathe. The spider must have been about three inches from my nose. That not being enough in my sudden start backwards my sun helmet hit the other side of the hollow and raised a nest of stingless bees. No, they don't sting, but they do bite, and they got through the vents of the hat and chewed up my bald pate. I left the bats alone that day, but on going back to the tree a couple of weeks after, I was able to secure a couple of *Vampyrum spectrum* bats, which on examination of the stomach contents proved to be carnivorous, and not frugivorous as previously recorded. The stomachs contained remnants of fur, bone and feathers.

When in Venezuela I was in the habit of taking a walk after work. Always carrying my gun I would walk along a railway line which ran through dense jungle and swamp to see what I could get in the way of game. One evening about dusk I was at what was known as the "three mile switch" when about twenty yards in front of me a beautiful puma sauntered gracefully across the railway line and stopped. I stopped dead; we looked at one another, the cat swishing its tail, so I said, "Well, go on, brother". I did not shoot as it would have been asking for trouble to use the small shot I had in the gun. The cat moved off. So did I, but in the opposite direction. He was a magnificent specimen; as he straddled the rails his paws were on either side of the track. I was very glad that I was alone, because had I been with one of those trigger-happy chaps with whom I worked, he surely would have fired, and then we would have been in trouble and danger.

On another occasion I was in a canoe on the Guanoco River with a friend, when a full-grown jaguar came out of the bush and swam across the river which was about a hundred yards across. My companion wanted to chase it in the canoe and hit it with a paddle, — paddle-happy that time as he had no gun. There are a lot of crazy people in this world who look for trouble in the bush and call it "adventure", and then write a book about the narrow escapes they have had and the danger from wild animals. If you look for trouble you will certainly get it.

I had a very eerie experience one day when I was after some wild turkey (Paoui -- Pipile pipile). I could hear them calling on the ridge. After climbing to the top, I found that they had disappeared so I stretched out on the ground to rest. Some corbeaux (Coragyps sp.) were flying high above me. I paid no particular attention to them until they circled and started to spiral down. One came and lit on a dry branch, then another and another. Finally there were four around eyeing me in the apparent hope of a meal. Then one dropped on the path near my head. Well, that was too much, so I got up and they flew away. I don't know if they were attracted to me by sight or smell, and only hope that it was not smell as the corbeaux feeds on carrion.

A large constrictor about twelve feet long, as far as I could estimate, was once sent to me from Quare Dam. I had it in a suitable crate and bought a young hen for it to feed on. The hen used to perch on the snake's back and peck at it; I then realised that it was pecking the ticks off the snake. Every time the snake raised its head to investigate the hen and flicked out its tongue the hen, taking the tongue for some kind of worm, I suppose, would peck him on the snout; the snake would recoil with a hiss and settle down again. Well, this went on for over a week and as the snake refused to eat (or perhaps was scared of the hen), I decided to liberate the hen -- she certainly deserved it -- and also the snake. I took the snake in a jitney to the Quare Valley to let it go, and putting the box on the ground pulled the snake out; it returned to the box. This went on for some time and I was getting tired of the game, so I overturned the box with the help of the driver and put it back empty in the jitney. The snake remained in the road, and I was wondering what to do next to get rid of it when three men came coasting down the hill on bicycles. There was a screeching of brakes and yelling. They were lucky not to be catapulted over the handlebars. Anyhow, by this time it was getting late and I had to get rid of the boa. I then noticed that when I walked about the snake was inclined to follow, so I walked slowly into the bush. I suddenly ran at right angles to the snake and left it there. It took me nearly an hour to get rid of that constrictor.

On two occasions I have been unfortunate in encounters with wasps. The first was at Quare Dam when I was replacing the Superintendent there. It was my habit after work to go for a walk in the forest. In going down a steep slope I grasped a small tree on my way down to check my descent, not noticing a big Guepe Tatoo (*Synoecca surinama*) nest on the tree. Things

happened fast then; the wasps swarmed out stinging me on the side of my face, neck and bare forearm. The pain was so sharp and sudden that I pitched down the incline and landed flat on my face with the wind knocked out of me. When I recovered sufficiently and looked around I found that I was picketed by a semi-circle of wasps on the ground. After a while the wasps started to fly back to the nest, one after the other, at intervals. One remained about ten feet in front of me, on guard; I in the meantime eyeing him and wondering if I dared move. This must have lasted for about ten minutes, or so it seemed; then I took courage and slid slowly backwards about a foot at a time till I gauged that I was far enough to get up.

The second memorable encounter took place in Venezuela when I happened to be walking up a hill in the bush (lastrajo) and put my face almost into a large nest of Jack Spaniards (*Polistes* sp.). I jammed on all brakes, so to speak, and stopped. I watched the wasps buzz around and waited till they had calmed down and settled on the nest. I turned round and started walking back down the hill when all of a sudden I got two stinging jabs in my posterior. I jumped forward with a yelp and landed sitting further down the hill. If that is what a wasp calls a joke, I had to see the funny side so I burst out laughing.

Another "adventure" that befell me again in Venezuela when I was making a collection of fish for the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia I should call a bad scare rather than an adventure. Being paddled up the river one day I was attracted by a fine bunch of Yellow Bee Orchids on a tree at the edge of the mud bank leading into the jungle. I started climbing the incline which was about thirty yards broad, when out shot a caiman of about 8 to 10 feet long heading towards me at great speed, — and believe me they can move. I was stuck in the mud more than knee deep and couldn't budge. I did not know what to do and all sorts of wild schemes flashed through my head; anyway the old stand-by of keeping stock still seemed to work again; the reptile passed about three feet away with a whoosh and a shower of mud, and darted into the river near my canoe causing the men nearly to upset it in their excitement. When my heart started beating again I made my way back to the boat, forgetting all about the orchids.

Looking over my notes of these jottings I find that on only one occasion, as far as I am aware, have I been in grave danger of being bitten by a venomous snake. This happened in going through some more or less

abandoned cocoa estate at the head of the Maraval Valley, when I nearly put my foot on a coiled Mapepire Zanana (*Lachesis muta*), one of our most deadly snakes. It must have been asleep. I cannot tell what made me look down at the time, and I don't know if I broke any records for a One-foot-backward jump, but that leap put me well out of danger zone. I had a .22 pistol with me and my hand was perfectly steady as I shot the snake in the head. But about five or ten minutes after shooting it and putting it in a bag, reaction set in and my hands started to tremble. A stiff shot of "Vat 19" put an end to that.