

Smooth-coated otter interacting with banded file snake

Subjects: Smooth-coated otter, *Lutrogale perspicillata* (Mammalia: Carnivora: Mustelidae);
Banded file snake, *Acrochordus granulatus* (Reptilia: Serpentes: Acrochordidae).

Subjects identified by: Contributors and Kelvin K. P. Lim.

Location, date and time: Singapore Island, Marina Reservoir at Kallang basin, Kallang Water Sports Centre; 20 November 2016; around 0748 hrs.

Habitat: Freshwater. Dammed estuary surrounded by concrete buildings and urban parkland.

Observer: Jeffery Teo.

Observation: The otter discovered the adult file snake in the water near the boat launch ramp. It caught and tussled with the snake at the ramp for about ten minutes, during which the reptile launched the front part of its body out of the water at the otter a few times (Fig. 1). The snake made two unsuccessful attempts to escape beneath a dragon boat docked at the ramp (Fig. 2). The otter used its claws and jaws to restrain the snake and prevent it from swimming away (Figs. 3-7). It seemed unfazed and unhurt by the struggling snake.

Eventually, the otter allowed the snake to swim away when it heard and responded to the calls of other members of its family nearby. Apparently it was a signal for all members of the otter clan to move on. The otter abandoned the snake and swam towards its family. The otter was alone while tussling with the snake. It did not vocalize to the other seven members of its family that were about 20 m away. It did not appear to be concerned with human on-lookers who were about 4 m away from it. The snake seemed to be undamaged after the encounter despite the otter having clawed and chewed at it.

Remarks: Smooth-coated otters are mainly fish eaters, but are known to eat rats, snakes, softshell turtle, crabs and freshwater prawns (Goldthorpe et al., 2010; Medway, 1983). One was recorded killing a large water monitor but was not seen preying on the lizard (Goldthorpe et al., 2010). The otter featured here did not seem to have the intention of mortally injuring the reptile or wanting to eat it. Instead, it appeared to be toying with the snake. Although the file snake's act of launching itself out of the water at the otter appears to be striking in self-defence, it could be desperate attempts to flee from the otter's grasps instead of biting the otter. This can be explained by 1) the snake not always aiming at the otter (for example in Fig. 1), 2) the snake not appearing to have its mouth wide open (Figs. 1, 3 & 5), and 3) the otter not once flinching from the 'strikes'.

The banded file snake is a non-venomous, fully aquatic species that occurs in saltwater. However, a local population adapted to freshwater is known from Lower Seletar Reservoir and is believed to be descended from snakes trapped in the Seletar estuary when it was dammed from the sea to form a freshwater reservoir (Ng, 2011). Likewise, the featured example is most likely descended from snakes trapped in the Marina Reservoir after the erection of the Marina barrage. The Marina Reservoir seems to be the second location in Singapore where the banded file snake is known to occur in freshwater.

References:

- Goldthorpe, G., C. Shepherd, S. Hogg & B. Leupen, 2010. Predation of water monitor lizard (*Varanus salvator*) by smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) in peninsular Malaysia. *IUCN Otter Specialist Group Bulletin*. 27 (2): 78-84.
- Medway, Lord, 1983. *The Wild Mammals of Malaya (Peninsular Malaysia) and Singapore*. Reprint of second edition with corrections. Oxford University Press, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. xxiii + 131 pp.
- Ng T. H., 2011. A record of the banded file snake, *Acrochordus granulatus* (Reptilia: Squamata: Acrochordidae) in a freshwater habitat in Singapore. *Nature in Singapore*. 4: 91-93.

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Fig. 1. The boat ramp where the otter (indicated by arrow) was observed interacting with the file snake at the lower right. The front part of the snake can be seen launching out of the water as it attempted to escape from the otter. On the extreme lower right is the dragon boat under which the snake had twice tried to escape.



Fig. 2. Banded file snake attempting to escape under the dragon boat.

Photographs by Jeffery Teo



Fig. 3. Snake apparently striking at the otter.



Fig. 4. Otter holding to the snake's tail.



Fig. 5. Snake with its head next to the otter's jaws.



Fig. 6. Otter with the snake's head in its mouth.



Fig. 7. Otter with midsection of snake in its mouth attempting to fling it out of the water.

Photographs by Jeffery Teo