

Pink-headed reed snake at Venus Drive forest with a note on its bite

Subject: Pink-headed reed snake, *Calamaria schlegeli* (Reptilia: Serpentes: Colubridae).

Subject identified by: Contributor.

Location, date and time: Singapore Island, Central Catchment Nature Reserve, Venus Loop; 1 August 2014; 2215 hrs.

Habitat: Secondary forest.

Observers: Contributor.

Observation: An example of about 40 cm total length was found on a narrow section of the trail. In his desire to photograph the specimen for record purposes, the contributor decided to relocate it to a more open area. As he gently picked up the snake, it jabbed its hard tail tip into the contributor's hand in its attempt to escape. Then the snake bit the contributor in the index finger of his left hand, which felt like two knives cutting in. The snake proceeded to chew on the wound. The snake was carefully prised away, and allowed to crawl into the undergrowth after the accompanying picture (Fig. 1) was taken.

The wound (Fig. 2) bled quite a lot for a snake of this size. After five minutes, the left side of the bitten hand, including the little finger, began to go numb. The numbness spread to the entire hand and arm in the next 15 minutes. About an hour later, a burning sensation and stinging pain were felt throughout the arm. A mild stiffening of muscles around the jaws was then also experienced. The pain and numbness in the arm subsided 15 to 30 minutes later, together with the stiffening of the facial muscles. However, some short periods of numbness in the hand were experienced well into the next afternoon. No swelling was observed around the bite site at any time.

Remarks: Although its colour pattern, particularly the brilliant red head, is believed to mimic the venomous blue coral snake (*Calliophis bivirgatus*), this apparently inoffensive snake has not been known to be venomous (Baker & Lim, 2012: 96). Indeed the bite of members of the genus *Calamaria* is considered harmless (Stuebing et al., 2014: 110). The present incident shows that this species may not be as harmless as popularly assumed, and its possible toxicity ought to be investigated.

References:

- Baker, N. & K. K. P. Lim, 2012. *Wild Animals of Singapore. A Photographic Guide to Mammals, Reptiles, Amphibians and Freshwater Fishes*. Updated edition. Draco Publishing and Distribution Pte. Ltd. and Nature Society (Singapore). 180 pp.
- Stuebing, R. B., R. F. Inger & B. Lardner, 2014. *A Field Guide to the Snakes of Borneo*. Second edition. Natural History Publications (Borneo), Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. viii + 310 pp.

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Fig. 1. The snake that bit the contributor. Photograph by David Groenewoud



Fig. 2. The wound on the index finger of the contributor, 2 hrs 15 min after the bite occurred, and after blood was washed from the wound. Photograph by David Groenewoud