

A king cobra hunting at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve

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Subjects: King cobra *Ophiophagus hannah* (Reptilia: Squamata: Elapidae);
Sunda dog-faced water snake, *Cerberus schneiderii* (Reptilia: Squamata: Homalopsidae).

Subject identified by:

Location, date and time: Singapore Island, Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, mangrove boardwalk; 6 July 2018; 1400 hrs.

Habitat: Inter-tidal mangrove forest, on the mud-flat at low tide.

Observers: Andrew Tay and a group of students from Fairfield Methodist Primary School.

Observation: From an elevated boardwalk, the observers noted a king cobra of about 2.5 m total length on the mudflat below slowly ‘sniffing’ around (Fig. 1). When it poked his head into a hole of a tree trunk lying on the mud (marked with arrow in Fig. 2), a small snake almost immediately shot vertically out of the hole into the air and landed a short distance away. Right away, the cobra reared its head up apparently to check the position of the small snake (Fig. 2). It managed to locate the small snake among some mangrove roots a short distance away (Fig. 3). The cobra caught the small snake by biting it at the mid-section and held on. The small snake responded by biting the cobra on the back of its neck (Fig. 4). From the keeled scales and dark markings on its underside (shown in Fig. 4), the small snake is identified as a Sunda dog-faced water snake. Unfortunately, the observers had to leave while the envenomation of the prey was still in progress.

Remarks: King cobras specialise in feeding on snakes and lizards (Charlton, 2018). In Singapore, an example was recently observed attacking a reticulated python (Ambede, 2015). Another tried apparently to cannibalise a smaller conspecific (Sankar & Harrick, 2019). One was encountered in the act of swallowing a clouded monitor lizard (Kurniawan et al., 2018).

The king cobra is known to inhabit the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve where a 1.5 m individual was photographed in the roof of an observation hut in November 2011 (Rakhmanaliev, E. & T. Ivanova, 2016). The dog-faced water snake is common at the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, with approximately 102 individuals recorded per hectare in brackish-water ponds in 2006 (Chim & Diong, 2013). The featured observation shows that this food source is being tapped by the king cobra.

References:

- Ambede, A., 2015. King cobra attacking reticulated python. *Singapore Biodiversity Records*. 2015: 133-136.
- Charlton, T., 2018. *King Cobra. Natural History and Captive Management*. Natural History Publications (Borneo), Kota Kinabalu. xi + 151 pp.
- Chim C. K. & C. H. Diong, 2013. A mark-recapture study of a dog-faced water snake *Cerberus schneiderii* (Colubridae: Homalopsidae) population in Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, Singapore. *The Raffles Bulletin of Zoology*. 61 (2): 811-825.
- Kurniawan, A., G. Lee, Nasruddin bin Tohed & M.-R. Low, 2018. King cobra feeding on a monitor lizard at night. *Singapore Biodiversity Records*. 2018: 63.
- Rakhmanaliev, E. & T. Ivanova, 2016. King cobra at Sungei Buloh. *Singapore Biodiversity Records*. 2016: 33-34.
- Sankar A. & P. Harrick, 2019. Observation of a king cobra attacking a smaller conspecific. *Singapore Biodiversity Records*. 2019: 48-49.



Fig. 1. The king cobra (indicated by arrow) hunting on the exposed mangrove mudflat during low tide.



Fig. 2. It reared up to search for the small snake that had shot out of the hole (arrowed) in the log.



Fig. 3. The cobra found its prey among the nearby mangrove roots and bit it.



Fig. 4. While the king cobra was biting the mid-section of the dog-faced water snake, the smaller snake responded by biting the back of the cobra's neck (arrowed).

Photographs by Andrew Tay