

Biodiversity Record: Attempted cannibalism between two king cobras

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Recommended citation. Azam HBM, Zanirato L, Ang JY & Quah SJW (2025) Biodiversity Record: Attempted cannibalism between two king cobras. *Nature in Singapore*, 18: e2025007. DOI: 10.26107/NIS-2025-0007

Subjects: Sunda king cobra, *Ophiophagus bungarus* (Reptilia: Squamata: Elapidae).

Subjects identified by: Lorenzo Zanirato and Ang Jun Yang.

Location, date and time: Singapore Island, Windsor Nature Park; 8 December 2024; 1313–1859 hrs.

Habitat: Parkland adjacent to swamp-forest and secondary forest. At the edge of a freshwater stream and pond next to a boardwalk.

Observers: Hamadnurrafat Bin Mohd Azam, Lorenzo Zanirato, Ang Jun Yang, Quah Shi Jie Wayne and others.

Observation: At 1313 hrs, the body and tail of an adult king cobra was sighted after the observers heard a splash in the stream (Fig. 1). It seemed as if the snake had caught something, but it was 10 minutes later when a second and larger adult king cobra was spotted. Both snakes were biting each other's necks (Fig. 2), and foam was observed around the smaller cobra's mouth (Fig. 3).

At 1355 hrs, and after multiple times of rolling their bodies about, the smaller cobra lost its grip on its opponent's neck. The larger cobra then executed another roll, causing the other snake to coil into a ball (Figs. 4 & 5).

At 1405 hrs, the larger cobra had secured a firmer grip on the other cobra's neck (Fig. 6). Both snakes remained in this position for more than an hour, occasionally performing more body rolls.

At 1554 hrs, the smaller cobra broke free and fled into the pond. It was immediately pursued by the larger individual, which quickly caught up, and both snakes were interlocked in the middle of the pond where they rolled about multiple times (Fig. 7).

About 10 minutes later, the larger cobra slowly dragged the other snake, which appeared limp, out of the water by the neck and attempted to swallow it (Fig. 8). It would slowly pull the smaller individual further up the bank.

About an hour later, the smaller cobra was still making occasional movements but seemed subdued at the same spot, unable to slither away. The larger conspecific released its grip and started slithering around, circling the pond multiple times. It was also observed drinking from the pond (Fig. 9). The larger cobra then returned to the smaller snake and bit it once on the body. They remained in that position until just before the observers left at 1859 hrs (Fig. 10).

Remarks: As the nature park closed at 7 pm, the observers could not stay to witness the result of the event. Hence, it is unclear if the larger cobra had eaten its smaller conspecific, although the larger individual was last seen at 1859 hrs still biting the smaller cobra, and attempts to swallow it were made earlier.

This is the second recent record in Singapore of a king cobra attacking a conspecific with an unknown end result. The earlier incident was observed at Macritchie in 2019 (Sankar & Harrick, 2019 as *Ophiophagus hannah*).

In Singapore, king cobras have been recorded preying on other snakes and large lizards, such as gold-ringed cat snake, *Boiga melanota* (see Lim et al., 2011, as *Boiga dendrophila* and *Ophiophagus hannah*), reticulated python, *Malayopython reticulatus* (see Ambede, 2015; Sankar et al., 2021; as *Ophiophagus hannah*), dog-faced water snake, *Cerberus schneiderii* and shore pit-viper, *Trimeresurus purpureomaculatus* (Koh & Chanani-Parikh, 2021, as *Ophiophagus hannah*) and clouded monitor lizard, *Varanus nebulosus* (see Kurniawan et al., 2018, as *Ophiophagus hannah*).



Fig. 1. Body and tail of the smaller king cobra in the stream when initially sighted (Photograph by: Ang Jun Yang).
Fig. 2. Dorsal view of both snakes biting down on each other's necks (Photographs by: Ang Jun Yang).
Fig. 3. Foaming around the smaller cobra's mouth (Photographs by: Ang Jun Yang).
Fig. 4. Smaller cobra lost its grip against the larger snake (Photograph by: Ang Jun Yang).
Fig. 5. The smaller cobra coiled into a ball after another body roll executed by the larger individual (Photograph by: Lorenzo Zanirato).
Fig. 6. Larger cobra securing a firm grip on the smaller conspecific's head (Photograph by: Lorenzo Zanirato).
Fig. 7. Both snakes intertwined and tussling in the middle of the pond (Photograph by: Ang Jun Yang).



Fig. 8. Lateral view of larger king cobra attempting to swallow the smaller conspecific (Photograph by: Lorenzo Zanirato).

Fig. 9. Larger cobra drinking from the pond while the smaller one lies subdued beside it (Screenshot from video by: Hamadnurrafat Bin Mohd Azam).

Fig. 10. Larger cobra biting the smaller conspecific's body at 1859 hrs (Photograph by: Hamadnurrafat Bin Mohd Azam).

Following a taxonomic revision of the king cobra by Das et al. (2024), *Ophiophagus hannah* is now restricted to the northern and eastern parts of the Indian sub-continent, southern China and continental southeast Asia north of the Isthmus of Kra. The form occurring in Singapore, as well as much of Sundaland, is recognised as *Ophiophagus bungarus*.

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