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## On Snakes Swallowing Their Young

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### ON SNAKES SWALLOWING THEIR YOUNG

"One day as we came trooping out of school at noon, the snake raised its head several inches, uttered a hissing sound, and then lowered its head an inch or so from the ground and opened its mouth quite widely. All eyes were on the snake, when from around the corner of the house and from further away in the yard, came a number of small snakes which rushed pell-mell into the open mouth of the mother—the first little snakes to enter the mouth would almost instantly turn around and stick their little heads out and thrust out their little forked tongues as defiantly as you please. Often there would be three or four heads sticking out at one time, and considerable signs of a rumpus going on inside her body a few inches back from the head."

The foregoing is from the pen of Dr. E. D. Ball, former State Entomologist, writing in the Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science for 1915. He is writing here of a large and "motherly" common garter snake whose unique behavior he witnessed while attending a rural school in Iowa. The actions of the snake here described took place not once, according to Ball, but as often as he and the rest trooped out to witness the feat. He adds, also, that he has seen the same thing several times since, although under less favorable conditions.

Do snakes actually swallow their young to protect them and later spew them out again as Dr. Ball states further in his article? Well, I have never seen them do this, and I do not know of any other student of snakes who has. Ditmars, Curator of Reptiles at the New York Zoological Gardens, has never seen anything of this kind, and he daily observes more snakes than the average man does in a lifetime.

But if they do not actually swallow their young, how can we account for stories like the one quoted above? Dr. Ball obviously believes what he is telling even though the story has its imperfections. It may be pointed out, for example, that garter snakes do not hiss, and that even for the moment granting this power, it would require a considerable hiss,

amidst the clamor of the school children, to tell all the little snakes "around the corner" and "further out in the yard" that they were expected to come running into the maw of their 'Ma.'

When garter-snakes are first born they are about the size of ordinary earthworms, say five or six inches long and the diameter of a soda-straw, and anyone who has ever watched even a good-sized garter snake swallowing an earthworm can well see the difficulty that the little snakes would encounter in thus seeking sanctuary in the depths of their mother. The earthworm, in fact, slippery as it is, is not actually swallowed, but rather "chewed" down, and one may well surmise that this would be a slow and painful procedure to the young snakes.

Some snakes, the common king snake for example, are cannibalistic in habit, and may often be seen devouring other snakes which they have killed by squeezing between their powerful coils. A casual observer seeing this swallowing act in its last stages might easily believe that the snake was swallowing its own young. Some snakes also produce living young and if shortly before the birth of its young a snake were smashed badly, the wriggling young thus prematurely freed might again lend some support to the idea of "snake swallowing." Both of these considerations may have something to do with the origin of the superstition, for such I believe it to be.

Roy L. Abbott

### WHAT ABOUT ORGANIC EVOLUTION?

One of the great generalizations of science is the theory of organic evolution. It is, however, very commonly misunderstood by the average person. To many, thanks to such deluded individuals as the late William Jennings Bryan, it is a very dangerous doctrine and any one who believes in it is an atheist and must reject the teachings of the Bible. I have had college students ask this question. Is it possible for one to believe in evolution and be a Christian? This question arises only from one who has misconceptions as to the real meaning of evolution and