

1915

Snakes Swallowing Their Young

E. D. Ball

Utah Agricultural College

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©1915 Iowa Academy of Science, Inc.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/pias>

Recommended Citation

Ball, E. D. (1915) "Snakes Swallowing Their Young," *Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science*, 22(1), 343-344.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/pias/vol22/iss1/51>

This Research is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa Academy of Science at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

SNAKES "SWALLOWING" THEIR YOUNG.

E. D. BALL.

Doctor Herrick in his review of the "Infancy of Animals" in a recent number of *Science* raises the question of the accuracy of observations on snakes swallowing their young. As the writer once had what was probably a particularly favorable opportunity to witness this phenomenon, it occurs to him that the following facts may be worth recording.

The country school in Iowa which the writer attended was held in the ordinary frame schoolhouse supported by a "cobblestone" foundation of water-worn rocks more or less embedded in mortar. The school house faced the south and a set of narrow steps led up to the single central door. Through the foundation wall about half way between these steps and the southeast corner of the building, and about eight to ten inches above the surface of the ground, was an irregular opening about two inches in diameter. This opening was used as a refuge one spring and summer by a large and "motherly" looking specimen of the common garter snake of the region. The snake kept close to the hole at first and disappeared at the slightest sound. Later as we became interested in it, it was not disturbed and became accustomed to the ordinary noises of the children and would, if not too closely approached, often lie in the sun along side the wall during recess time. One day as we came trooping out at noon the snake raised its head several inches from the ground, uttered a hissing sound and then lowered its head to within an inch or two of the ground and opened its mouth quite widely. This rather frightened us and 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. When the last one was in, the mother snake raised her head quite high, wriggled over to the hole and disappeared. She was back there again at the next recess and the performance was repeated for a number of days. After this the same thing occurred at each recess, and two of us, who had even then budding naturalistic instincts would occasionally ask to "go out" in order to get a performance for our special benefit.

When the troops of children were pushing and elbowing "to see" they would crowd up within a few feet of the snake, and the performance was very hasty and the snakes' disappearance rapid—the whole occupying only a few seconds. When, however, we went out alone and were careful not to get too near at the start, the mother snake would often not go into the hole at first but simply raise her head and remain in that position for several minutes, or until our curiosity prompted us to approach too close, when she would go in rather liesurely.

At these times the first little snakes to enter the mouth would almost instantly turn around and stick their little heads out and thrust out their forked tongues as defiantly as you please. Often there would be three or four of these heads sticking out at one time, and considerable signs of a rumpus going on inside her body a few inches back from the head. These signs we interpreted as the other little snakes fighting for a chance to get their heads out.

The little ones never seemed to be far away and often would be lying alongside the mother. The hiss seemed to be the sign for them to scurry for the mouth, and often two or three would be entering at the same time, while frequently before the last one was in there would be one or more heads sticking out. We never saw a little snake come entirely out, for as soon as the last one started in the mother snake would raise her head quite high, higher than that species ordinarily carries its head. The bulge in the mother snake was always in that part above ground, and there was always considerable movement in the bulge.

There could be no possibility of an optical illusion through the small snakes' going under the mother, because as soon as they were in, the head was always raised higher than the length of the little snakes and their heads and often an inch of their bodies would be showing out of the mouth at this time. Moreover the hole the mother's body went through was a tight fit around the bulge so that no little snakes could have gone in outside the mother, even if they could have reached up to the hole, which they could not. And if they were going into the hole at all why go past it as they often did to reach the mother's mouth? This same performance has been witnessed several times since under less satisfactory conditions, but at the time no question had been raised in the writer's mind and no particular attention was paid the details.

UTAH AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE,

LOGAN, UTAH.