

THE WATER-COBRA OF LAKE TANGANYIKA

By ARTHUR LOVERIDGE

Though more than 70 years have elapsed since Dollo described the eastern aquatic cobra (*Boulengerina annulata stormsi*), of its habits relatively little has been recorded.

So far as authentic records go, its sole habitat is Lake Tanganyika. There, at Kigoma and Karema on its eastern shore, Mr. C. J. P. Ionides secured eight in 1956, all of them being captured alive. Of these eight the three juveniles taken at Karema were subsequently killed, made into spirit specimens and sent to the M.C.Z., Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A. More recently—in August, 1958—Ionides visited Mpulungu on the Northern Rhodesia coast at the south end of the Lake, where, in less than a fortnight, he captured another 25. With characteristic generosity Mr. Ionides has placed at my disposal the observations that he made during the course of these undertakings. They add so much to our knowledge that it seems to me they should, by publication, be made available to a wider circle of naturalists.

Though largely aquatic and nocturnal, occasionally these big snakes may be seen shortly after sunrise basking among the rocks along the shore, before returning to the water where they are active till about 10.30 a.m. During most of the day they frequent crevices in the underwater rocks or, at Kigoma, among the submerged sandbags surrounding the pier at which the s.s. *Liamba* ties up. Daily at Mpulungu from the 11th to 27th August, cobras were visible entering or leaving crevices among the rocks below and around the *Liamba*, or occasionally, before 10 a.m. or after 4 p.m., basking while still partially submerged. Towards 4 p.m. they again appear to become more active.

When in the water, except when coming up to breathe, aquatic cobras appear to spend most of their time well below the surface. They seem shy, wary, and not in the least aggressive, so that the local people show no hesitation in bathing in the haunts of these reptiles. Such powerful snakes are difficult to dislodge from among the rocks, especially if the anterior portion has been able to secure an anchorage when the tail end is seized. On being captured an aquatic cobra almost invariably spreads its hood and gapes widely, but there is no spraying of venom.

With a single exception, all cobras taken at Mpulungu were caught in the evening, for this is the time they tend to cruise along the coastal rocks—visiting one cranny after another before departing for the open lake. Such behaviour is in sharp contrast to their return at daybreak, for then most snakes steer a fairly straight course to the rocks among which they usually disappear with a minimum of delay.

On the 23rd May, 1956, when in the vicinity of Kalalangabo, Kigoma, Ionides observed a five-and-a-half-foot cobra swimming on the surface of the lake with head above water. In her jaws was the head of a large fish she was propelling towards a rock. On reaching her objective the snake emerged and was engaged in swallowing the fish when Ionides seized her. Promptly she disgorged her prey, spread a hood, and demonstrated with wide-open mouth. After her captor had paddled ashore and consigned the cobra to a bag, he returned for the fish, but it had disappeared.

Another large ♀, taken at Mpulungu on the 30th August, 1958, was sent to the Coryndon Museum where, on the 9th September, 1958, she laid 22 eggs. Yet a third ♀, captured at Mpulungu on the 17th August, 1958, deposited eggs in September at the Chicago Zoo, Brookfield Park, Illinois.

An exceptionally interesting observation made by Ionides was the presence of ticks (*Aponomma latum*) infesting the head of a ♀ cobra taken at Mpulungu. For identification of the ticks the collector is indebted to Miss J. Walker.