

A TRIP TO AL ABER, QUATI STATE, HADRAMAUT,
EASTERN ADEN PROTECTORATE.

By

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The objectives of the trip were to collect specimens of Cerastes cerastes (Linnaeus), the Desert Horned-Viper, and of Echis coloratus Günther, the Arabian Saw-scaled Viper.

The habitat of both these snakes is desert, and in the case of the latter, semi-desert also. Al Aber is a fort in the Arabian Desert about 330 miles in a northerly direction from Mukalla which is on the coast, and 300 miles north-east of Aden itself. It is at an altitude of 3,300 feet. The area consists of isolated stony hills, sand, lava rocks and, in places, a certain amount of low scrub and coarse grass. There is no cultivation.

We reached Al Aber in the afternoon on the 17th April, 1965. As soon as we arrived we asked the Bedouin to spread the news among the encampments in the area that we wanted news of any snakes seen. Provided the snakes were not molested in any way, we promised that a substantial reward would be paid for any such information which resulted in the capture of the specimen.

Early in the morning of the 18th, we started off in a Landrover from Al Aber to make a round of the Bedouin encampments. We hoped to pick up news of our quarry. At the first of these encampments news was actually brought while we were drinking coffee with the Arabs. A snake had been found in the near vicinity. We went to the place and found a large adult male Cerastes coiled up among small dark stones. He was captured at 7.40 a.m. and proved to be the largest of the species we were able to collect during our stay in Al Aber. He was 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ ins. long, had a girth of 3 ins., and a tail of $\frac{3}{4}$ ins. We continued the round but found that the news had not yet reached most of the encampments.

On our way back to the fort we decided to make a search amongst some small rocks on the side of the hill. We turned over many of the rocks and discovered a male snake beneath one. He made off and hid beneath another rock but was then captured. This species we have not yet identified, but it is a back-fanged snake and although in no way related to the Cerastes, its coloration of warm sand brown marked irregularly with darker brown was surprisingly similar in general effect. It also had a conspicuous dark round spot behind each eye.

On the 19th the round was made again. A fair sized Cerastes female was taken in open rocky shale at 8 a.m. We dug an adult male from under sand at 9.10 a.m. He was very angry and rustled loudly when we caught him. This rustling is made by rubbing the strongly keeled scales together while the snake is in a tightly coiled position. Both Cerastes and Echis do this as a warning demonstration.

On the following day we secured two further specimens of Cerastes; a female taken in sand at 7.55 a.m. and a male in a similar habitat fifteen minutes later.

A Trip to Al Aber

On the morning of the 21st we were lucky enough to take our first Echis coloratus. He was a large male of 28 ins. in length which we found in a rocky area at 8.45 a.m. whilst he was still on the move. Within five minutes of this success we discovered another E. coloratus, this one a female lying under a rock. Our bag of Cerastes was increased by two specimens, namely a large male moving in sand at 7.40 a.m. and within a few minutes a female was seen buried in the sand with only her head visible. She was photographed by Mr. Orme-Smith in this position and then collected. At about 9.55 a.m. a juvenile male snake of the same species as the previous unidentified one, was taken on sand.

On the 22nd our first capture was made at 6.30 a.m. and our second five minutes later. Both female Cerastes and both in a sandy area. At 6.40 a.m. also in sand, a male of the same species was taken. Two hours later we collected a male of the unidentified species of back-fanged snake. He was in a flat sandy area and spread a slight hood when caught.

Following this capture, a strong wind arose which destroyed all snake tracks. Probably as a result of this we failed to find any more snakes that day. We left Al Aber on the 23rd to return to Mukalla.

During our stay at Al Aber there had been sunny days interspersed with very light drizzle. However, shortly before we arrived, there had been rain, and the day we left we heard that it rained again. We, ourselves were caught in heavy rain on the way back. We had found the nights cool, and the days quite warm, but somewhat windy.

Of the ten Cerastes taken, four had a large erectile horn-like scale over each eye. In the remaining six, this process was absent. The approximate lengths of the vipers caught were as follows:-

<u>C. cerastes</u>	male	horned	705 mm
<u>C. cerastes</u>	male	horned	660 mm
<u>C. cerastes</u>	male	unhorned	560 mm
<u>C. cerastes</u>	female	unhorned	480 mm
<u>C. cerastes</u>	female	unhorned	460 mm
<u>C. cerastes</u>	female	unhorned	450 mm
<u>C. cerastes</u>	male	horned	440 mm
<u>C. cerastes</u>	female	horned	440 mm
<u>C. cerastes</u>	female	unhorned	410 mm
<u>C. cerastes</u>	male	unhorned	390 mm
<u>E. coloratus</u>	male		711 mm
<u>E. coloratus</u>	female		570 mm

C. cerastes is clearly nocturnal in habit. During the day-time it lies up under sand, often with only the head protruding, or in the shade of stones. Its normal method of progression is "side-winding", which means that it moves at right angles to the direction in which its head is pointing and appears to skid along the sand in this manner. It moves with quite surprising speed. Fur was found in some of the faeces indicating that at least part of its diet is mammalian. It is a high spirited snake ready to defend itself if molested. Its sandy colour and broken pattern make it difficult to see in its desert habitat.

Judging by the two examples of E. coloratus taken, this species is of a milder temperament than its more widespread relative E. carinatus. It may "side-wind" in the manner of Cerastes but does not always do so. It occurs side by side with Cerastes in this area. It also

has the habit of rustling its scales as a warning as does E. carinatus. Though not so aggressive as E. carinatus it is a high spirited snake which is not prepared to stand any nonsense. It also has a sandy colour which assimilates with its desert environment.

Both species of viper are highly venomous, probably the E. coloratus is more so.

Beyond the fact that one specimen was caught among rocks and two in sand no particular notes were taken of the unidentified snake.

Various species of lizard were common in the area which suggests the likelihood that they form the large part of the food of all these three snakes.

We are deeply indebted to Qaid J.W.G. Gray of the Hadrami Bedouin Legion and to his wife, whose help, hospitality and kindness resulted in a most successful trip. The charm and friendliness of the Bedouin of Al Aber and of all the Arabs with whom we came in contact added greatly to the pleasure and success of the trip.

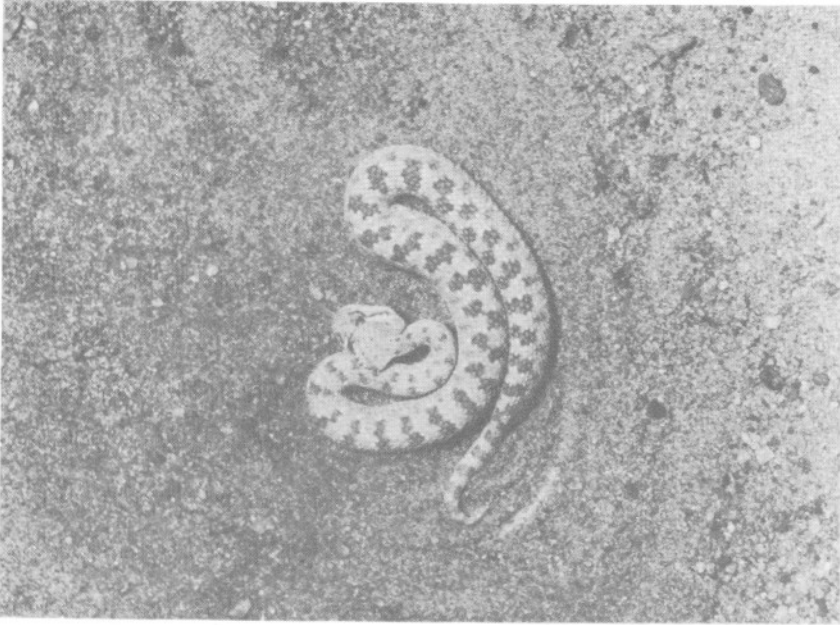
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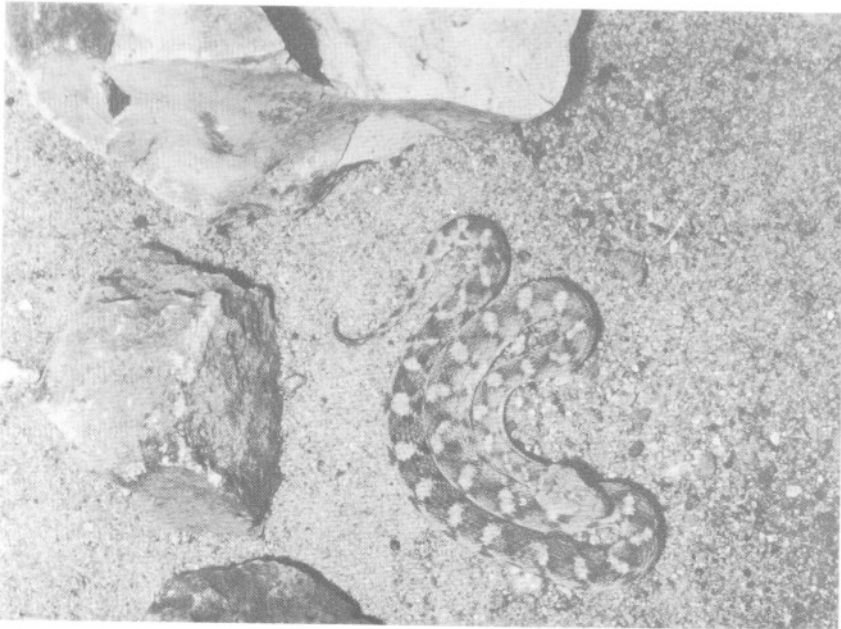
Desert Horned-Viper in its Natural Habitat.

Photos by C. ORME-SMITH

A Trip to Al Aber



Cerastes cerastes



Echis coloratus

(Photos by N.P.MITTON)