

## SNAKES ALIVE

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The best of being a member of the Cairngorm Club for me is having the occasional use of Muir Cottage for a weekend with a group of friends and no radio, telephone or television. After a hard walk or climb on the Saturday we come to the social highlight in the multi-course evening meal. Everyone seems to bring enough food and wine for two so we try hard not to waste anything, especially the wine.

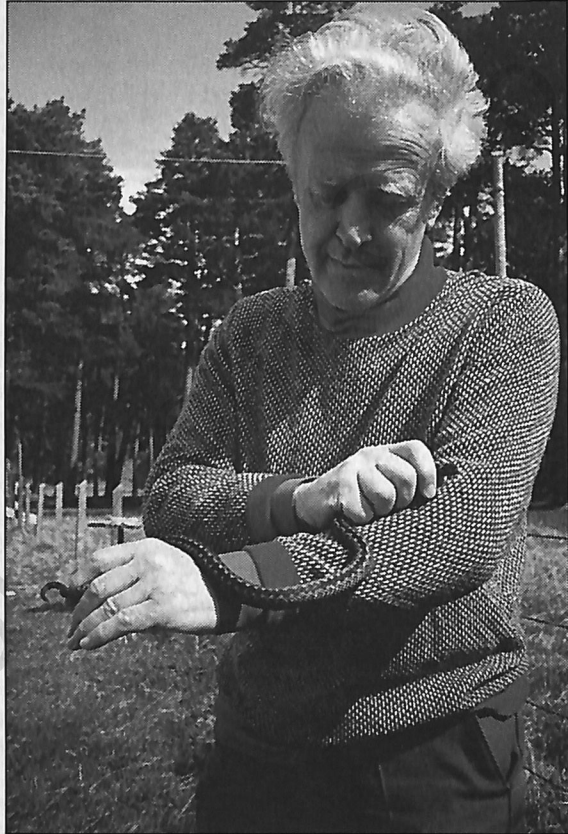
Sunday is usually a day for a gentle stroll and some amateur nature spotting. Early one morning one of our lawn-mowing red deer was doing a stint at the west end of the cottage. I got out the video and filmed as I herded it towards the river, intending to record the dainty standing leap with which they clear the fence. Just beyond the wood shed it got down on its knees and crawled under the bottom wire, walked a few paces and resumed grazing. On another occasion three of us came upon an astonishing brick-red frog. The only lady present refused to remove the spell by kissing it, on the rather feeble grounds that it didn't look very like a prince, and we men declined since there is no authentic record of a frog princess.

Across the road from Muir there is a mix of woodland, bog, dry banks and running water that is worth a careful look. There are fingerling trout in the burns, tadpoles in season above the deer fence, an occasional frog or toad and, if it is warm enough, a snake or two may be sunbathing. Like many a hill walker I had never seen a snake until I started looking in the most likely habitat on sunny days. With my sister and fellow member Hazel Elrick, I found my first near the water intake. With some trepidation and a lot of care I picked it up and handed it to her while I ran for my camera. The resulting photograph has hung in Muir for several years just to remind everyone of the sort of neighbours we have there. The rest of our company were idling around the cottage and, thinking that they would like to see this colourful chap, we took it across to them. It was an instant cure for Sunday morning lethargy. Two nameless persons gave the impression that they had suddenly recalled urgent business in a neighbouring county. Provided I held it by both head and tail, all the rest gave it a stroke and were impressed by its clean, silky smoothness. From that time I have made it my business to persuade friends that snakes really are quite nice and not at all nasty like those great, hairy, horrible house spiders lurking about in dark corners with more legs than a respectable insect has any need for. We put the snake back exactly where we found it and on checking about an hour later, it was lying sunning itself on the same spot, apparently not a bit put off.

The first one is still the most dramatically coloured I have seen. The lozenge shaped dorsal scales were laid out like a Moorish mosaic and the underside was of black, overlapping strips laid from side to side like the

apron of a medieval suit of armour. Looking at it straight on, the expression was a bit stony-eyed and the occasional flicker of its black tongue gave the distinct impression that it was studying me equally intently.

Five is the most that I have found at one time opposite the cottage. I had taken the tall plastic bucket from the kitchen with me and popped them in as I found them and took them to the cottage to let everyone see how varied they were. Having heard several people say that on seeing a snake they ran for their lives, I was able to demonstrate on the lawn that any one of those five would have had difficulty over-hauling a reasonably active zimmer driver and, on the linoleum in the dining room they made very poor progress indeed. Funny thing was that during the latter demonstration, most of the spectators sat with their legs tucked underneath them. Perhaps this was because the biggest



*The author handling an adder for the first time*

one was hissing both while inhaling and exhaling.

At an indoor meet last winter, our journal editor asked if I would care to write something on snakes, having heard of my interest and ability to find them. Being a complete amateur, I was not sure that I could do the subject justice. Since then however, I have added a snippet to my knowledge of snakes that is freely available to all but rarely taken up. There seems to be a fairly widespread belief that any snake one sees is a grass snake. This is highly unlikely and the only safe assumption is that all Scottish snakes are adders and therefore venomous. A slow moving, pencil-sized one could be a slow worm, but beware of immature adders in cold weather.

One day, fifty metres West of our water intake, I came upon a couple of snakes that appeared to be practising for their scout knots badge - or perhaps these adders were multiplying. I crept quietly away, not wishing to cause offence. On the Saturday morning, all my companions but Ray Clark having left for the hills, I was talking to a lady whose two dogs were running around on the grass across the way. I asked how they reacted to snakes and she said that she had never seen one. I immediately went a few paces through the trees, and there on its usual patch was the dark one I had shown to the work weekenders in April. I picked it up. It bit me!

There was no sudden flashing strike but a rather casual dab at my right index finger. I thought "Drat!" or something very similar and checked the damage. A small bead of blood appeared and, having left the Bowie knife back at the ranch, it was a case of suck and spit. It was no more painful than a jab with a darning needle if my long term memory serves me correctly. I tied a rough tourniquet round the finger with a handkerchief, bundling the spare material into my fist to conceal it and returned to the cottage.

I knew that when the hikers returned from the hills there would be fits of laughter at my expense and a large hole in my 'snakes are cuddly' campaign. To avoid this I swore Ray to eternal silence. It didn't last more than twenty minutes. My finger was now hard and a fetching shade of mauve, and he persuaded me that a visit to the doctor in Braemar could do no harm. Dr. Cruikshank made some phone calls then said that Accident and Emergency were expecting me. This seemed a bit over the top, but there is no point seeking medical advice and then ignoring it. Back to the cottage we went, where my car was loaded with canoe, bike etc. Ray laid down the law again - in royal Navy terms he outranks me by a dozen levels or so - and he would take me in his car. I reckoned we would be back in good time for the evening meal.

On the way the car became quite hot and Ray was slow to open the windows. He told me a week later that it was quite cool. By now I had loosened the tourniquet and my hand was like an inflated surgical glove while my arm had become round and featureless. A mild pain had spread along my arm, up as far as my larynx and almost down to my waist. My thoughts were mainly on the ribbing that was coming my way. On arrival at A and E the waiting time was zero. A venflon was fixed in my left arm and I was given Piriton and hydrocortisone while blood samples were sent for analysis. About three hours after the bite I suddenly felt rather weak and lay down, but was still able to exchange witty repartee with Ray. He told me later that I had been talking a lot of rubbish. Did he have to add "as usual!"

About this time I was whisked through to the resuscitation unit where I noticed that the tubular lights were funny shapes. What with all the gowned figures, heart monitor, blood pressure and pulse monitor, drip and oxygen mask, I began to feel quite important and heard some interesting medical talk "His BP has gone through his boots. Yes, here it is - sudden onset of hypotension." Next they gave me an infusion of European viper venom anti-

serum and I began to feel much better. I was later congratulated for having gone through the list of symptoms as per the book, fortunately stopping somewhere short of the last.

Of later non-medical opinions, I heard several of "accident waiting to happen" From one young man - "no fool like an old fool" (Thinks - "How sharper than a serpent's tooth etc." and consider redrafting will) and from a colleague on hearing that I had not been bitten on the ankle or such but had been picking the thing up, "Nae the hale shillin!" I suppose there is some truth an all of these.

I was kept at A and E for about thirty hours during which I received eight different medicines, including an antibiotic lest the snake's oral hygiene was poor. I was sent home with dented pride and swollen from neck to waist. My forearm was bluish and the rest of the area was a mild smoked haddock yellow. The pain was never anywhere near to unbearable, perhaps aided by drugs at the beginning. A slight discomfort persisted for about a month and the blood bank banned me for six months.

It was some time later after all the fuss had died down that I realised my good fortune. Left to my own devices I may well have reached the wobbly stage three hours into the hills, with the ignominy of requiring the rescue services and the attendant publicity of 'the old fool' nature. I am most grateful to Mr Raymond Clark and Dr. Cruikshank for setting me on the straight and narrow to the expert care and attention at A and E. So now I offer some entirely superfluous advice. There is only one course of action for dealing with a snake bite. Get immediate medical help, no matter how trivial it seems, especially if the victim is a child or elderly.

After all that I still feel well disposed towards snakes. I have only once come close to a genuine accident. There is some dry stone walling built into a bank just a few steps above the water intake, and at just the right height to put your hand on for a rest. An adder sometimes lies where a stone is missing. I saw it just in time. Look before you lean.

Oh, that snake? You will be pleased as I was to know that there are so many nature lovers at A and E. I think that there were as many enquiries after its health as mine. No, I did not take it with me in two pieces. No, I did not kill it. When last seen it was gliding gently away into the long grass with a thin-lipped smile on its face that looked distinctly smug. I feel that we shall meet again.