



The American Blacksnake

➤ WHEN LINNAEUS was giving scientific names to his pickled specimens from the New World, he awarded our American black snake, or black racer, the title of *Coluber constrictor*, meaning in translation "the constrictor snake."

But since then, naturalists have become aware of a fact that old Linnaeus did not learn from his pickled snakes. The American blacksnake is not a constrictor. It relies chiefly on stealth and speed to capture its prey, and does not generally kill by squeezing. Thus, *C. constrictor* goes under a name it does not deserve.

Perhaps if that famous name-giver had known more about the natural history of the blacksnake, he would have called it, in proper Latin, something like the speeding snake, or the rattlesnake's friend, or satiny snake. All of these would fit it well.

The blacksnake is smooth and satiny in appearance, not shiny. The most familiar of the group of subspecies, *C. constrictor constrictor*, is uniformly black above and beneath, the only break in its color being a white patch on the chin and lower lip plates. Other subspecies show color variations, such as the blue racer, *C. constrictor flaviventris*, which has a yellow under surface.

Blacksnakes are among the very fast crawlers of the snake family, so much so that their capture is often difficult if they choose to run instead of fight—and they can put up a valiant battle when cornered.

What seems lightning-like speed in a snake, however, is not always what it appears. Experiments have shown that the coachwhip, *Masticophis flagellum*, a very fast species and a close relative of the blacksnake, moves at a rate of only three miles per hour and prowls at a much slower one.

In winter, blacksnakes and rattlers may use the same hibernating quarters, gliding in and out of a common entrance and sleeping harmoniously in the same under-

ground dormitory with each other. Tales of enmity between rattlesnakes and blacksnakes are myths.

A six-foot blacksnake can be considered a very long one. Most reports of "blacksnakes" of seven or eight feet length can usually be attributed to the mountain blacksnake, *Elaphe obsoleta*. This snake is similar in appearance but of an entirely different group and with different habits. This snake, by the way, is a constrictor.

It may be that Linnaeus had heard tales of this snake when he called our blacksnake a constrictor.

Science News Letter, March 3, 1956

MEDICINE

Advanced TB Yields to Prolonged Drug Use

➤ EVEN FAR ADVANCED tuberculosis of the lungs with cavities can be checked by modern anti-TB drugs.

Good results with "indefinitely" prolonged treatment in six cases are reported by Drs. A. C. Douglas and N. W. Horne of Edinburgh City Hospital and the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, in the *British Medical Journal* (Feb. 18).

All the patients will acutely ill when admitted to the hospital. They were kept on bed rest and given streptomycin with either isoniazid or PAS for six months. After about six months, they were allowed gradually to be up and about, but the drugs were continued.

Marked improvement clinically and on X-ray examination followed in every case. Every one stopped having TB germs in their sputum in five months. They have continued to be sputum negative for 16 to 35 months.

The patients have now all been living at home for at least six months, some for much longer. Three housewives manage their homes unaided. The fourth woman patient is now employed at light work. One man, aged 68, is retired and able to enjoy his retirement. The sixth patient is incapacitated for any work because of chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

The patients continue to take their drugs and probably will have to do so indefinitely. They report to the hospital outpatient department about every three months. They are instructed to get medical attention early if they get a cold.

Interestingly, the doctors point out, only one patient has had a cold requiring specific treatment since leaving the hospital and that only once.

Science News Letter, March 3, 1956

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