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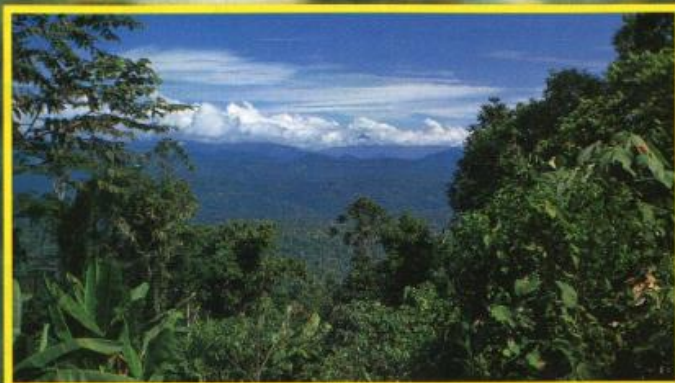
Searching for  
**GREEN TREE  
PYTHONS**  
In New Guinea

**IN THIS ISSUE:**  
Small Tortoises  
Lesser Antillean Iguanas





# THE EMERALD SERPENTS OF NEW GUINEA (Part 1)



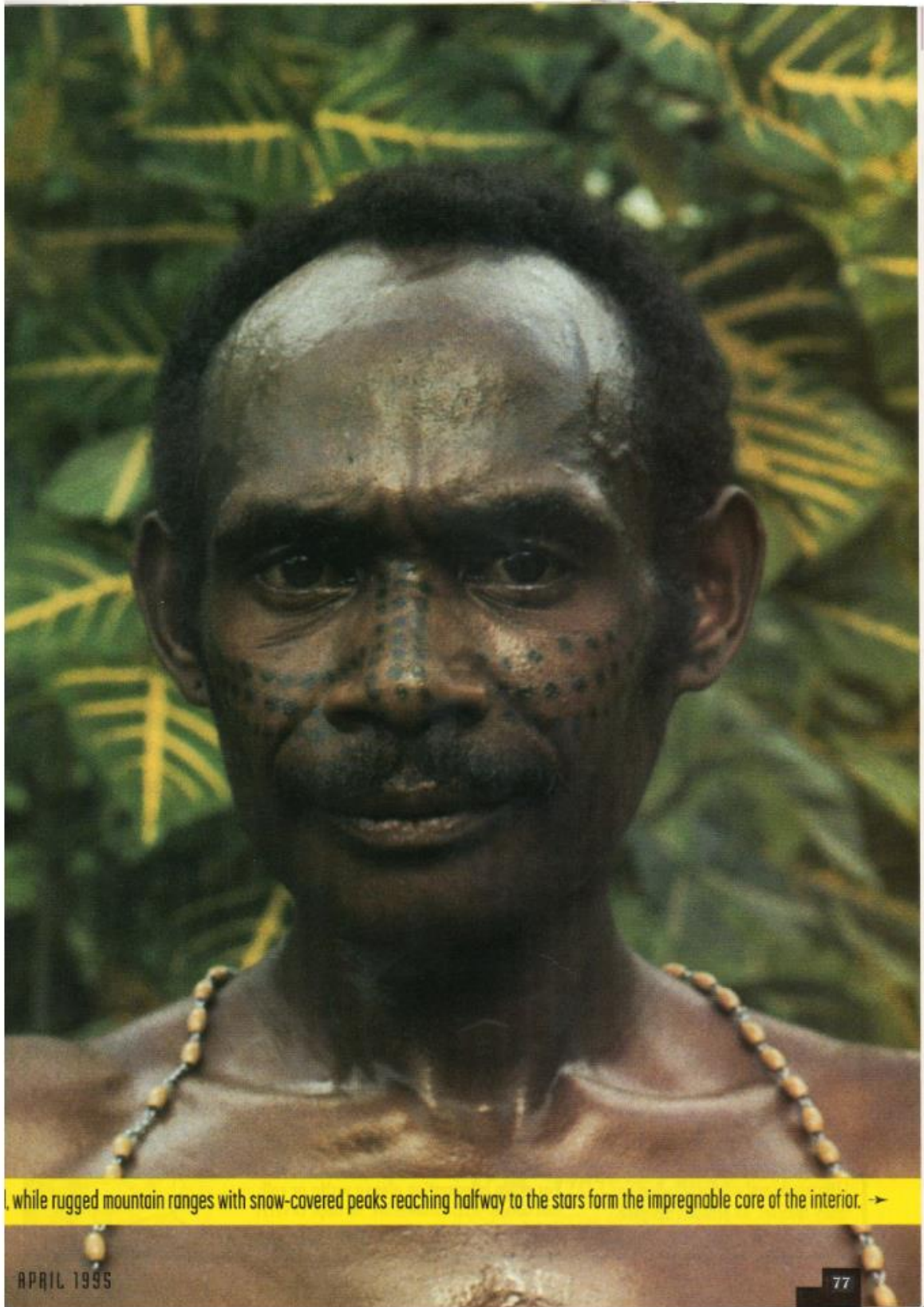
This is green tree python country, overlooking the Jimi region. The Sau River is hidden among the jungle's lush, green foliage.

Join this author in his search for green tree pythons.

Story and photos by Karl H. Switak

Natives from nearby villages captured several pythons for the author, including this exquisite specimen.

Mosquito-infested swamps surround the island at sea

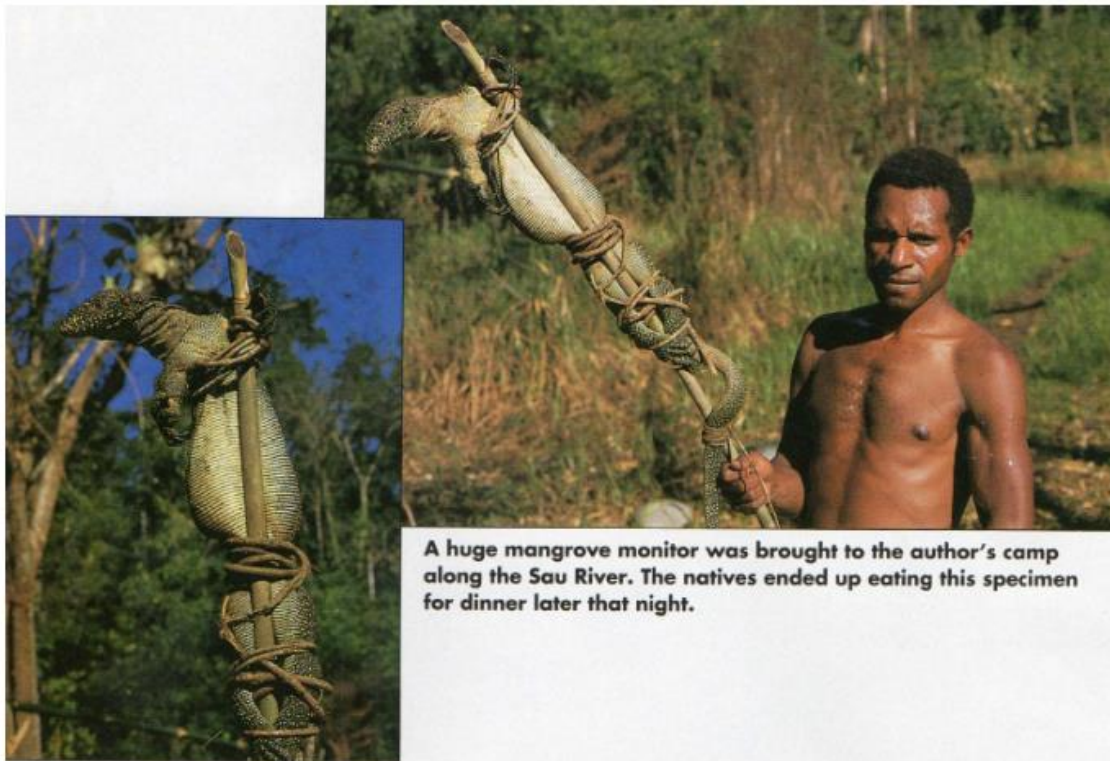


l while rugged mountain ranges with snow-covered peaks reaching halfway to the stars form the impregnable core of the interior. ->

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77





A huge mangrove monitor was brought to the author's camp along the Sau River. The natives ended up eating this specimen for dinner later that night.

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A multitude of rivers, some barely moving and others raging torrents, laboriously twist and wind their way toward the sea. At times, these waters are forced through narrow gorges, creating magnificent waterfalls and sending a penetrating mist throughout the already soaked countryside. The island is inhabited by a people whose beliefs date back to forgotten centuries and whose value for human life leaves much to be desired.

This is New Guinea, a land I have loved, a land I have feared, but always a land I've respected!

My love toward the island has been for the colorful diversity of plant and animal life. My fear dates back to the unknown bend in a muddy river or deserted mountain track where small settlements, seemingly devoid of habitation, kept the camp fires burning. My unquestionable respect has always been for the people. Day in and day out they are at war with some of the most trying elements that nature has to offer, but seldom yield much in return. Quite often, however, this war is not fought solely with nature's elements, but rather with a neighboring tribe. As a matter of fact, war is still a way of life. Not so long ago, warfare was the primary means by which a boy became a man.

#### Island of Plenty

With the passing of time and personal experience, I referred to New Guinea as the "island of plenty." That is, plenty of irritable natives, plenty of treacherous rivers to cross, plenty of heart-throbbing incidents, and always plenty of blood-sucking mosquitoes.

For parts of three consecutive years, starting in February of 1971, I traveled back and forth to Papua New Guinea to photograph and study the amphibians and reptiles which abound at various elevations. Although my searching through jungles and over mountain tops was never anthropological, I nevertheless encountered many people from different tribes, and heard beliefs and observed customs so interesting, and often bizarre, that herpetology quite frequently took second place during my investigations.

However, the primary reason for my journeys to this luxuriant island of

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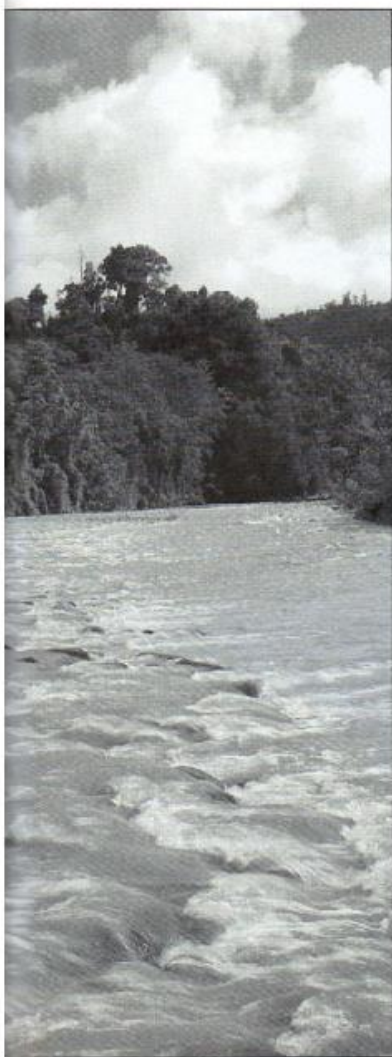


mountains, rivers and primitive tribal cultures was to find and observe one of the strangest serpents on earth: the coveted green tree python, *Chondropython viridis*. It is found only on New Guinea (both the Papua and Irian Jaya sides) and some of the smaller outlying islets. It also has a limited distribution in the extreme northern corner of Australia's Cape York Peninsula.

The green tree python is a striking creature with emerald skin, bronze eyes and a yellowish abdomen. The young are hatched from eggs and appear as either chocolate brown, reddish-brown or lemon yellow. Adults wear a coat of shiny green with contrasting patterns

REPTILES





The Sau River can be turbulent after rains. Mangrove monitors (*Varanus indicus*) frequent this locale.

of white spots or blotches. The young differ, the adults differ, and even specimens from various locales differ in color and pattern. It is indeed a sage of continued variance.

In the Jimi region surrounding the Sau River area, the natives actually differentiate between the sexes, saying that the yellow variety is the female. They do not, however, have an explanation as to what gender the brown variety belongs. Not wanting to admit their lack

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of knowledge, the sly and manipulative natives merely call the brown variety "another snake."

It wasn't so much native legend or myth that prompted my research, but rather the accumulation of scientific facts that could substantiate the unusual color transformations which surround the secret life of the monotypic genus *Chondropython*.

When I started my field investigations concerning the green tree python, I was employed by the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. My very first look at this serpentine beauty actually occurred in the mid-1950s, when Sir Edward Hallstrom of Australia sent a few of these snakes to Steinhart Aquarium, a part of the academy complex. I was still attending school in those early



The giant water dragon (*Gonocephalus* sp.) from Wau, Papua New Guinea, is a common species in the rain forest and reaches a length in excess of 2½ feet. A bite from this lizard is extremely painful and bleeds profusely.



days, but I managed to visit the aquarium almost daily to feast my eyes on so precious a reptile. Several years later, I took up employment with the academy (herpetologist in charge of the live amphibian/reptile collection at Steinhart Aquarium), but by then all of the pythons had succumbed to the perils of captivity. However, the images in my mind remained a concrete vision, and somehow I always knew that one day in the future a visit to New Guinea would be inevitable.

#### The Journey Begins

These visions, memories and a keen taste for adventure finally turned into reality on January 16, 1971. After months of planning, letter writing, organizing permits and selecting camera

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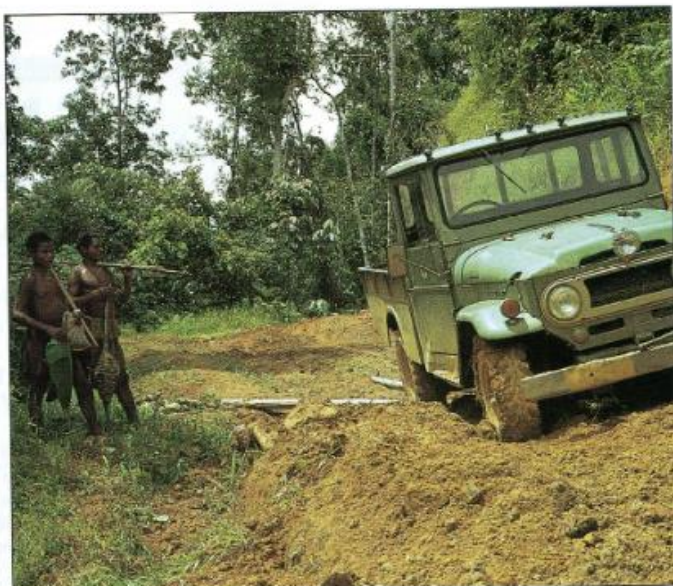
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On the road into the Jimi region, mud made traveling extremely difficult. On one occasion, it took more than a dozen natives to free the author's vehicle from concrete-like mud.



Another favorite food of the New Guinea natives are scrub pythons (*Liasis amethystinus*).

gear, my plane departed San Francisco for the "island of plenty." But first a few stops along the way, such as Tokyo, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore, Indonesia and Australia. Then, on February 15, 1971, the object of my dreams came into sight. "Fasten your seat belts," were the instructions from the

crew. "We are about to land in Port Moresby." Needless to say, my adrenalin was now flowing like a raging river. After organizing export permits and checking with Qantas about a possible shipment of live snakes back to San Francisco, I departed Port Moresby for the highland town of Mt. Hagen. There,

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This adult green tree python, some 4 feet in length, is from the highland jungle surrounding Nondugl.

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A young, 6-month-old green tree python is yellow in coloration, but it will eventually turn a brilliant green.

via pre-arrangement, I would travel some 60 miles over a dirt road to Nondugl, home of Rev. and Mrs. J. Rose, who kindly agreed to put up with a reptile enthusiast for a few days. Their two sons, Bruce and Brian, were fluent in pidgin and extremely helpful with the procurement of green tree pythons. As a matter of fact, they already had a number of specimens waiting for me.

The 1971 sojourn was merely exploratory, and shortly after my arrival, I knew that future expeditions were inevitable. Just obtaining live specimens of *Chondropython viridis* wasn't enough. What I desperately needed was a live female carrying eggs. And here is the reason why:

We knew that green tree pythons laid eggs, and that the young are either lemon yellow or chocolate/reddish-brown. We also knew that both juvenile color morphs would eventually turn emerald green. What we didn't know, however, was this: Does a single clutch of eggs produce both color variations? And if so, how long does it take for the neonates to change from one color to another?

My 1971 expedition did not produce the answer. However, I was fortunate to return to the academy with a number of specimens, and before leaving Nondugl, the Rose family agreed to have me as a visitor again the following year.

January 26, 1972, saw me back in Port Moresby once more. This time the preparations for export permits and shipping had been taken care of well in advance. On the evening of the 27th, I was back in Nondugl. The Roses had already accumulated 10 adult pythons and three yellow individuals. None of the adults, unfortunately, appeared gravid. So Bruce, the oldest son, suggested we undertake an expedition into the Jimi region to look for specimens in a different locale.

The Nondugl region lies at approximately 5,400 feet, where morning temperatures often drop into the low 50s Fahrenheit. Perhaps it wasn't the right time for female pythons to be gravid at these altitudes, so Bruce's idea of heading into lower elevations was terrific. It wasn't long before we had our 4-wheel drive Toyota Land Cruiser headed in the direction of the Sau River. We were well equipped and even took along one

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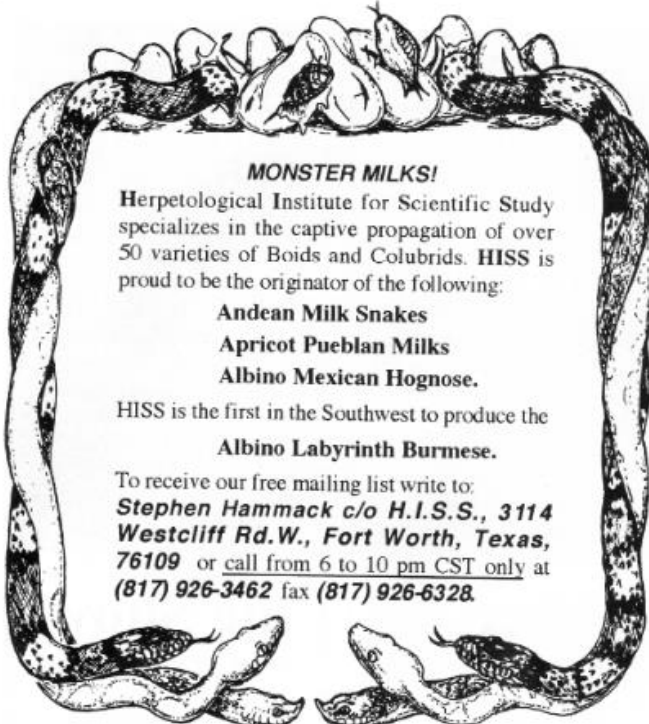
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**Journeys to the Jimi region  
produced several green tree  
pythons.**



of the local natives, who was an expert at trapping the famous bird of paradise. Nondugl was not only a self-sustaining coffee plantation, but also a bird sanctuary of excellence. Both projects were in the capable hands of the Rose family.

**The Jimi Region**

Soon after leaving Nondugl, our dirt road turned into an undulating track of

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nerve-racking experiences. Slowly, we climbed to 7,000 feet. At times there was just enough room to guide the wheels of our Land Cruiser past embankments that dropped well over a thousand feet into the hidden depths of the jungle below. Giant pandana palms silhouetted the mountain skyline, visible only when the clouds shifted position. From the 7,000-foot level, we de-

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scended 4,500 feet to the shores of the Sau River, but not before our vehicle bogged down several times in 2-foot-deep mud. We provided endless and comical entertainment for the natives along our route. However, they were the only ones laughing.

Reaching our goal, we used a deserted native hut for our base of operation. A Hilton it was not. At night, the mosquitoes plagued us to no end, while rats and giant cockroaches clambered over our sweaty bodies. We even built a small fire in the hut, which only provoked a lack of oxygen and continued laughter from the natives. The dawning of another day was a most welcomed sight, and the immediate submerging of our weary bodies in the Sau River seemed appropriate.

Not long after we set up our riverside camp, we began receiving visitors from the various tribes of Jimi people in the vicinity. When these natives learned that crazy Europeans were willing to pay hard cash for live snakes, the word spread quickly from village to village. The ruling council of the local Kwibin clan actually assigned five young men to look for pythons. All five were excellent climbers (who were accustomed to setting bird traps in trees), had keen eyesight and even volunteered to keep us supplied with fresh bananas and juicy papayas. Most important was the fact that they knew what a green tree python looked like and where they were likely to occur.

While our hunters were out foraging the jungle, we were hardly at a loss for company. Wasps, bees and a multitude of ants frequented our humble abode, while small skinks scampered through the dry grass walls chasing the aforementioned for food.

The first two days at the Sau turned up a small D'Albert's python (*Liasis albertsi*), a number of lizard species and two types of birds—but no green tree pythons. Both Bruce and I were starting to get worried. Finally, during the afternoon of the third day, came the loud chatter of native voices. Only a few yards down the dirt path was a small procession of locals, led by two very proud individuals, each with a green python wrapped around his arm. Both specimens appeared in excellent condition, and we were assured that no strong-arm tactics were used during

REPTILES

their capture. I noticed that one of the specimens appeared swollen near the anal region, and the thought of a gravid female shot through my mind like one of Robin Hood's arrows. But the anticipated eggs turned up in the morning as a regurgitated rat.

The natives' procedure for carrying a snake usually involves forcing its neck into a gap in the top of a split bamboo stalk, then tightly affixing the body to the stalk with vines, or even a piece of

Only a few yards down  
the dirt path was a  
small procession of  
locals, led by two  
very proud individuals,  
each with a green  
python wrapped  
around his arm.

rope. As the serpent struggles to escape, these vines cut deeply into the flesh and inflict permanent damage. Therefore, in dealing with our hunters, we always emphasized that the reptiles would be no good to us if they were "buggered up," meaning injured in pidgin, the blend of English and local languages that many tribes use to facilitate communication. Nevertheless, a number of animals arrived in deplorable condition, but we paid for them in any case. After haggling over the price—a normal procedure—we gave the beasts back to the natives along with payment. Then, it turned out, the natives would kill the pythons and eat them.

Numerous other snake species, lizards, frogs, birds, even marsupials, were brought to us, but no more green tree pythons.

The time had come for us to leave the

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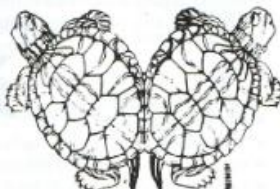
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Jimi area and return to Nondugl. On the last night of our stay, the natives prepared a rip-roaring feast in our honor. After all, we had paid a lot of money for

Excessive rains had  
turned the road into  
a treacherous  
mud bath.

animals that ended up in their stomachs instead of our collecting sacks.

First, a number of fist-size rocks were placed into a hot fire. While these heated to perfection, two pigs were butchered. A hole dug in the ground was lined with green banana leaves, into which were placed the rocks and the pigs. The hole was then covered with more banana leaves and some dirt. In

REPTILES



Beautiful reddish-brown neonate green tree pythons look quite different from adult animals of the same species. This individual came from the montane region surrounding Wau (elevation is 4,000 feet). This same area also produces the much sought after Boelen's python.

the meantime, wild pumpkins stewed over a separate fire.

After barely 45 minutes, the pigs were removed by two young boys and placed on the ground in front of the elder, who in turn divided the morsels more or less equally. From what I could see, those pigs needed much more time for human ingestion. Bruce, through his perfect command of pidgin, convinced the elder that we had over-eaten earlier and would be happy to give our share to him. This was more than acceptable, and we slept that night with a sigh of relief.

Two nights of thunderous down-pours had caused a major landslide over the road out of the Jimi region, and it took more than a dozen natives all day to clear this obstacle. During our week's absence from Nondugl, several more green pythons were brought in. None of them, however, appeared gravid.

APRIL 1995

After returning with my emerald prizes to Steinhart Aquarium, we were unable to induce captive breeding, thus leaving the sought-after question unanswered. It appeared that yet another expedition was in order, and again, the Rose family graciously offered their hospitality.

#### Back Again

With zero luck in obtaining a gravid python during the month of February (two expeditions), I decided to schedule the third and final snake safari for June, July and August. So, on June 3, my plane landed in Port Moresby, and on June 4, I was back home in Nondugl. Before embarking on this last, and most extensive, expedition to the Sau River area, circumstances forced me to first investigate the islands of New Ireland and New Britain, plus mainland regions



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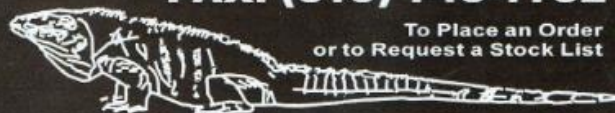
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of Lae and Wau, all in hopes of recording new locality data for certain species of reptiles. We were also waiting for an artist from Sydney, who was going to accompany us to the Sau.

Finally, on July 18, 1973, our vehicles left Nondugl. This time, due to the number of people and equipment, we decided to take the Toyota Land Cruiser plus a full-time 4-wheel-drive unit known as a Puch. Kimp, the bird of paradise catcher who was with us on the

Many animals were brought in by the natives, including additional green pythons. One of these, concealed within a thick piece of bamboo, was a gravid female. I nearly burst with joy.

first expedition, joined us once more. This time success was in the making, we just didn't know it yet.

Our drive to the Sau was a depressing one. Excessive rains had turned the road into a treacherous mud bath, and even the versatile Puch bogged down occasionally. By the time we reached the Australian police outpost of Tabibuga, our bodies were completely drained of energy, plus soaking wet and miserably cold. We also had car problems with the Puch and were forced to leave it at Tabibuga. However, the kind folks at the station offered to loan us an additional Land Cruiser and pam-

REPTILES





Perseverance pays off! This was the first and only gravid green tree python the author obtained during his New Guinea explorations. Later, en route from Hong Kong to San Francisco, she laid 12 perfect eggs.

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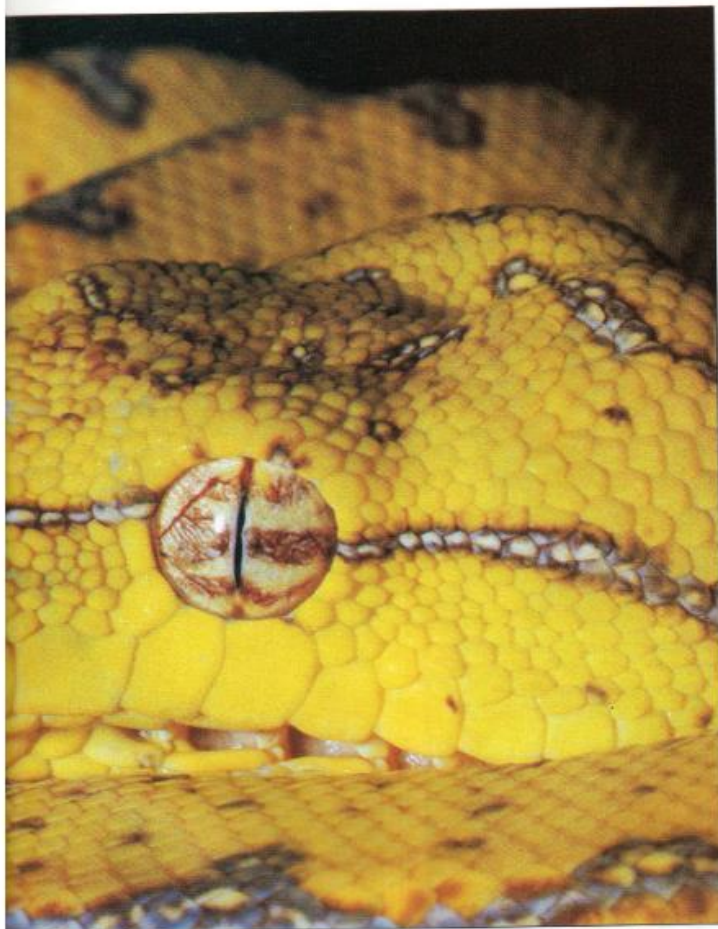
pered us with a hot shower, a stiff drink  
of scotch and a night of much-needed  
sleep in a dry grass hut.

The following morning dawned with  
a more positive outlook, and without  
further ado we started on the final de-  
scent to the "water sau," as the natives  
called it. We arrived at our destination  
very late in the afternoon, and the river  
was much lower and clearer than in Feb-  
ruary of the previous year. After erecting  
the tents, a swim in the river and some  
much-needed nutritional intake, we  
went to sleep with natives still sitting  
around the burning campfire. Just as I  
drifted into dreamland, my cot broke.

### Success!

The next 10 days were filled with ex-  
citement. Many animals were brought

REPTILES



The natives from the Jimi region of New Guinea believe that the "yellow snake" is the female, and all green specimens are males. "What gender is the brown variety?" the author asked. They had no answer.

in by the natives, including additional green pythons. One of these, concealed within a thick piece of bamboo, was a gravid female. I nearly burst with joy. Now came the arduous and nerve-consuming task of getting her and the developing eggs back alive. She was immediately removed from her cramped quarters within the bamboo and placed in a large, clean flour sack.

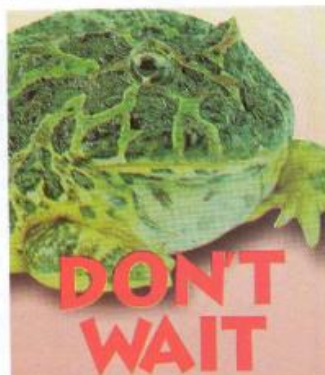
Our departure day came much too soon. I knew that this might very well be my last visit, but getting that gravid python back alive, and as quickly as possible, somehow outweighed the sadness of saying goodbye to the serene

beauty surrounding the "water sau."

Our ascent was a tumultuous undertaking. It took us 16 hours and proved a virtual nightmare for the person in charge of driving back from Tabibuga to Nondugl—that's right, the driver was yours truly. But this is a long story and one I would just as soon not recall. We made it, the vehicles made it and the gravid python made it. Everything else seemed irrelevant. However, that piping hot cup of freshly brewed coffee plus an excellent meal, which Darlene Rose had kept warm for us, was indeed heaven sent.

On August 14, I left Nondugl for Port

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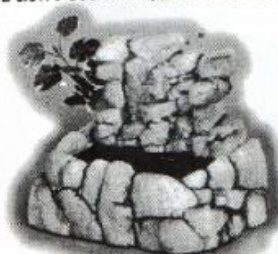
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True to their name, green tree pythons are found coiled among the branches of bushes and trees.

Moresby, via Mt. Hagen, with my reptilian prizes, including the gravid female python, which remained coiled within the protective confines of her cloth sack. The Mt. Hagen airport was completely fogged in, and no flights were scheduled until the following day. Once I reached Port Moresby, I again arranged for the appropriate permits, then headed

REPTILES



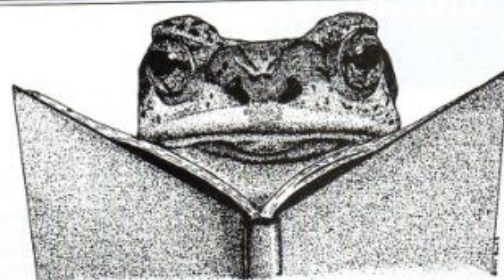


for San Francisco via Hong Kong.

When we unpacked the shipment at Steinhart Aquarium, our gravid python was gravid no more. She was neatly coiled around 12 pearly-white eggs! There was no telling exactly when she laid the eggs, but for certain it was either between Port Moresby and Hong Kong, or between the latter and San Francisco. Only she knew that secret. 🐍

The Emerald Serpents of New Guinea (Part II) will appear in next month's issue.

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