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A detailed close-up photograph of a green tree python's head. The snake's scales are a vibrant green with yellowish-orange borders, particularly visible around the eye and on the lower jaw. The eye is large and dark with a vertical slit pupil. The background is dark, making the snake's features stand out.

Profile of an adult green tree python, clearly showing the upper and lower labial pits.

This author shares valuable insights into *Chondropython viridis*, both in captivity and in the wild.

F NEW GUINEA (Part 2)

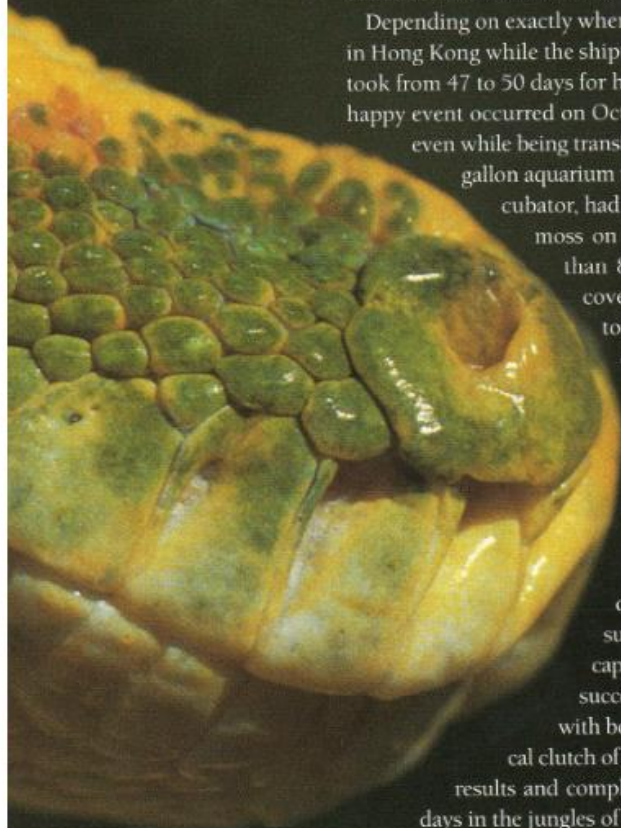
Story and photos
by Karl H. Switak

The gravid python that I brought back from Papua New Guinea in 1973 proved to be the perfect "mother." When we unpacked the shipment at Steinhart Aquarium in San Francisco, she was found coiled around a clutch of 12 pearly white eggs.

Depending on exactly when she laid her eggs (I suspect this occurred in Hong Kong while the shipment was being delayed by the airlines), it took from 47 to 50 days for her progenies to make an appearance. This happy event occurred on October 4, 1973. She never left her eggs, not even while being transferred from the cloth shipping sack to a 15-gallon aquarium tank. This unit, which also served as an incubator, had a 1-inch layer of slightly damp sphagnum moss on the bottom and was never kept warmer than 84 degrees Fahrenheit. I actually had to cover her (and eggs) with a small terry-cloth towel, as the slightest movement near the cage would prompt her to strike. She proved to be a nasty, but determined, mother-in-waiting.

Out of the 12 eggs emerged two yellow and 10 brown neonates—a 100-percent hatch! And now we had the long sought-after answer. It is true that both color morphs can originate from a single clutch of eggs. Up to this point (October 1973) our success with hatching *Chondropython* eggs in captivity was the first ever. Others had minimal success, but never a 100-percent hatch and never with both color morphs emerging from the identical clutch of eggs. Needless to say, I was ecstatic with the results and completely satisfied that all those nerve-racking days in the jungles of New Guinea were not spent in vain.

But the mystery of color change that surrounds the secret life of *Chondropython viridis* remains just that: a secret. Much more water will flow over that infamous dam before the final answer is uncovered. During the past 12 years or so, "sky-blue" adults have emerged from the Irian Jaya side of New Guinea, throwing another monkey wrench into all our thinking. Only adults have been found; no juveniles or young specimens. This we do know. A captive green adult turned blue after



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nearly 10 years in captivity. Another record, also of a captive, documents a reddish-brown neonate first turning green, then, after two years, it adopted the magnificent sky-blue coloration. I believe that most herpetologists will agree with me when I say that the "blue" phase of *Chondropython viridis* is one of the rarest snakes on earth. In this respect, I refer to wild-caught specimens, not something manipulated through captive propagation.

Back to square one. How does the



blue phase originate in the first place? A good question, with no immediate answer. I very much doubt that blue neonates ever existed, or ever will, but I'm willing to be surprised. Herein, however, I am left with a dream. One day in the future, I hope to be present when an emerald green female, tightly clutched around her pearly white eggs, oversees the hatching of her lemon yellow, reddish-brown, and sky-blue progenies. After that, the devil can take tomorrow!

Next on the agenda is an expedition

to the Irian Jaya side of New Guinea. More than likely it will take three or four such safaris, but whatever it takes I must uncover the secret of the "blue" green tree python. And I trust that somewhere down the avenue of success I will be able to report on my findings in the pages of REPTILES magazine.

The range for *Chondropython* is pretty much restricted to the island of New Guinea, both the Papua and Irian Jaya sides. It also occurs on some of the outlying islets. In Australia, its distribution

is even more limital, being confined to the extreme north of the Cape York Peninsula. But irregardless of locality, this species is most often associated with tropical rain forests. It is largely arboreal, but has been found on the ground at night. In the Jimi region surrounding the Sau and Jimi rivers, the trees are inundated with massive clusters of staghorn ferns that create natural water basins for arboreal creatures. Specimens have been recorded from sea level to at least a 6,000-foot elevation.



LEFT: Note the almost perfect dorsal line of white spots. Such a pattern is indicative of adults from the highlands; at least on the Papua side of New Guinea. This individual was a yellow neonate.

BELOW: A pair of young adult green tree pythons from Irian Jaya were yellow as neonates. They were 18 months old when this photo was taken.

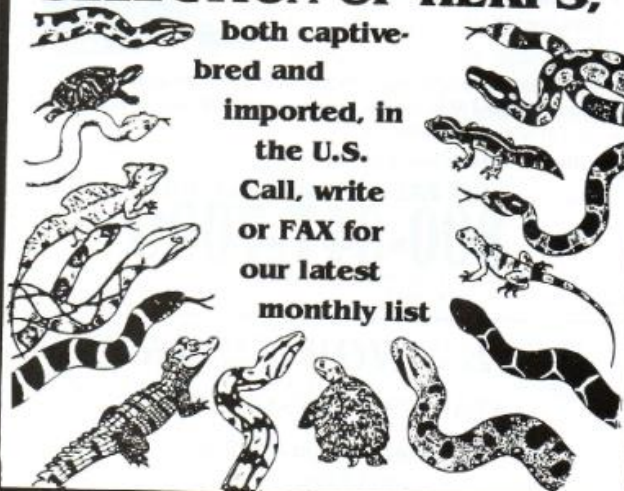


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Due to the inaccessibility of many regions, coupled with the lack of individuals who are keeping scientific records, I suspect that the known range of *Chondropython viridis* may well extend beyond the known periphery.

I have personally collected live individuals of this beautiful python near Port Moresby (sea level) and at Nondugl in the Western Highlands District of Papua; the latter lies at an elevation of 5,400 feet. Bruce Rose and I found D.O.R. (dead-on-road) specimens near

Bulolo and at the outskirts of Madang.

My very first sighting of a green tree python in the wilds occurred at Nondugl, a situation worth remembering.

On a cool and misty morning, after a night of torrential rains, we decided to photograph one of our captive pythons. The location was less than 100 yards from the main house. While bending and twisting, trying to figure out the best format, my eyes picked up a shadowy object in a tree 15 feet off the ground. It was backlit and simply showed up as a

dark, baseball-sized clump.

I quickly asked my helpers, Bruce and Brian Rose, to place the snake that we were photographing into a cloth bag while I found a semi-dry spot on the ground for camera and strobe. Climbing the tree was easy, but I did get soaking wet. Most of the leaves still had water droplets on them, and my movement created a secondary rain shower. By the time I reached that shadowy object, Bruce and Brian had moved to the sunny side of the tree. And now, all in unison,

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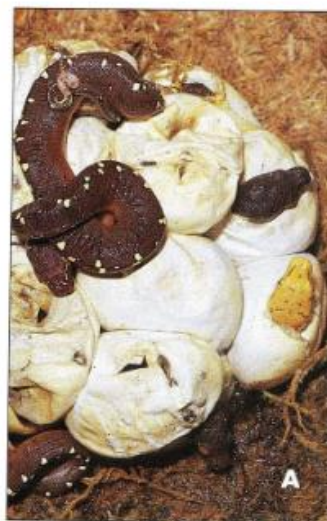
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A: After the young started to hatch, the female was removed. I believe that the female can do a much better job with incubating her eggs than can be accomplished by artificial means.

B: One of two yellow neonates (the others were brown) that hatched from 12 eggs takes a first look at the world. There were no infertile eggs in this clutch.

C: This is the female green tree python that I brought back from the Sau River with her eggs. Note a brown neonate emerging just below her head. She was acutely protective of her progenies.

we screamed, "It's a green tree python!"

What luck. In the process of photographing one *Chondropython*, we actually discovered another. I unwound the wet and cold serpent from its branch, then handed it down to the boys. After that, I measured the ambient temperature only inches from where I found my prize. I placed the thermometer directly behind the branch so that there was no interference from the gentle breeze. It read 72 degrees Fahrenheit. Now subtract for that the wind chill factor across

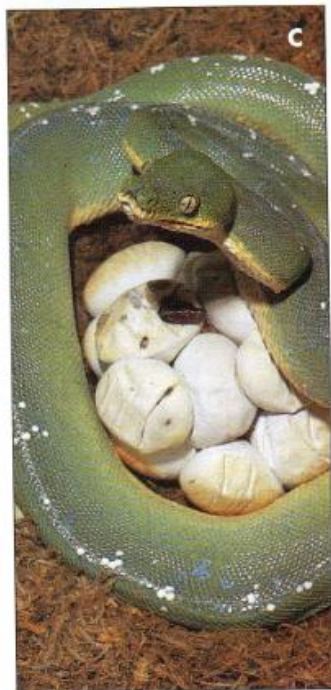
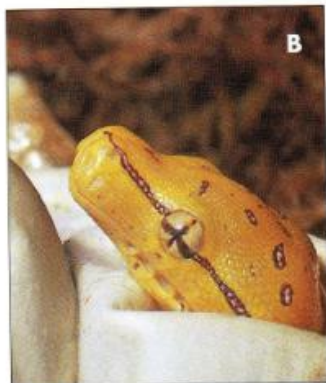
the serpent's wet body, and once again we arrive at a most important conclusion: Are most people keeping this species too warm in captivity? But remember, we are talking of montane specimens, not those from sea level.

On another occasion we located a large scrub python only 100 feet from where this emerald beauty was found. However, it was coiled high up in a tree, at least 30 feet above ground, so we opted for viewing it with binoculars only.

All of the green tree pythons that were

brought to me by natives had been located above ground during the day. This does not mean that *Chondropython* is strictly arboreal. Natives seldom, if ever, hunt for food at night, which certainly explains why they never find this species after nightfall. I suspect that many of the adult pythons venture to the ground at night in search of food. Juveniles, on the other hand, feeding primarily on lizards and possibly frogs, are more apt to be arboreal and active in the day.

Although I found two D.O.R. speci-



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This brown tree
python is in the
process of turning
green. The snake is
11 months old. You
can still make out
clearly the alternating
triangles along the
dorsal ridge.



The white triangles
along the dorsal
ridge of this
6-month-old
specimen are
usually indicative
of brown neonates
(at least those
hatched in the
wilds).



These young green
tree pythons are from
the same clutch of
eggs and were
hatched in captivity
by artificial means.
Note that one of the
yellow specimens has
a dark dorsal line and
the other does not.
Patterns are
extremely variable.



mens on the ground, my only sighting
of a live specimen after dark took place
near Port Moresby, the capital city of
Papua and located on the shores of the
Coral Sea. It is very humid and hot
there for most of the year.

Roy Mackay, who resided in Port
Moresby, volunteered vehicle and ex-
pertise and took me snake hunting one
night. We started our drive well after
dark. The moon, what there was of it,
stayed well concealed behind those
ever-present clouds. A gentle breeze
kept the oppressive humidity at bay.

A slight drizzle persisted as we left
the outskirts of Port Moresby. Giant

tree frogs, *Litoria infrafrenata*, leaped
from one side of the road to the other.
The introduced marine toad, *Bufo mar-
inus*, was present everywhere and con-
sidered a real pest. Several robust frogs,
probably a ranid type, pole-vaulted
through the air with the greatest of ease.
There certainly wasn't any lack of ac-
tivity, and our eyes kept a close vigil
over every inch of this coastal dirt road.

Roy and I discussed a number of sub-
jects, but the conversation always re-
turned to herpetology. It was a pleasure
riding through this lowland jungle with
Roy at the helm, learning new facts
about the animals I loved. The road

wound through grassy fields, passed thick stands of indigenous trees, and crossed several slow moving creeks. We drove along very slowly.

It came upon us out of nowhere.

Both Roy and I shouted a remark of jubilation, immediately followed by, "It can't be, it just can't be."

But it was!

The car had come to a complete halt. There was no motion to confuse our senses. We saw what we saw. Directly in front of us, fully stretched across a portion of the road, lay an adult green tree python some 3 to 4 feet in length. Calling it a beauty would have been the understatement of the year.

The slight drizzle we experienced earlier in the evening had now disappeared. As a matter of fact, this section of road was virtually dry, and we encountered no difficulties with placing our emerald serpent into a clean sack. I was the one who picked it off the road, then handed it to Roy, who also examined it thoroughly. During all of this maneuvering the python never attempted to bite. I suppose it was just as surprised as we were.

With our quarry stored securely, and our blood pressure back to normal, we stood next to the vehicle for a few minutes and examined the immediate surroundings. It was dark, very dark, but with the help of our flashlights we did make out some very large trees, numerous bushes and tall grass in between. The snake must have been happy to find a clearing, but hesitated too long. Our arrival ended its search for freedom beyond.

I am not sure who was more excited about the catch—Roy or myself. Had someone been there to judge our reactions, he might have summed it up as "two peas in a pod." But whatever the summation, realistic or otherwise, it climaxed the perfect ending. Insect noises echoed through the jungle all around us, and numerous frogs voiced their approval of a perfect evening from a distance. New Guinea couldn't have given me a more appropriate farewell gift.

Except for a water snake of the genus *Stegonotus* and a rather thin tree snake, *Boiga irregularis*, we didn't see much else on our return drive to Port Moresby. We did, however, in honor of the night's successful hunt, patronize the pub at the Davara Hotel and indulged in some adult liquid refreshment.

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The Beast Itself: A Dossier



The blue phase of the green tree python is a jewel among reptiles and one of the most sought after of serpents. This is an adult female. Note that there is some green color on her head.

Size

The green tree python is a rather slender python in the wilds, reaching a maximum length of approximately 6 feet (2 meters). Most adults, however, measure between 3½ and 4½ feet. Body and tail are compressed with a conspicuous vertebral keel, a condition that becomes more obvious in specimens lacking proper nourishment. The head is triangular in shape and equipped with greatly enlarged anterior teeth. A well placed bite from this species is extremely painful and bleeds profusely. Captives, due to overfeeding with laboratory mice and rats, tend to become much more obese, and the otherwise compressed body takes on the shape of a plump sausage.

Food and Feeding/Adults

Wild adults feed primarily on warm-blooded prey, such as rodents of the genus *Rattus*. Without doubt, they also catch a bird on occasion. Each and every dead specimen (wild) I examined, did not contain avian remains. These observations are in keeping with the findings of McDowell (1975). Captives, however, readily accept birds. As a matter of fact, some newly captured/imported individuals actually prefer birds. This commodity usually

consists of domestically hatched chicks.

One author (Bechtle, 1971) writes that this species catches, among other food items, "kleinere schlangen" (smaller snakes). I believe this to occur only rarely. Captives, expecting food or smelling a food item on their cagemates, may resort to attacking the movement of origin, but this cannot be regarded as natural behavior.

Adults that were brought to me in New Guinea often regurgitated rats, but never birds. *Chondropython* is primarily arboreal, at least during the daylight hours. At such times, the snake is often found neatly coiled on the outer extremities of branches. If this, in fact, indicates a period of inactivity, then it would also explain the lack of bird remains in the feces of wild specimens. At night, dropping to the ground, the snake obviously has greater contact with various rodent and small marsupial species than with birds.

Every green tree python brought to me by natives was collected during the day. And each snake was found resting in a stationary position. That is, coiled on a branch well above the ground. Unless a bird landed directly on the serpent, or immediately in front of it, I can understand why avian prey constitutes a secondary food item in the wilds.

REPTILES

Food and Feeding/Young

The young feed on lizards. I had newly captured juveniles take two species of skinks and one type of gecko. Again, this goes in keeping with the findings of McDowell (1975), who found only lizard remains of the genus *Emoia* in the stomachs of juveniles. In captivity, some newborn green tree pythons accept rodents (pink mice) immediately, while others insist on a diet of lizards. Juvenile pythons that I cared for in captivity accepted anoles, blue-tailed skinks, Asian house geckos and even fence lizards. In due course they all switched to rodents.

However, in the wilds I suspect that the neonates' major food intake consists of lizards, frogs and perhaps the odd insect.

What a snake eats in captivity is not necessarily indicative of that which it preys on in the wild. For example, one of my shipments from Australia contained a gravid death adder, *Acanthopis antarcticus*, that later gave birth to a number of miniscule young. I tried feeding them various lizard species, insects and hatching tree frogs of the genus *Hyla*. The snakes showed no interest whatsoever. As a last resort I tried slender salamanders, *Batrachoseps attenuatus*. Bingo! We had a takeoff. Each one of the neonate death adders fed on these salamanders and later switched to lizards and small mice. There are no salamanders to be found on the Australian Continent!

Yellow-bellied racers, *Coluber c. mormon*, at least those that I collected just south of San Francisco, always defecated the remains of grasshoppers—never lizards, never rodents. But in captivity they refused grasshoppers and readily accepted lizards, frogs and young rodents.

A third example, and perhaps the most bizarre, involves the pelagic sea snake, *Pelamis platurus*. I kept an adult of this species at Steinhart Aquarium, and it fed on the tree frog *Hyla regilla*. As a matter of fact, the snake would even stick its head out of the water to accept the frogs from a pair of forceps. Even the student who failed elementary biology should know that there are no tree frogs living in the ocean.

"Tail-twitching" of neonate and very young adult green tree pythons can be directly associated with the approach of food. The very thin, sometimes black-tipped tail (in juveniles) may very well serve as a lure in attracting prey. I believe this to be true.

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Considering that the stomachs of wild juveniles contained only lizard remains, and that many of the lizards in New Guinea are diurnal, we must assume that hatchlings and perhaps even very young green tree pythons are also diurnal. Tail-twitching or luring for prey in darkness, when said prey is likely to be asleep, certainly doesn't make sense.

Eggs and Mating

A large clutch of eggs laid by a captive female numbered 25 fertile eggs and

three infertile ones. The female that I brought back from the Sau River laid only 12 eggs, but there wasn't a single bad one in the clutch. An educated guess would be that this species lays from 10 to 30 eggs. The number depends on the size and age of the female.

The eggs are pearly white, fairly small and somewhat elongated in shape. Incubation period is from 39 to 65 days and directly related to the increase or decrease in temperature.

In the wilds, mating probably takes

place throughout the year, depending on altitude variations. Captives have shown a high degree of sexual activity when a low pressure system arrives. This parameter, however, is a difficult one to control. On the other hand, such low pressure systems are commonplace in New Guinea, suggesting that mating could take place most any day of the week or month.

Captive males have been known to instigate vicious combats, resulting in severe injuries and even death to one of the opponents. Keeping one or more males in the same cage could present a problem. Extreme caution must be exercised here.

Sex determination is best accomplished by probing. Do not allow spur length to cloud your judgement, as both males and females possess these vestigial limbs. According to Ross and Marzec (1990), the males probe to a depth of 9 to 10 subcaudal scales, and the females to only two. I suspect there are some minor variations to be encountered here.

Adult Green Tree Pythons

Color and pattern vary considerably on adults. Lime green to emerald green with a dorsal line of white spots, flecks or blotches is typical. The abdomen is off-white and slightly yellow at the edges. Specimens from the highlands, at least those within the confines of the Wahgi Valley from Mt. Hagen to Nondugl, show that straight dorsal line of closely knitted white spots perfectly. At lower elevations these white markings are arranged in a more haphazard way.

Some individuals retain the yellow juvenile coloration well into adulthood. Others show blue streaks along the head and body, while some are virtually devoid of any white markings. A miniscule few, as adults only, have been collected in Irian Jaya that display a glistening body of "sky blue."

All of the adults that I examined in the wilds that were severely injured or close to death, contained at least one species of nematode (roundworm). It is therefore highly recommended to deworm every specimen imported directly from the wilds.

Sexual maturity is reached when the python is about 2 to 3 years old. A captive male bred successfully at the ripe old age of 20.

1995

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The New Guinea natives are opportunistic food gatherers, and the green tree python is definitely included in their diet. I was told that the snake is chopped up into 1-inch sections, which are then used in a makeshift stew. The free-moving nematode worms in the intestinal tract of the snake were probably removed with the viscera, but those solidly affixed to body walls, plus egg cases, helped to season this highland cuisine. No, I did not persuade myself to try such bewitching a dish.

Young Green Tree Pythons

Young pythons hatch from eggs as either lemon yellow, chocolate brown, or reddish-brown. The yellow variety boasts some white streaking dorsally, while the brown snakes have alternating triangles of white. One captive breeding (Walsh, 1977) produced yellow neonates with red dorsal lines, diamonds, head markings and side speckling. Juveniles possess white tails banded in black. Again, variables are to be encountered.

Some egg clutches produce only the yellow variety, others only the brown. I consider the perfect combination to be a few of each. The gravid female I brought back from the Sau River produced such a colorful mixture—two were yellow, and two were brown. I am aware of one captive breeding that yielded 25 of the yellow neonates.

The color transformation from the juvenile stage to that of the green adult is a gradual one. It may start within 6 months of age and last well into one year. My experiments showed that individuals eating twice as much as others were the first to undergo this transformation.

In the eastern Highlands District of Papua New Guinea, specifically in the Jimi Region, the yellow variety is considered to be the female and the green the male. A member of the Kwibin clan referred to the yellow snake (snake) as *Kolongware*, a female, but had no explanation as to the gender of the brown pythons.

Green tree pythons are now available in the animal market on a regular basis. They are bred in the United States and abroad by both amateur and professional reptile keepers. Some are still imported from Indonesia, but word has it that this may soon be discontinued. *

MAY 1995



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