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The Leigh Woods Python

A true short story about a python from Africa that lived, very quietly, in a Bristol suburb in the UK for over 25 years.

by Bob Golding

To this day, few of the worthy residents of the leafy Bristol suburb of Leigh Woods know that, living quietly and unseen amongst them for many years, was a python from tropical Africa.

My wife, son, python and I moved, in 1986, into our house in Leigh Woods, just along the road from the Clifton Suspension Bridge. We knew very few of our neighbours at that time so I wasn't quite sure what they would think if they discovered we had a python in the house. I decided that a little discretion was called for and only introduced it to a few carefully selected friends and immediate neighbours.

The python came from southern Nigeria where I spent from 1963 to 1979 as Curator, then Director, of the University of Ibadan Zoological Garden. I had friends who lived and worked at the Gambari Experimental Station there and, late one evening in 1977, they found the python crossing a road within the Station compound; it was going quietly about its business. However, my friends had little doubt that the night watchmen, who patrolled the Station every night after dusk and who had just come on duty, would find the snake within minutes and kill it. So they decided to pick it up and take it home. At least this would ensure that the python wouldn't be harmed and would give them time to decide what to do with it.

My friends, who fortunately had some knowledge of reptiles, very soon realised that releasing the python back into the wild locally needed careful thought. They were aware of the increasing human population in that area and of the activities of hunters of 'bush meat'. The more information they gathered, and the more

advice they took, the more reluctant they became to release the python anywhere nearby. They came to the conclusion that there was an ever-increasing likelihood of the snake being stumbled upon again by somebody or other and very possibly killed if released in the area. So they continued to keep it at home while hoping that an acceptable solution to their dilemma might be found.

No such solution presented itself so, in 1979, the year I was to leave my job in Nigeria to return to the UK, my friends gave the snake to me in the knowledge that I would take it with me and take care of it. It turned out that I was unable to



The Snake

take it on my final flight home in September that year but I arranged for it to be sent to me as soon as I had sorted out various matters in the UK and was ready to receive it. It was sent by air cargo to London in April 1980 and I was waiting at the airport to receive it. The snake had travelled in a small, carefully made container and, after examining it and sorting out all the paperwork, I drove it straight home to Bristol.

There are several different kinds - or species - of python. Mine was a royal python and its scientific name was *Python regius*. It didn't have a pet name and

in our household in Bristol it became known simply as ‘the snake’. Because snakes are deaf to purely airborne sounds I saw little point in giving it a name that it couldn’t even hear, let alone respond to. In any case, there were no other snakes in our house to confuse it with.

Little did I expect that this python would live in the UK with me and my family for the next 25 years! Although I do not have the precise date in 1977 when the snake was picked up from the road in Nigeria by my friends, I can state with certainty that it lived in captivity for approximately 28 years before its death in 2005. There seem to be few other documented records of a captive royal python living longer than this, either in a private collection or a zoo.** If one assumes that the snake was, say, five years old (this is just a minimum possible figure) when taken from the wild, then it was at least 33 years old when it died.

I was not absolutely sure of the snake’s sex. To be certain of this it would have been necessary to manipulate and probe its cloaca to gain information about the sexual structures within. However, as at that time I was not expert at this procedure, I didn’t attempt it. The snake’s cloacal spurs and tail proportions, however, indicated that it was probably male, and this indeed proved to be the case after it died and could be examined fully.

A wild royal python is usually fairly easy to handle as, when approached or threatened, its natural response is usually to coil into a ball, with the head hidden and protected within the coils; and it usually stays that way even when picked up. Hence the other name for this species is ball python. Royal pythons are found in western Africa and are one of the smaller species of python. They don’t climb a great deal and spend most of the time on the ground in undergrowth, grasses and shrubbery, where they are well camouflaged and where they can hide and find prey such as small rodents.

Pythons don’t have fangs or a venomous bite; they have long, sharp, solid, backward-pointing teeth for grasping and holding prey animals during their capture and constriction. The teeth can inflict a nasty wound on a human hand if the snake bites in self defence, but my python quickly became used to being handled and was about the most docile and approachable snake you could ever come across. Whenever I picked it up it lay quietly across the palms of my hands or coiled gently around my arms. Not once did it attempt to harm me.

** With reference to paragraph 2 above, a notable exception is also a royal python (*P. regius*) that lived at the Philadelphia Zoological Garden in the US for just under 47 years, dying there in October 1992. This snake was a young adult when acquired in April 1945.

The snake lived in our bedroom in our house in Leigh Woods, Bristol. Its home was a specially made, glass-fronted vivarium equipped with a container for drinking water, cut branches on the floor and a couple of small rocks; it was fitted with electric heaters and a thermostat that kept the interior snug and warm and within a controlled temperature range - a place where an expatriate python from tropical Africa could relax and feel at home.

My royal python was truly beautiful and, for me, was immensely satisfying to look at, with its smooth, dry, polished skin that, in strong light - especially sunlight - glowed like burnished leather. The dominant colours were black and brown and cream. There were brown markings shaped rather like a crown along each side of its body. Such markings and colours are conspicuous when viewed against a plain, artificial background; however, on a wild royal python that lives mainly on the ground, they break the outline of the snake's body and help to camouflage it against a background of plants, earth and fallen leaves.

The snake shed its skin every two or three months. When a snake sheds its skin, only the thin, dead, translucent outer layer is actually discarded. I always knew when my snake was nearing the time to shed because, due to the chemical and physical changes involved, its skin changed colour and



texture slightly and its eyes became a milky, whitish colour (*see image above right*). It also usually refused food for a few days before shedding. The snake nearly always shed at night so, when I judged that the big night had probably arrived, I sprayed the snake and interior of the vivarium with warm water from a plastic hand spray.

This moistened and softened the snake's old skin and made the whole shedding process easier. When it was ready, the snake started moving around, rubbing its snout and head on rough surfaces such as the rocks and branches in its vivarium. The skin first came away from around the mouth and the head, including the eyes (*see above left*); then, bit by bit, it rolled neatly down the neck and body and down to the tip of the tail, like a stocking rolling down an elegant leg (*see above*). Underneath was a gleaming new skin. Immediately after shedding, the snake looked its very best and its body seemed to sparkle with renewed beauty and energy (*photo of discarded skin left*).



When I removed the discarded skin from the vivarium the following morning I always checked to make sure it included the two transparent, dome-shaped

scales on the head, one from over each eye. These miniature eye covers are replaced along with the rest of the skin - little windows through which a snake views its world.

As my snake was obviously not on public display in any sense, as a snake in a zoo would be, and as its presentation was thus not a consideration, I used several sheets of clean newspaper to cover the floor of its vivarium. Newspaper is absorbent and could be replaced quickly whenever necessary. The snake spent its time either in full view, coiled and wedged snugly between the rocks and cut branches, or largely hidden under the newspaper. It was fascinating that, over time, the snake learned how to use its snout to prod, slowly and methodically, along the straight outside edges of the newspaper until it found a loose or torn area that it could lift with its snout. It then disappeared underneath. Bingo!

The snake would sometimes lie perfectly still for long periods, its body hidden below the newspaper and just its head and neck visible above it. This is almost certainly what it would have done in the wild when it needed to feed - wait motionless for hours, or perhaps days, at least partially hidden, certainly



Showing the very sensitive infra-red heat receptors or pits along the upper labial scales.

camouflaged, ready to strike and grab unwary, passing prey. Pythons have heat-sensitive pits along the upper labial scales on the head. These pits are extremely sensitive to heat changes and can detect the heat from the body of a nearby mammal; the snake strikes instantly, even from a position of apparent rest.

I fed my snake dead, fully grown rats; it took a single rat every two weeks or so in the summer. It fed irregularly, and more frequently during summer than in winter, partly because I allowed the vivarium temperature to drop slightly in winter. In the wild temperatures can fluctuate seasonally, even in tropical regions. I soon discovered a specialist pet shop in Bristol that kept a freezer full of white laboratory rats that were purchased as food by owners of a variety of exotic, carnivorous pets. The rats lay on display in the freezer in tightly packed bundles. I always bought a few at a time, then took them home and kept them frozen until the snake was hungry.



I have a conservatory attached to my house in Bristol where I grow many different cultivars of the tropical hibiscus plant *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*, including some brought from my garden in Nigeria. In the summer the conservatory is always warm and humid and smells like the tropics. I sometimes took the python in there in the evening, together with a can of cold beer, and sat there quietly, the snake resting on my lap, savouring memories of those warm, tropical evenings in West Africa.

I didn't always feed the snake straight away when it was hungry because captive reptiles can become overweight from eating too much and not getting enough exercise. In the wild a python moves around more than it would in captivity, thus using up calories and maintaining a healthy weight. So sometimes, even if my python was hungry and had started to emerge in the evenings from under its newspaper in search of food, I didn't feed it for several days. As a result, the snake continued to spend the nights searching, searching. The problem with this was that, although such nocturnal serpentine activity sounds harmless enough, in our bedroom in the wee small hours of the morning it sounded as though the snake was having some sort of rowdy party. A hungry snake is a persistent snake. It prowled around and around its vivarium, searching here, exploring there, waking and annoying my wife with its rustlings and bumpings as it slid across and down the sides of its vivarium. It didn't bother me too much, though; the snake was my buddy and I understood what was going on.

At least the regular exercise helped to keep it nice and trim. I am sure that a female royal python would have found my snake really sexy.

Contrary to popular belief, constricting snakes such as pythons do not crush their prey to death – that is, they don't break any bones or cause major physical deformity. In the wild, a python strikes and grabs its prey in its backward-pointing teeth. Then, within a second or so, it coils around its victim very tightly to prevent it breathing and to arrest its blood flow. Within minutes the prey is dead.

My snake liked to feed in the evening, as darkness was falling. I had to decide in the morning if I was going to offer it food that evening because, if so, I had to take a rat out of the freezer in time for it to thaw out completely by evening feeding time. Then, just as darkness was gathering, I would tiptoe into the bedroom – snakes are sensitive to vibrations in the ground or floor – open the hinged glass front of the vivarium, gently place the dead rat on the newspaper, close the vivarium and tiptoe out of the room. Sometimes, though, I would sit motionless on the bed to watch what happened.

Snakes have an excellent sense of smell. I suppose most people know that snakes have a forked tongue, and a lot of people think the tongue is venomous or harmful in some way. But it isn't. When a snake flicks its tongue out of its mouth it picks up minute particles in the air. And when the tongue disappears into its mouth again the forked tips, with the particles adhering to them, come into contact with a special sensory organ in the roof of the mouth; so flicking the tongue in and out helps a snake keep in touch with what's going on around it.



The snake was usually hiding under its newspaper when I placed the rat in its vivarium, but I knew it would use its sense of smell rather than its rather poor eyesight to find the food. I should also mention here that the body temperature of the dead rats was always around room temperature; thus the snake's heat-sensing mechanism and the heat receptors it uses when hunting small (warm blooded) mammals in the wild probably played little or no part in this feeding process in captivity. It seemed able to smell the rat almost immediately and often emerged from its hiding place within two or three minutes, especially if everything was quiet and motionless in the room. As the snake appeared from under the newspaper, its tongue was already flickering in and out of its mouth so fast the human eye could hardly follow it. Gradually it seemed to fix the direction the rat smell was coming from and then moved slowly across the floor towards it until, suddenly, its tongue made direct contact with the rat itself.

This moment always seemed to come as a complete surprise to the snake. Snakes can't make facial expressions, but my snake always managed to look totally astonished, as though it had never before had the good fortune to come across such a nice plump rat just lying there waiting to be eaten. It froze and remained completely motionless for some time, as though recovering its composure.

Snakes usually start to eat their prey from the head end, and my snake was no exception. It soon began to explore the dead rat and, when it found the nose, it opened its mouth and grabbed the head in its teeth. It then moved each side of its lower jaws separately and alternately, forward and then backward, gradually hooking the rat back into its throat. Then it coiled around the rat and, with the rat now in the throat, held it in position while it used its body muscles to pull it further and further back towards its stomach.

Had the snake been dealing with a live rat, it would first have grabbed its prey in its teeth by means of a high speed strike, coiled around it and killed it by constriction.

The body of a fully grown male white rat could be significantly larger in diameter than my snake's head. However, a snake's jaws are equipped with tendons, muscles and ligaments that enable them to expand and swallow surprisingly large prey. If the snake was swallowing an exceptionally large rat, it usually slowed down a little in its attempts to engulf its prey. It raised its head off the floor of the vivarium and took long, motionless pauses, the rat hanging from its mouth. At the same time the snake extended a tube-like structure, its epiglottis, from the floor of its mouth and past the bulky prey to the exterior to enable it to breathe while it was feeding.

Sometimes it was difficult to believe that the snake would be able to swallow its prey. But it always did!

One day I noticed what appeared to be blood on the newspaper on the floor of the snake's vivarium. In some alarm I took the snake out and examined it. On its underside, about halfway down, was a slight swelling with a raw, bleeding area about half an inch across. I cleaned and disinfected this and put the snake back in its vivarium, hoping it would heal without needing professional treatment. However, over the next two or three weeks it showed no sign of improvement. Clearly, it was time to consult a veterinary surgeon, and preferably one who specialised in reptiles. I soon found a suitable person and she asked me to take the snake over to her surgery for examination.

I put the snake carefully inside a soft, patent leather sports bag, together with a rubber hot water bottle at just the right temperature. I put the bag on the passenger seat of my car with the top zipper left slightly open to let some air in and to enable me to take an occasional glimpse at what was going on inside. During the journey I stopped a couple of times to take a really good look. The snake didn't look happy. It was moving around inside the bag. Now and again it

raised its head up and seemed to glare at me through the open top of the bag. I knew it wasn't actually glaring, but that's the way it seemed.

The vet didn't like the look of the lesion and swollen area at all; she took some tissue samples from it and sent them off for detailed examination by a specialist. She telephoned me a few days later with really bad news - the snake had a tumour which might be malignant and which should be removed surgically as soon as possible!

So a week or so later the snake was admitted to the vet's animal hospital for surgery. I was distressed by this development. As I signed the hospital's Admissions and Consent form I found myself hoping, with a new intensity, that my snake would make it safely through its operation and come back home again fighting fit.

I collected it from the hospital the following day. The vet seemed to have done an excellent job. The lump had disappeared and the wound had been closed with small metal staples. The snake looked fine and behaved quite normally. I drove it home and replaced it in its vivarium. It immediately found its way under the newspaper, disappearing as usual without so much as a backward glance or even a hint of a 'Thanks, mate'.

To my delight the snake appeared to recover from the operation very quickly. A couple of days later I offered it a small rat which it took immediately. The metal staples were soon removed and the surgical wound healed beautifully. Everything seemed to be returning to normal.

Not quite, though. After the operation, the vet sent more tissue from the lump for further examination. The tumour was diagnosed as a spindle cell sarcoma that 'could be difficult to excise adequately as it is malignant and may have metastatic potential'. In other words, there was no knowing if the tumour cells had all been removed during surgery or if the tumour had already spread to other parts of the snake's body. Only time would tell.

For over a year after this the snake remained apparently well, and fed and behaved normally. However, one day I again noticed blood on the floor of its vivarium. I picked the snake up and examined the site of the surgery. The area was swollen and bleeding again! My heart sank. I contacted the vet. She carried out some ultrasound scans of the tumour area. When we viewed these scans on a screen, she pointed out where two more masses of tumour cells had developed near the original surgery site and how other tumour cells had invaded



the surrounding tissues at several locations. She gently but clearly spelt it out: it would be an impossible task to separate the tumour tissue from the healthy tissues without doing fatal damage....

Looking back now I realise that, up to that point, I had simply not been able to or embrace or absorb the probability that the snake would die. As I looked at those images on the screen, though, I could evade this obvious truth no longer.

Rather than hand the snake over to the vet for immediate euthanasia, I decided I needed a little quiet time to come to terms with what was happening. We agreed that the snake didn't seem to be suffering any pain or discomfort, so I drove it home and returned it to its vivarium.

I reflected on the great interest, the deep satisfaction, all that I had learned and gained from having had the snake in my house all those years. Clearly, there is something deeply embedded in the human condition that gives rise to the urge in so many of us to seek contact with nature, with wildlife and wild places, to keep pets at home and grow plants in our gardens. It is a force, an instinct that seems to swirl around at the very core of our chemistry. We remain fundamentally part of the natural world with which we have evolved. If only the world's politicians

and so-called leaders and planners would understand and remember that!

As far as my snake was concerned, there was an additional, more personal dimension. On a cold, grey, winter's day in Leigh Woods, just a glance at the snake in its warm vivarium evoked so many memories of my life in West Africa - the dry season with its smell of burning grass, the rainy season with its warm downpours and green renewal, the orchestra of sounds at night from a myriad invertebrates, frogs and other small nocturnal creatures.

I kept the snake at home for a few days, quietly trying to untangle my memories and unexpectedly powerful emotions, and then decided that the time had come, finally and rightfully, for it to die. I placed it, in a pillow slip, on the car passenger seat for its last journey and set off. On my arrival at the hospital, there was really nothing left to say or do. I gently pushed the snake, still in its pillow slip, across the table to the waiting vet, turned and walked out. The date was 25th of August, 2005. My son's birthday.

Post mortem examination of the snake confirmed that the tumour had spread to the kidneys and that it probably hadn't had much longer to live. At least it seemed that we had euthanased it before it suffered any significant discomfort. It was confirmed to be male.

The vet asked me to dispose of the snake's body, so I put it temporarily in a freezer at home. Perhaps it could be put to good use in some way - for example, a museum had expressed interest in having the skeleton professionally prepared and mounted as an educational exhibit. I needed a little time to explore this and other possibilities. However, I was rather busy with other things at that time and was unable to pursue the matter immediately.

Then one day fate took a hand. When my son was a schoolboy a few years before, he kept a male common toad. He had found the toad in our garden one day and kept it in a simple but perfectly acceptable vivarium. The toad became very tame and regularly entertained my son's young friends by battling with, and eventually swallowing, the most gigantic earthworms he always managed to dig up somewhere. Two or three years after this the toad died and my son buried it in the garden.

Some weeks after the snake's death, when I was doing some gardening one day, I came across the little patch of ground where my son had buried the toad several years before. I decided then and there to bury the snake next to the toad. Irrational and sentimental this may have been, but I suddenly liked the idea

of still having the snake around, albeit buried in the garden and, by its remote presence, reminding me occasionally of what had been.

Under a leaden sky one cold April morning in 2006, I grabbed my garden spade and dug a hole in the ground near the toad. I took the snake's body out of the freezer and placed it at the bottom of the hole and back-filled it with soil. I decided to mark the spot by placing a single large stone on the small mound of soil above the grave. I walked over to look behind our house where I had stacked a few surplus items from our garden rockery and, after some rummaging around, found a suitable stone. As I straightened up I was surprised to find that a heavy snowstorm had started - quite suddenly, from nowhere - and that huge snowflakes were swirling everywhere.

I placed the stone on the snake's grave, hurried back through the snowflakes into the house, shut the door and looked out of the window. That snowstorm! Its arrival had coincided so remarkably with the snake's burial that I knew I would always remember it as something special. As I stood there and watched the falling snow dust the garden white, I felt suddenly able to accept that my long and rewarding relationship with the python from Africa really had come to a natural conclusion.

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The End

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