

Male Combat in Venomous Snakes

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Introduction:

In many species of snakes, ranging from Elapids and Viperids to Boids male combat has been recorded many times. Examples of species include: Eastern Brown Snakes (*Pseudonaja textilis*) (Shine, 1991), Coastal Taipans (*Oxyuranus scutellatus*) (Shine, 1991) and Personal observation, Lowland Copperheads (*Austrelaps superbis*) (Shine, 1991), Mulga Snakes (*Cannia australis*) (Personal observation), Western Diamond Back Rattlesnakes (*Crotalus atrox*), Bushmasters (*Lachesis muta*), Carpet Pythons (*Morelia spilota variegata*) (Personal observation), Red bellied Black Snakes (*Pseudechis porphyriacus*) (Eipper, 2000), Spotted Black Snakes (*Cannia guttatus*) (Eipper, 2000) and Collett's Snakes (*Cannia colletti*) (Eipper, 2000).

The combat involves the two snakes writhing and twisting together with each snake trying to dominate the other by keeping its head on top of the opponent and trying to throw the other off balance to assert dominance in its territory, biting can also occur in the battle.

I have kept the *Pseudechis* and *Cannia* genera for many years and I have described my breeding success and the way I keep them in a previous paper (Eipper, 2000).

Results:

In mid September I was cleaning out my cages and shifting some occupants. My holding cage was full and I moved an adult Male *C. guttatus* into a cage holding a similar sized male *C. colletti*. For 5 minutes I had not noticed anything different. After this as tail slapping the glass caused my sight to be lifted to the cage. The Male *C. guttatus* had entwined the Male *C. colletti* and was pushing down its head in typical combat fashion. The Male *C. colletti* lost the battle and tried to escape, bolting off to the other end of the cage. The *C. guttatus* closely pursued the *C. colletti* and bit the Male *C. colletti* several times. No ill effects were sustained to the Male *C. colletti* which was to be expected as they are closely related, but this is not always the case. (Hoser, 1996).

I thought this was somewhat of a freak occurrence and that it had happened previously in other species of snakes, in Asking many colleagues here and overseas this may be a first record of Male combat between two different species?

I spoke to Raymond Hoser about this and he thought that it would be a good idea to put the snakes in together again and see what happened. This time it took over 20 minutes for them to start, but they were fighting for a good 15 minutes.

It was also done for a third time to take photos.

Both males had been cooled for breeding and both where viable males, The Instances occurred from September to November and then later in December.

References:

Eipper, S. (2000) Notes on the Black Snake Genus *Pseudechis* in Captivity, *Monitor*, 11 (1) 24-30.

Hoser, R. (1996) Interspecific Immunity to Venom in Snakes, *Herpetofauna* 26 (1): 26 -27.

Shine, R. (1991) *Australian Snakes - A Natural History*, Reed Books, 223 pp.