



# African Snakebite Institute

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## REPTILE NEWS

Hi all,

A little late but wishing all of you the very best for 2014. Make it a good year.

### What's in a name?

Wildlife enthusiasts are a weird bunch, passionate about their specific field of interest and invariably devote a rude amount of their spare time to their field of interest. In some of the groups it is fashion to use scientific names in general conversation and this varies dramatically from group to group. From what I have seen and heard, the bird folks and butterfly folks seldom use scientific names but the reptile folks are another bunch. Even amongst newcomers and youngsters you will hear: -'Think we will go up to Sani Pass this weekend and look for *Montaspis gilvomaculatus*. It hasn't been seen in more than 20 years'. For the uninformed, *Montaspis gilvomaculatus* is the Cream-spotted Mountain Snake, known from about half a dozen individuals and described in the 1990's. I managed to photograph one that was in the collection of a good friend Gavin Carpenter and to the best of my knowledge those are the only photographs of a live specimen ever taken. Correct me if I am wrong.

So what is the deal with the scientific names? I started keeping snakes at the age of 7 and only heard about scientific names when I was about 17 years old. I used to purchase mice for my snakes at the local pet shop in Montclair, Durban and another snake enthusiast, Raymond Taylor, tracked me down through the pet shop. I had a bunch of snakes in an outdoor pit (not a good idea but we did that in the 70's) and Raymond looked into the pit and told me that I shouldn't keep *Psammophis sibilans brevirostris* (now *Psammophis brevirostris*) with *Crotaphopeltis hotamboeia* as the latter will be eaten. I was puzzled but Raymond tried to explain what the Latin and Greek names were all about. I am by no means the best qualified person to try and explain what it is all about but here goes:

In the classification and Relationships chapter of my book ***A Complete Guide to Snakes of Southern Africa*** the first paragraph reads as follows: 'The ability to classify is one of the fundamental attributes of human intelligence' – Lynn Raw. It was important for primitive man to identify what was good to eat and what was not, what was dangerous and what was benign. Such groupings or classifications were obviously limited to the extent of our knowledge. The objective was to group similar objects or concepts according to some sort of similarities or design. But why the scientific names?

Common names are very confusing and vary from region to region for the same animal or plant. The Cape Cobra (*Naja nivea*) is a good example – it is also known as the Geelslang, Koper Kapel or Bakkopslang. But in parts of Limpopo and the Northwest Province, the Snouted Cobra (*Naja annulifera*) is also known as the Geelslang and on the Highveld the Rinkhals (*Hemachatus haemachatus*) is often called the Bakkopslang. Most confusing to say the least. Can you imagine ending up in hospital after a snakebite and the Cuban doctor is told you were bitten by a Bakkopslang!

Back in 1758 a very clever man by the name of Carolus Linnaeus introduced a system of scientific names that is still in existence today, obviously with some fine tuning and modifications. Most species have two Latin or Greek names called a binomen. The first word, the genus, always begins with a capital letter and is given to a group of species with similarities. So all of our cobras are in the genus *Naja* and the Rinkhals, which is not a cobra for a variety of reasons (has keeled scales and gives birth to live young whereas cobras lay eggs) is in its own genus *Hemachatus*. The second name begins with a small letter and is the species. Both of these names are always printed in italics, or if that is not possible they are underlined. So the Cape Cobra is written as *Naja nivea* or Naja nivea. It becomes far more complicated but I think you get the picture.

Again, you may ask why? Firstly, once a specific animal or plant has properly been described and assigned a scientific name, scientists (and anyone else) knows exactly which animal is being dealt with and once the natural history and distribution of that animal is better understood, it can be given the attention that it deserves. For example, any animal that is endangered cannot be protected by law if we have no idea what animal it is, how it behaves and where it occurs. Another advantage is that if any scientist (or lay person for that matter) from any country and who speaks any language speaks of *Naja nivea*, everyone will know exactly what snake that scientist is referring to. No confusion whatsoever.

That was a mouthful! I need a cup of Rooibos tea.

### **Courses**

The next KZN snake awareness and venomous snake handling course takes place at DumaZulu Lodge in Hluhluwe on 25 January 2014. Please E-mail me for more details or go to the website.

The next Gauteng snake awareness and venomous snake handling course takes place at Heia Safari Ranch on 01 February 2014. Please E-mail me for more details or go to the website.

### **Snake Tongs**

A new snake tong (ST 2) measuring 1.21 m and weighing 700 g has been developed. It is only 21 cm longer than the standard snake tong and is far safer when removing venomous snakes because of the extra distance. It sells for R1,000.00 (postage/packaging R65.00).



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Kind regards,

**Johan Marais**

Author of *A Complete Guide to Snakes of Southern Africa*

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