



# African Snakebite Institute

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## REPTILE NEWS

Hi all,

### PYTHON KILLS TWO YOUNG BOYS

I am sure that most of you have picked up snippets of this story. The initial report was that a 4 m African Rock Python (*Python sebae*) weighing around 45 kg escaped from a ground floor pet store, crawled up an air-conditioning duct to the second floor of the building where it crashed through the ceiling and killed two brothers, one aged six and the other four. This happened in Brunswick in Canada. Because of the limited

Soon after the news of the deaths I was interviewed by various television news stations, radio stations, numerous newspapers and magazines. Because of the limited amount of information that was released, it all sounded rather suspicious and I was extremely sceptical. It soon turned out that the snake was not on the ground floor as initially reported but that it was housed on the same floor where the incident took place. According to Shawn Parker, a friend of Jean Claude, the owner of Reptile Ocean, the snake was confiscated about ten years ago and Jean housed it to prevent it being euthanized.

Pythons are largely ambush hunters – they are just far too bulky and slow to be effective hunters and usually choose a suitable spot on an animal trail where the snake will withdraw its head and patiently wait for a meal to pass by. This may take several weeks and it is common knowledge that an adult python can easily survive a year on one decent meal – like a young antelope. But, like most reptiles, they are opportunistic feeders and pythons are often found in fowl runs.

When catching their prey, the python first bites to secure its prey and they have formidable teeth. A bite from an adult python will easily result in the victim requiring more than 50 stitches, as many keepers have learnt to their detriment. Once the prey is secure, the snake immediately throws a few coils around its prey and constricts it. In the past it was often thought that constrictors suffocate their prey, slowly tightening their coils as the prey exhales while others believe that they crush most of their victims' bones. What usually happens is that the snake coils around the chest region, putting a lot of pressure on the thorax region and in doing so prevents the heart from functioning properly and in doing so causes cardiac arrest. It is unusual for a constrictor to break bones when it kills its prey but it certainly does a fair amount of muscle damage and this comes in handy when trying to digest very large food animals.

Back to the incident, the initial reports made no mention of bite marks on the boys and they were reportedly lying there as if they were fast asleep. This sounded very suspicious as one would expect both to have marks and some evidence that the snake tried to swallow at least one of them. Later reports mentioned bite marks and as I write this newsletter the preliminary autopsy points to asphyxiation although the final report has not yet been issued.

So despite my scepticism it appears as though the brothers were indeed killed by the python – the first time ever (that I am aware of) that two people were killed by a python in one go.

There have been numerous reports of giant snakes killing people and photographs of people swallowed by pythons and anacondas often do the rounds on the internet and on Facebook. But most of them are hoaxes and quickly make it onto [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com), a great website that exposes hoaxes.

People have been killed by pythons in Africa but such cases are very few and far between. There was a report of a Portuguese soldier being killed and eaten by a large python in Mozambique back in 1973 and some photographs did the rounds. Strangely enough, an identical report came from Angola at the same time (another Portuguese-speaking country) and the authenticity of this story was questioned by Wulf Haacke, one of our esteemed herpetologists, in an article in the Journal of the Herpetological Association of Africa in 1981.

We also had a report of three friends playing in the bush somewhere near Durban, KwaZulu-Natal a few years back and one of them was reportedly caught and swallowed by a large python while the other two watched it from the safety of a tree. There were (of course) several newspaper reports but subsequent investigations could not confirm the incident and no child went missing.

On the subject of people being killed by pythons, there was a case in Illinois back in 1999 where a python escapes from an enclosure and killed a three-year old. And another case, I think in the U.K., where a keeper took a dead rabbit to feed his python, held it under his chin while he struggled to open the door to the enclosure, and as he opened the cage the snake struck, got him and killed him.



I had a narrow escape at Transvaal Snake Park many years back – we were feeding Guinea pigs to the giant snakes and had an enclosure containing a bunch of Reticulated pythons. It had split doors and as I opened a door towards myself a large Reticulated python, which had obviously smelled the food and was in a bit of a feeding frenzy, struck out and got me in the face with its teeth in the upper jaw getting me in the forehead and those in the lower jaw getting me in the throat. It struck so hard that several teeth broke off in my forehead. I

grabbed the snake by the throat the moment it struck and managed to minimise the damage by gently pulling it off my face without letting the strongly-recurved teeth rip my skin. There was a lot of blood but relatively little damage and my colleague at the time, the late Hans Koenig, poured some

hydrogen peroxide into the wounds to clear out any bits of junk. So if ever you happen to come across a large python crossing a road in a wilderness area, don't do the macho thing and try and grab it by the tail – you could end up with a bunch of stitches. And on the subject of bites, I have included a photograph supplied by my good friend Wayne Rawlinson to give you some idea of how unpleasant a Mole snake bite could be, not even to mention a python.

## COURSES

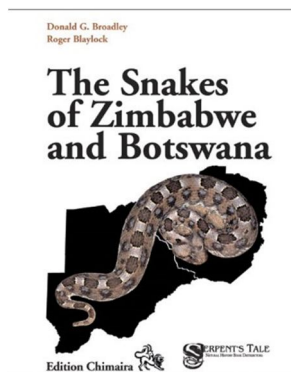
20 August 2013 – Kudumela Game Farm, Vaalwater

24 August 2013 – DumaZulu Lodge, Hluhluwe, Zululand

31 August 2013 – Heia Safari Ranch, Muldersdrift

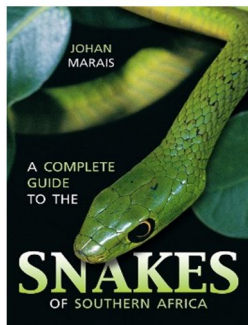
01 September 2013 – talk on snakes and snakebite at the Four Wheel Drive Club Hennops Park on the R511 towards Hartebeespoortdam Dam

## SNAKE BOOK



I am out of copies of the new *Snakes of Zimbabwe and Botswana* book but should have the next shipment within a week. The book sells for R560.00 and is not freely available in Africa. A must for all snake enthusiasts.

And on the subject of books, my best-selling book *A Complete Guide to Snakes of Southern Africa* has just gone into its 8<sup>th</sup> print edition and has now sold in the region of 60,000 copies. My thanks to Pippa Parker and the team at Random House Struik for the excellent job that they do. It is also available as an E-Book and as an App on all cell phone platforms.



## SWAZILAND SYMPOSIUM

Arrangements for the Swaziland Snakebite Symposium on 12 and 13 October 2013 are in full swing, the speakers are in place and booking are pouring in. Because of limited space the majority of seats for the symposium will be reserved for Swaziland medical practitioners and it is filling up rapidly. Please contact Thea or myself soonest if you wish to attend.

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Kind regards,

**Johan Marais**

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

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