

## **Snakes Alive**

My work at the park was to help the workers with their jobs for that was the only way for me to learn about snakes. So everyday I would clean the starback tortoise pit, the turkey pit, the chicken pits and later on the ratsnake pit, the chequered keel back pit and the monitor lizard pit. I also assisted with feeding the snakes, which is usually done once a week. Most of the snakes are fed small rats-the white mice come from the laboratory-and frogs while the python gets a chicken every week.

I was also taught the proper way of holding and handling snakes. On the third day, I was bitten by a wolf snake. Now you must understand that this is a non-poisonous snake and it was deliberately allowed to bite me for my experience and to enable me to get over the irrational fear of snake bites that all of us have acquired as a result of grandmother's tales being dinned into us from childhood. In my case even though I liked snakes, still, Anna explained, there will be a subconscious residual fear! This bite was not particularly painful and treatment was like any other wound one might receive.

During my stay at the snake park I was bitten on several occasions by a variety of non-poisonous (but hot-tempered) snakes and when I left after 3 weeks I had at least about 15-20 bites on my arms. Some of the bites were quite painful and one was so bad that my wrist had swelled up and I couldn't wear my watch for quite sometime. However when you remember that the snake gets damaged much more than you-it loses quite a few of its teeth in the bite-then you don't feel too bad. At any rate there was no question of using anti-venom as the snakes were all non-poisonous. And I learnt to think of the bites as injuries and wounds rather than the much feared 'snake-bite'.

Besides snakes, the Park also has a number of other animals. Some had been rescued, others found injured and brought to the Park for rest and recuperation. At the time of my stay at the Park it housed a wild boar, a civet-cat, a leopard, a Shikra bird, a jackal, three mongooses and several owls and eagles with broken wings. The eagles and owls were in cages with the top end kept open.

Once they were able to fly again they could fly out if they wished. There were also many types of exotic fowls, guinea pigs, white mice, rabbits, monkeys and a pair of turkeys. And of course there were Ganges soft shell turtles, starback tortoises and melanac turtles. All these animals had to be fed daily and their cages cleaned regularly.

The snake park has a system through which people in Pune city can call up the park if they sight a snake. Someone from the park will then go to the site with the caller, after

taking directions from him/her, and try to get the snake. This ensures that people do not unnecessarily kill snakes. It was on two such occasions that I went with the boys on “calls” and returned without a snake. You see when the distance that the rescue team has to travel is long, the snake may not necessarily remain in the same spot till it gets there.

The snake park has a lot of visitors daily and people are always looking for someone knowledgeable to answer questions. I used to feel quite proud to do this and would gladly answer all the queries like, “What is the name of the snake?” “What does it eat?” “Which is the male and the female?” and so on. At other times I would be pestering the staff to answer more complicated and detailed questions about the habits of snakes. Workers are a mine of information and all of it is knowledge gained from practical experience.

Some nights we went frog catching. We used to go after dinner on scooters to a river about 10 kms away. The method was simple. One person shone a torch on the wet banks of the riverbed, blinding the vision of the frog, which would stop dead in its tracks, while another nabbed it with his bare hands from behind. (Frogs must be taken alive or else the snakes won't eat them.) It was easy to catch the frogs as they remain quite still for the few seconds it takes to catch them, the difficult part being only to ensure that once caught they do not slip out of your grasp, for frogs are quite wet and slippery. After two to three hours we would return with 25 to 30 frogs in our sack.

I used to have my food at a small shack where some poor people cooked meals mainly for the Snake Park staff. One of the popular items was something called ‘shample’ which was made of vegetables and had lots of oil floating over it. This was served with bread and it was deep red in colour and very spicy. After a couple of days of eating this delicious food, I had a very bad stomach and I had to go to the toilet seven times that day. That was the end of shample. I decided to stick to dal and chappaties, and cheap creamrolls.

The bathroom of the snake park looked very dirty and I usually avoided having a bath. I would wet my long hair and pretend that I had had a bath. When the Snake Park staff found out about this they decided to give me a bath. One day they caught me and stripped me of all my clothes, then they dragged me to the bathroom and, using detergent and a little bit of Harpic, they scrubbed me with the toilet brush.

Somehow these chaps also came to know that I was afraid of the dark and all night sounds. So they kept telling me ghost stories which despite my fears I liked to hear. Finally, on the last night I even met this “real” ghost. It happened this way. Three of us, together with the watchman were watching TV when Bhushan, one of the boys said he had to go on a “call”. Shortly thereafter the lights went off and a sound like a

cat mewling was heard. Baba, the watchman didn't seem to care but the other boy Popea and I were terrified. Next a light appeared at the window and the door started banging. A voice (in Marathi) thundered, "close the window". All sorts of strange things kept happening one after another. A skull with bones was floating in the air outside the window and when we went out, cautiously, to see who was there we found no one. Returning to the room we found my bedding thrown around and my clothes and the whole room in a mess. The door frame shook, the windows rattled and I held on tight to the watchman's hand. I remembered being told that if one makes the sign of the cross the "ghost" will disappear, and so I did that, but it didn't work. This ghost apparently did not know the rules. Then suddenly we received a phone call from Bhushan saying that he was on his way back, and strangely, with Bhushan's return, the ghost had done the disappearing act. Nothing more was heard from the ghost after that. The next day when I told Anna and the others about this night-time visitor they all had a good laugh.