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NOTES ON THE HABITS OF BASCANION CONSTRUCTOR.

W. E. PRAEGER.

EARLY in August, 1898, when staying on a farm in Hancock County, Ill., I captured a fine black snake (*Bascanion constrictor*), a typical specimen about five feet long. One hot afternoon we were disturbed by the alarming report that a snake was in the henhouse. I investigated and found the snake among the boxes and straw, but for a moment the species puzzled me. Only its head and a small part of its body could be seen lying on the eggs of a hen's nest. Immediately behind the head the neck was greatly distended, colored pink and yellow, with fine longitudinal lines of black spots. Closer inspection showed that the black lines were rows of scales on the greatly stretched skin of the neck, and its guilt as a nest robber was manifest. The snake lay perfectly quiet, and as seizing it by the neck in the orthodox manner was impossible without breaking the egg it had swallowed, I took hold of it by the body. As though in preparation for fight or flight the egg was at once broken, apparently by some muscular contraction, the contents running out of the mouth, and the neck quickly assuming its normal proportions. During the five weeks that it was in captivity I frequently offered eggs to it, but no other food, for I was interested to see how such a small pair of jaws could encompass an entire hen's egg; but it refused to gratify my curiosity, and ate nothing while I had it.

The snake was kept in a small box, but was frequently released on the porch or lawn, and allowed its freedom for a while. Its one idea seemed to be to escape, though it went about it deliberately, and did not show any signs of fright. When touched, it struck quickly with open mouth at the object, but the wounds inflicted in this way on my hand were very

trifling. Black snakes have been described as expert climbers, which my captive soon showed me to be true. On the lawn stood a fine black oak (*Quercus tinctoria*), the trunk eight feet in circumference, perfectly straight, and for fifteen feet without a branch. Up this trunk our snake would go, apparently preferring it to the smooth lawn as a way of escape. The course pursued was always right up one side of the tree, and no attempt was made to encircle it. The general direction was perpendicular to the ground, the irregular curves of the body being comparatively slight. Once clear of the ground, progress was very slow; the head and neck were sometimes moved deliberately from side to side, presumably in search of a good hold. It never moved hurriedly, and there was probably always some part of its body not in motion, though this was not always apparent. It took close inspection to see that, here and there, the edge of a ventral plate was caught on some slight projection of the bark, and even then the appearance of the snake against the perpendicular trunk of the tree seemed like a defiance of the law of gravity. The muscles were thrown into unusual prominence, and constantly changed in appearance throughout its length, their contractions showing the effort needed to make the ascent.

Once while I was absent the snake escaped from its box and climbed up the smooth stone wall of the house, to a height of about thirteen feet, aided only by a few small nails and a wooden moulding above the arch of a door.

In more favorable situations our captive showed that climbing by black snakes was not necessarily slow and laborious. The ease and silence with which it could glide through the loose tangle of the vines (*Ampelopsis quinquefolia*) that covered the porch railing was remarkable; and to disentangle it from this, or from among the branches of some bushes that grew near, was not easy. A single crook of its muscular body across a branch made a firm hold, but it never twisted itself entirely around a branch. It would make for any hole that offered; the hollow stump of a small tree was a favorite retreat, and when even but a short way into this hole it was no easy matter to get it out. The body was bent so that it was pressed

against the rough sides of the cavity, and it was only by main strength on my part, and always with injury to its scales and plates, that it could be pulled out.

Placed on a porch floor, the body and tail were lashed in strong curves from side to side, but forward progress was very slow. On the tennis lawn the curves of the body were less pronounced, and the forward movement more rapid. However, it was only when it reached long grass or rough ground that the snake straightened out and went forward with that mysterious gliding motion peculiar to its kind. As an onlooker once described it, "when he strikes rough ground he quits wiggling and just scoots."