

The Grass Snake first attracted my attention as it lay on the side of a bund in the padi field, apparently lifeless. On going to pick it up, however, I found that it was not dead, but that it was firmly caught by the neck by something, and partly pulled into a hole in the bank, so that its head was doubled back on its body. So tightly was it held that it required considerable force to extract it, and in doing so revealed the head and neck of an Earth Snake, with its jaws firmly closed on the Grass Snake's neck. On trying to pull the Earth Snake out further, it relinquished its hold and retreated deeply into the bank, from where I was unable to recover it. From the view I obtained I gathered it to be about the same size as its victim. Presumably it was in residence in the hole in the bank, and the Grass Snake, entering in search of food, had been suddenly surprised and seized in the manner described. In no other way can I account for such a snake as *Natrix piscator*, well known for its active habits and aggressive nature, being overcome by another snake no larger than itself. In due course the Earth Snake would have worked its jaws along to its victim's head and then swallowed it.

Of the voracious habits of *Cylindrophis rufus* I have seen many instances. This snake feeds, as far as I know, upon eels and other snakes, and several specimens that have been sent me have disgorged meals, nearly as thick as, and several inches longer than, themselves.

Both snakes are common in Bangkok and throughout Siam in the lowland country. *C. rufus* is a nocturnal species, and in Bangkok, may be often seen lying in the road where it has been killed. It is easily recognised by its thick, purplish-brown body, with incomplete whitish bands. The tail is very short and pink underneath. It does not bite when captured, but has a curious habit of arching its tail over its back in the manner of a scorpion, showing the pink under surface, and looking most aggressive. The tail is blunt and of about the same thickness as the head, and to the Siamese this creature is often known as the two-headed snake. It is reputed to be very dangerous. *N. piscator* is the common Grass Snake of the padi fields. When caught it bites fiercely, but with its small teeth can not do much damage.

MALCOLM SMITH.

Bangkok, Oct. 20th 1921.

No. IV.—Curious Fishing Ceremony on the Upper Mekong.

Recently while on tour in the north of Siam, I came across an interesting ceremony among the Lao people at Wieng Kuk, near Vien Chan on the Upper Mekong.

From the 13th increase of the moon to the 15th in February

every year, people come from far and near to witness the catching of a huge (?) fish locally designated Pla Bük (ปลาบึก). Interference with the creature at any other time of the year, is said to bring terrible misfortune upon the offender.

The fish are stated to frequent the whole length of the Mekong river up to this point, as well as being found at the mouth. They are about 12 ft. in length, and 8 to 10 ft. in girth, have smooth black skins and are scaleless. Their heads are blunt and toothless. The females have a pair of mammae. When caught their stomachs are never found to contain anything but stones.

The fish are seen rising and ascending the river, when their capture is attempted. Only particular, and specially skilled people, are allowed to indulge in this business. Boats proceed up stream with huge seine nets, and drop them so that they extend to a great depth, across a narrow defile of the river above where the fish have been seen. These as they ascend charge into the nets and are caught by their gills. It is said that they make no attempt to turn and go down stream. The fishermen come up and guide them ashore, where they are tethered in the water by their gills until sold. Great care and skill has to be exercised in catching the fish when enmeshed, as the overturning of a boat is apt to lead to fatal results, owing to the strong undercurrent.

A curious part of the ceremony is that, on peril of the greatest misfortune, those engaged must keep up a continual flow of abuse.

The fish is said to be very powerful, and it is alleged that purchasers living upstream utilise them to tow their boats home. The live fish sells for Tcs. 200—240. The Lao chief of Vien Chan collects a fee of Tcs. 10 per fish caught, for charges incurred in propitiating the guardian spirit of the river. The retail price is Tics. 1 per catty. The flesh is much prized, and is eagerly consumed by the Laos, who believe it brings good luck and success in trading.

As I have not myself seen the creature, I should be glad of any further information readers of this Journal may have, or any suggestion as to the nature of this so-called fish.

A. H. DUKE.

October, 1920.