

Chironius Attack!

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Venomous snakes can be lethal. Unfortunately, many of us forget that even some non-venomous snakes usually considered to be harmless can, in fact, be very dangerous. Accidents with large boas and anacondas (especially the latter) can be nasty and potentially life threatening. One of my jobs has been to catch anacondas and show them to tourists. Over time, one gets to know (or believes that one knows) these animals, and one develops tricks to avoid bites. Sadly, in certain situations, even with a lot of care, accidents can happen. When they do, one does not quickly forget an anaconda bite. These massive animals live in water, and their mouths and saliva are full of bacteria. Even a relatively inoffensive bite from a baby anaconda can quickly become infected and produce a lot of pain, and the bite of an adult is another matter entirely!

Another snake that can be really aggressive and potentially dangerous is the Common Savanna Racer, *Chironius carinatus*. These snakes usually are encountered crossing roads, along paths, on beaches, or along rivers in bushes. I've been bitten by more than just a few. Bites are very bloody, but usually no deeper than a cat scratch. On those (unfortunately frequent) occasions when I have been bitten while capturing one of these aggressive



The author with the *Chironius carinatus* that attacked his face. Photograph courtesy of Arassari Trek!Fundación AndígenA.

snakes, I take advantage of the opportunity to show people that they are non-venomous and pose little danger — until now...

I have had two previous encounters with *Chironius* attacking my face, in the rainforests of the Guiana Shield. On the first occasion, I was handling a *Chironius fuscus* in front of a group of gold miners, with the intent of showing them that it was "harmless." I let go of its neck for only a second and it immediately attacked my nose. At the time, I thought it was funny, but some of the garimpeiros almost died of heart attacks! The second time, I had seen a large, red *C. scurrulus* crossing a forest path. I ran and caught it by the tail — and the next view I had was the open mouth approaching my face at an amazing speed. I immediately released the snake and luckily avoided a bite.

Neither of those episodes was anything like my most recent encounter with a *Chironius* in Los Llanos. Rather than providing an amusing tale, that experience was quite serious. I had seen the tail of a big *C. carinatus* disappearing into a pile of dead logs along the bank of the Apure River. I grabbed the tail and was showing the snake to a group of tourists before securing its neck — big mistake! I never would have imagined that its tail was strong enough to support its entire body, nor that an apparently panicked snake could effectively identify a particular target. I had considered the two previous attacks to my face as coincidental, mainly because bites resulting from handling these snakes at serpentariums were directed at my hands and arms, but I now realize that was due to the fact that only a small portion of the total length of those animals was free.

I now believe that *Chironius* attacks the face strategically. With at least 1.40 m of the animal's total 1.60 m free, it had the potential to reach my face — and it did! It twice attacked the same eye, and after that my side and my arm, all in the few seconds before I finally secured its neck. Of course, I closed my eye, and that saved my sight. Even so, the bite was frighteningly effective. If *Chironius* had longer teeth, such as those of an anaconda or a treeboa, they would have easily penetrated the eyelid and severely damaged my eye. I was extremely fortunate not to lose the eye, and I can only hope that I will be far more cautious the next time I handle a monster *Chironius*!



All Savanna Racers, like this Venezuelan *Chironius carinatus*, are quick, aggressive snakes that bite readily when handled. Photograph by the author.