IRCF REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS
CONSERVATION AND NATURAL HISTORY

A Case of Cannibalism in the Common Catsnake *Boiga trigonata* (Schneider 1802) (Squamata: Colubridae) from Surat, India

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Cannibalism has been reported in a number of animal species (e.g., Polis 1981; Polis and Myers 1985; Mitchell 1986; Campbell and Lamar 2004; Robbins et al. 2013). It is relatively rare in reptiles, although it has been described in a number of species (e.g., Mitchell 1986). True cannibalism in snakes, whereby an individual actively subdues and swallows a conspecific, is rarely observed in the wild. Instead, such events usually are artifacts of confinement in captivity, where accidental predation is more frequently observed and documented in captive snakes (e.g., Hoser 1993).

The Common Catsnake, *Boiga trigonata* (Schneider 1802; Fig. 1), is a mildly venomous colubrid snake of southeastern Asia. These snakes also are known as Indian Gamma Snakes because of the "Y" or Gamma-shaped marking on top of the head; this mark starts between the eyes and extends to the posterior labials. The species' range includes India, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal (Leviton 1959), and possibly Bhutan (Lenz 2012). It is a common species found throughout India except for the states northeast of Sikkim. *Boiga trigonata* is a nocturnally active, arboreal species often associated with low vegetation, bushes, scrub, or trees, but it also occurs in areas without a shred of vegetation (Daniel 2002; Whitaker and Captain 2004). Its venom is capable of paralyzing small prey, which consists mainly of lizards, small rodents, and birds (Whitaker and Captain 2004).

Fig. 1. A Common Catsnake (*Boiga trigonata*) from the Dang Forest, Gujarat, India. Photograph © M. Thakur.

At 2234 h on 18 September 2014, Prayas Team Environment, an animal-welfare NGO, received a distress call regarding a snake from Dipli Village (21°06'57.2"N, 72°49'07.8"E). The caller described the situation as a snake seen moving inside wooden scrap in their backyard. Team member Bipin Patel was deployed to rescue the snake. He reached the site within 20 min and started rooting through the scrap lumber. After a few minutes, he saw two Common Catsnakes in a wooden box. After clearing the space around the box, he noticed that the larger snake (total length 134 cm) was swallowing the other (83.7 cm; Fig. 2). The former subsequently regurgitated the latter, presumably in response to being disturbed. The regurgitated individual was dead. The live snake was rescued and relocated nearby and the carcass was discarded in the natural environment. Cannibalism had not been reported previously in *B. trigonata.*

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Fig. 2. Cannibalism by a Common Catsnake (*Boiga trigonata*) in Dipli Village, Surat, India. Photograph © B. Patel.

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