



A Bare-throated Tiger Heron (*Tigrisoma mexicanum*) Preying on a Yellow-bellied Seasnake (*Hydrophis platurus*) in Corcovado National Park, Costa Rica

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The Yellow-bellied Seasnake (*Hydrophis platurus*) is a common species with the broadest distribution of any snake; in the eastern Pacific, it ranges from extreme south-

western California southward to northern Peru and the warm waters around Isla de Pascua, Chile (Campbell and Lamar 2004; Wallach et al. 2014). This is the only truly pelagic sea-



Fig. 1. A Bare-throated Tiger Heron (*Tigrisoma mexicanum*) grabbing a Yellow-headed Seasnake (*Hydrophis platurus*) by the head (left) before swallowing it (right). Notice the other avian predator, a Yellow-headed Caracara (*Milvago chimachima*), another species frequently encountered along the Pacific shore of Costa Rica. Photographs by Gabriel Calvo Benavides.

snake, with a life cycle occurring entirely in the water, where individuals often can be seen floating at the surface 1–20 m from shore (Kropach 1975; Voris 1983; Campbell and Lamar 2004). In Costa Rica, this species is encountered most frequently in gulfs, bays, and other areas relatively near to the shore. At the beginning of the dry season, individuals sometimes are stranded on the shore, a consequence of strong seasonal winds and ocean currents (Solórzano 2004; Solórzano and Kastiel 2015).

Relatively few predation events on this species have been documented (Heatwole 1975, 1999; Solórzano 2004), perhaps attributable to its aposematic coloration, toxic skin, and a lack of palatability (Rubinoff and Kropach 1970; Kropach 1975; Caldwell and Rubinoff 1983). However, wounds and scars found on seasnakes (Rubinoff and Kropach 1970; Kropach 1973; Dunson in Heatwole 1975; Weldon and Vallarino 1988; Sheehy et al. 2011) suggest that predation attempts might not be that rare.

Known predators of *H. platurus* include crabs (likely *Ocypode* spp.; partially eaten individuals have been reported protruding from crab holes), a pufferfish (probably *Spherooides annulatus*), Tiger Sharks (*Galeocerdo cuvier*), a Leopard Seal (*Hydrurga leptonyx*), and possibly a young Galapagos Sea Lion (*Zalophus wollebaeki*) (Duellman 1961; Heatwole and Finnie 1980; Reynolds and Pickwell 1984; Masunaga et al. 2008; Sheehy et al. 2011). Of these, the pufferfish and seal subsequently regurgitated the snakes, and the sea lion was observed vomiting but the body of a snake was not found. Birds also are known predators of seasnakes (Heatwole 1999). A Lava Gull (*Larus fuliginosus*) dropped a *H. platurus* onto a research vessel (Reynolds and Pickwell 1984) and Frigatebirds (*Fregata magnificens*) have been reported carrying snakes for a short distance before dropping them into the water (Wetmore 1965; Sheehy et al. 2011). Predatory attacks also occur when snakes are stranded on beaches, a situation that makes them more vulnerable. A Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*) and a Common Black Hawk (*Buteogallus anthracinus*) are known to have taken a stranded *H. platurus* (Solórzano and Kastiel 2015; Solórzano and Sasa 2017).

Tide pools along the rocky beach at San Pedrillo, Corcovado National Park, support a variety of vertebrates and invertebrates that are most vulnerable during low tides. At 0847 h on 5 August 2019, GCB found a Yellow-bellied Seasnake trapped in a pool. Unfortunately for the snake, an opportunistic Bare-throated Tiger Heron (*Tigrisoma mexicanum*), one of many species of predatory birds that patrol this beach in search of a meal, captured the snake and beat it against the rocks. Once the heron immobilized the snake by

grasping its head, the bird began its meal (Fig. 1). The heron regurgitated the snake once but swallowed it a second time. We were unable to determine if the heron suffered any ill effects or regurgitated the snake after swallowing it the second time. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report of a Bare-throated Tiger Heron feeding on a Yellow-bellied Seasnake.

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