



An Unusual Predation Attempt by a Cuban Racer, *Cubophis cantherigerus schwartzi* (Squamata: Dipsadidae), on a Bar Jack, *Caranx ruber* (Perciformes: Carangidae)

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The Cuban Racer (*Cubophis cantherigerus*) (Fig. 1) is probably the most ecologically versatile snake in Cuba. This species is widely distributed in the Cuban Archipelago, occupying a wide range of habitats at elevations from sea level to 1,800 m (Henderson and Powell 2009; Rodríguez Schettino et al. 2010, 2013). The species was thought to have a wider distribution in the West Indies, but recent molecular studies restricted it to the Cuban Archipelago and the Cay Sal Bank in the Bahamas (Powell and Henderson 2012; Krysko et al. 2015; Reynolds et al. 2018). A variety of prey items have been reported in its diet, including marine crabs (unidentified), frogs (*Eleutherodactylus*, *Osteopilus*), lizards (*Anolis*, *Cyclura*, *Diploglossus*, *Leiocephalus*, *Pholidoscelis*, *Sphaerodactylus*), other snakes (*Caraiba*, conspecifics, *Tropidophis*), turtle hatchlings (*Chelonia*, *Eretmochelys*, *Trachemys*), native bird nestlings (*Columbina*, *Turdus*, *Xiphidiopicus*), domestic fowl (*Gallus*), introduced murid rodents (*Mus*, *Rattus*), and bats (*Phyllonycteris*) (for reviews see Buide 1966, 1985; Henderson and Sajdak 1996; Henderson and Powell 2009; Reyes Vázquez et al. 2013; Rodríguez-Cabrera 2017; Rodríguez-Cabrera et al. 2018). Herein we report the first predation attempt by a Cuban Racer on a marine fish.

At mid-morning (date unrecorded) in late April 2021, we observed an adult Cuban Racer, *C. cantherigerus schwartzi* (ca. 800 mm SVL), attempting to swallow a Bar Jack, *Caranx ruber* (ca. 400 mm total length) (Fig. 2) in a rustic wooden building at “Playa Prohibida,” a tourist resort north of Cayo Coco, “Centro y Oeste de Cayo Coco” Ecological Reserve, Chambas Municipality, Ciego de Ávila Province (22.55402, -78.40897; WGS 84; ca. 20 m from the shore line; elev. <1 m asl). The rustic wooden building is surrounded mostly by sandy beach vegetation complex, with isolated seagrape and mangrove trees (Fig. 3). A number of fish had been caught



Fig. 1. The Cuban Racer (*Cubophis cantherigerus*) is probably the most ecologically versatile snake in Cuba. This individual (*C. c. schwartzi*) was in “Lomas de Banao” Ecological Reserve in south-central Cuba. Photograph © Raimundo López-Silvero.

by local fishermen during the early morning hours (still dark) and temporarily stored on the floor of the building. The fish were rigid because of the time elapsed since their capture. The snake, apparently hidden beneath the floor of the building (Fig. 3), approached the pile of fish and grabbed one by its head (Fig. 2). The fish chosen by the snake was isolated from the rest of the pile. The attempt at ingestion lasted several minutes before the snake abandoned its meal, presumably after realizing that it was too large to swallow.

Fish consumption by West Indian snakes has been reported only in the Caribbean Watersnake, *Tretanorhinus variabilis* (Dipsadidae), the Salt Marsh Snake, *Nerodia clarkii compressicauda* (Natricidae), and possibly the Saint Lucia Lancehead, *Bothrops caribbaeus* (Viperidae), although reports of the latter are unverified (for reviews see Henderson and Powell 2009; López-Hurtado et al. 2020). A Puerto Rican Racer (*Borikenophis portoricensis*) attempted to swallow the



Fig. 2. An adult Cuban Racer (*Cubophis cantherigerus schwartzii*) attempting to swallow a Bar Jack (*Caranx ruber*) in a rustic wooden building at “Playa Prohibida,” north of Cayo Coco, Chambas Municipality, Ciego de Ávila Province, Cuba. Photograph © A. Gil Carballo.



Fig. 3. The rustic wooden building at “Playa Prohibida,” north of Cayo Coco, Chambas Municipality, Ciego de Ávila Province, Cuba, where we observed a Cuban Racer (*Cubophis cantherigerus schwartzii*) attempting to swallow a Bar Jack (*Caranx ruber*). Photograph © A. Gil Carballo.

small, dry carcass of a marine fish (referred to as “*Herangula* sp.”) dropped from a pelican nest (Norton 1993).

The observation described herein corroborates the opportunistic feeding habits of Cuban Racers, which appear willing and capable of consuming prey items (aquatic) that would not be available for this snake under normal circumstances. This suggests that Cuban Racers might feed on fish carcasses along shorelines of the sea, rivers, and lakes, as observed in several snake families (for reviews see DeVault and Krochmal 2002; Lillywhite et al. 2008). In this case, differences in scent, texture, and shape from its usual prey did not seem to deter the snake from recognizing such motionless items as food.

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