



A rock python (*Python molurus*) predate on a porcupine (*Hystrix indica*)

The endemic Sri Lankan subspecies of rock python, *Python molurus pimbura* is the largest snake found in Sri Lanka (Deraniyagala 1955). Though distributed island wide, it is listed as Near Threatened due to the rapid population decline. This is a common victim of illegal trade (as pets and for skin/meat). The prey items of the rock python are poorly documented (De Silva 1980), but it is not unusual for them to take difficult prey such as porcupines. In India, Bhupathy & Vijayan (1989) observed 14% of the python diet was porcupines, but this is a rare observation for Sri Lanka.

On 25 August 2019 at about 17:45 h in Koonkatiya (6.7031°N, 81.2550° E), Buttala, Monaragala District, Sri Lanka, we observed a rock python regurgitating a juvenile female porcupine. The habitat was a home garden in a rural village with abundant scrubland. The python was 2.2 m long. The carcass of the porcupine had partially come out and one of its front legs had penetrated the body of the snake (Fig. 1). The python was alive when it was seen by villagers who tried to save its life by removing quills that had penetrated the snake's body. However, it succumbed to the injuries shortly after. The python's body was marked by sharp bites that may have been the result of an attack of other porcupines when the first one was taken. When disturbed after a large meal, snakes naturally react by regurgitating that meal because then they can move freely and escape (Wall 1921), but regurgitating a porcupine is not that easy and the result would be death. This report is the first of a rock python swallowing a porcupine in Sri Lanka.

The Indian crested porcupine, *Hystrix indica* is the largest and a most widely distributed rodent in Sri Lanka. They live in large burrows dug deep into the ground and give birth to 2–4 young at a time. Predations on porcupines are rare because of their sharp quills, so predators do not attack unless starving. But there are a few

records of the leopard (*Panthera pardus kotiya*) and the saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) hunting porcupines in Sri Lanka (Samarasinghe & Alwis 2017). We also observed an adult Sri Lankan leopard found dead in Kumana National Park after trying to hunt a porcupine. Nearly 20 sharp quills were attached to the face and fore part of the leopard carcass.

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Plate 12



Figure 1. The Sri Lankan rock python (*Python molurus pimbura*) tries to swallow a juvenile of Indian crested porcupine (*Hystrix indica*): (A) dorsal and (B) lateral aspects of the animals