

GRAYIA SMITHII (Leach, 1818)**Smith's African Water Snake**

BIBLIOTHÈQUE HERPÉTOLOGIQUE Olivier PAUWELS

DIET

A junior synonym of *Grayia smithii* (Leach, 1818) is *Grayia silurophaga* Günther, 1858. The reason for the latter name is that the syntypes BM(NH) 1946.1.5.16 and BM(NH) 1951.12.6.16 contained a Black Walking Catfish *Clarias anguillaris* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Siluriformes, Clariidae). De Rochebrune (1884. Faune de la Sénégalie. Reptiles. Doin, Paris, pp. 1-221) wrote that the species feeds on various kinds of small fishes, and not only on siluroids, and hence that the specific epithet «piscivora» would have been much more appropriate for the species than the name silurophaga. Cansdale (1955. Reptiles of West Africa. Penguin Books, West African Series, London: pp. 1-104) stated that it “feeds mostly on mudfish, though it also takes tadpoles and frogs, especially the aquatic clawed frog *Xenopus*”. Cansdale (1961. West African Snakes. West African Nature Handbooks. Longmans, London: pp. vi + 1-74) said that it eats fish, notably mud-fish (*Clarias* sp.) and frogs, notably clawed frogs (*Xenopus tropicalis* according to Dunger, 1972. The Nigerian Field 37(1): 21-38). Doucet (1963. Acta tropica, 20(3): 201-340) stated that it feeds on fishes. Roux-Estève (1965. Cahiers de la Maboké, 3(1): 51-92) said that it feeds on frogs and fishes. De Witte (1966. Institut des Parcs nationaux du Congo, Fasc. 48, Bruxelles: 1-108 + pl. I-V) mentioned a specimen that was catching a catfish (“silure”) when collected. Leston & Hughes (1968. Bull. IFAN (A), 30: 737-770) cited a Ghanaese specimen which had eaten a 215 mm long catfish *Heterobranchus longifilis* Valenciennes, 1840 (Siluriformes, Clariidae). Villiers (1975. Les serpents de l'Ouest africain. Init. Afr., IFAN, 3rd ed.: pp. 1-195) said that it feeds mainly on fishes. Stucki-Stirn (1979. Snake Report 721. Herpeto-Verlag, Teuffenthal: pp. vii + 1-650) reported that it eats fishes (mainly mudfish) and frogs. Chippaux (1980. Epidémiologie des morsures de serpents en Côte d'Ivoire. Ph.D. thesis, Faculté de Médecine, Marseille: pp. 1-154) and Chippaux (1999. Les serpents d'Afrique occidentale et centrale. IRD Editions, Paris, pp. 1-278) stated that the species feeds on fishes and amphibians. The hand-written label accompanying the adult female MNHN 1994.7294 (SVL 1003 mm, tail length >356 mm, ventrals 160, subcaudals >74) indicates “couleuvre aquatique attrapée sur les bords du fleuve Bandama [Lamto, Côte d'Ivoire], alors qu'elle sortait du fleuve pour manger le Silure» («aquatic colubrid caught on the river bank while it was going out of the Bandama River [Lamto, Ivory Coast] in

order to eat the catfish"); we could however not trace this fish in the MNHN collections. We hereafter report the stomach content of an adult female *G. smithii* (MNHN 1987.1419; SVL.995 mm, tail length >392, ventrals 159, subcaudals >91), collected in Congo Brazzaville, Epena (1°21'N 17°28'E) area, which had ingested the exceptional number of 20 fishes representing four species of Cichlidae. This specimen was already quoted in a list of the Congolese snake species by Trape & Roux-Estève (1995. J. Afr. Zool., 109(1): 31-50). The circumstances of its capture are quite unusual and deserve some comments. It was given to one of us (J.-F. T.) by Mr Roy Mackal who caught it during a cryptozoological expedition (October-December 1981) devoted to the study of a large cryptid called Mokele-Membe, said to resemble Mesozoic sauropods. The report of the expedition with a map of the research area was given by Mackal et al. (1982. Cryptozoology, 1: 62-72). The snake was precisely caught during the return passage of the expedition, while the cryptozoologists were hardly progressing by dugout in the narrow 20-miles Djemba canal linking the Tanga River to the Ubangui River. The list of the 20 fishes is as follows (their respective standard length in mm from tip of snout to base of caudal fin is indicated between brackets, with a precision of 0.05 mm): 8 *Hemichromis* sp. (33.50, 35.00, 40.65, 41.65, 44.00, 45.00, 46.25, 47.55), 3 *Thoracochromis* sp. (61.90, 86.60, 91.55), 2 *Tilapia* sp. (45.90, 46.35), and 7 Cichlidae sp. (40.00, 45.40, 46.80, 48.00, 48.65, 50.05, 50.05).

We take the opportunity of this note to mention that the species was dedicated to the Norwegian botanist Smith and hence that the spelling *Grayia smythii*, as well as the common name Smyth's water snake, encountered in many recent publications (e.g. Spawls & Branch, 1995. The dangerous snakes of Africa. Natural history. Species directory. Venoms and snakebite. Blandford, London: pp. 1-192) overlooking the nomenclatural remarks of Laurent (1956. Annls. Mus. Roy. Congo Belge, Sci. Zool., 48: pp. 1-390 + pl. I-XXXI) and Meirte (1992. Annls. Mus. Roy. Afr. Centr., Sci. Zool., 267: 1-152), is inappropriate, being an original incorrect spelling of *Grayia smithii* (for the differences between different kinds of spellings in zoological nomenclature, see Dubois, 1987. Alytes, 6 (1-2): 27-55).

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to Jean-Christophe de Massary (MNHN) for commenting on the manuscript. The senior author is much indebted to Dr. Colin J. McCarthy for his warm reception at the British Museum

(Natural History), and to Dr. Danny Meirte (MRAC/KMMA, Tervuren) for constructive discussions.

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GRAYIA ORNATA (Bocage, 1866)

Ornate Water Snake

DIET

The African Ornate Water Snake is distributed in the swamps and rivers of Equatorial Africa. Very little data on its biology and food habits are available in the literature. Chirio (1998. *Les serpents du Cameroun*. C.R.P. Bafoussam, Projet Paseca, A.F.C. Dschang, Yaounde, pp. 1-37) mentioned that *Grayia ornata* is aquatic and piscivorous and goes on land only for basking and egg laying. Moreover Chippaux (1999. *Les serpents d'Afrique occidentale et centrale*. IRD Editions, Paris, pp 1-278) specified that the species is also "arboreal" in that it hunts from branches overhanging the water. Due to the lack of precise data on the diet of *G. ornata*, we think appropriate to provide hereafter two cases of ichthyophagy for the species.

The stomach of the young male MNHN 1995.9386 (SVL 288 mm, tail length 110 mm, ventrals 150, subcaudals 85) from Equatorial Guinea, Monte Alen National Park, donated by Carlos Lasso, contains a *Parauchenoglanis* sp. (Siluriformes, Claroteidae (ex Bagridae) (total length 78 mm).

The stomach of the adult female IRSNB 11193 (SVL 800 mm, tail length 260 mm, ventrals 156, subcaudals 76) collected by natives on 22 March 1950 in Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo), Parc