

In the coastal grasslands of Loango National Park and in the Gamba region, the amphibians are not very visible, one could even say rare, but one species particularly deserves mention: Perret's snout-burrower *Hemismus perreti* (Box below). The other species are, rather, linked to the wetlands or forests and only appear in the grasslands during the rainy season and mostly when they are partially flooded.

Perret's burrowing frog

The afrotropical genus *Hemismus*, only representative of the amphibian family of Hemisotidae, is unique in its habits and its morphology. Its strongly muscled forelegs, its hard and pointed muzzle that is used like a shovel, its small eyes and its stocky and slippery body are all just so many adaptations for a life that is exclusively subterranean. The speed with which the *Hemismus* buries itself in the sandy or muddy soil, headfirst, is impressive. They only rarely come above ground, at night and mostly during heavy rainy season downpours. Their food consists of termites and other



invertebrates found under the leaf litter and the soil. During the reproductive period, the males call the females from the entrance of their burrow. The eggs are laid in the burrow where the female guards them, and the tadpoles only emerge during the floods caused by the rains, to go rejoin the temporary watering holes where they complete their development. In certain species, it has been observed that the female dug a canal between the burrow and a watering hole in order to help the tadpoles leave, and some females have even been seen carrying their tadpoles toward the water. Perhaps these behaviors are shared by nine species in the genus, but for the most part no thorough ecological study has been undertaken as of yet. *Hemismus perreti* (Figure 560) is among those species whose biology is not very well known. Discovered in 1972 on the coast of the Democratic Republic of Congo, it was not known until its recent discovery in Gabon, where the populations were inventoried in Loango National Park., in the town of Gamba and its surrounding area, and in one tract of savanna in Moukalaba-Doudou National Park. The species seems, therefore, to have a very restrained distribution, in forest-savanna mosaic along the southern coast from Gabon to Congo, between sea level and altitudes of 110 m, but in known areas, the species appears to be fairly common.

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Reptiles

Among reptiles, the most common snake is a sand snake, *Psammophis cf phillipsi* (Figure 562). It belongs to the family Lamprophiidae and sub-family Psammophiinae, formerly included in the Colubridae. The widespread genus *Psammophis* has many species in African grasslands, but only one in Gabon. It is a diurnal snake, terrestrial, very fast and venomous. Easily recognisable to its head pattern, it is not dangerous for humans since its venom fangs are back in the mouth. Its main food seems to be amphibians.