Giant snakes of Bygone Days

A Collector's Selection of Old Postcards, Prints, and Photographs

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About 10 years ago, a friend of mine on business in Singapore spotted the old postcard shown above, and knowing about my interest in giant snakes, he sent it to me. I liked the relic so much that I was inspired to start a collection, and began contacting European and U.S. antique dealers, asking for old photos of snakes longer than 9 metres. In time my interest grew to include old woodcuts and lithographs of giant snakes, which I appreciate for their artwork even when this differs greatly from scientific reality.

Today I have more than a hundred original rarities — some of my favorites are shown in this article, guaranteed to gratify both lovers of giant snakes and lovers of curious old prints. Many of the images also reveal amusing misconceptions about these impressive reptiles. I have included passages from old literature to enhance the feeling of stepping into the past.

So far I have not found any old photograph of a snake longer than 9 metres, but I do know that such snakes have existed — for example, Colossus, the female reticulated python that attained a length of 9.15 metres before dying in 1963 at the Pittsburgh Zoo (USA). My search for the longest snakes will never stop, and although I know it is improbable, I dream that someday a captive python (maybe mine!) might grow even bigger than Colossus.

Thirteen dusty postcards

It is not easy to find old postcards of reptiles, even in general, and finding postcards of giant snakes in particular is truly difficult. However, I have endured, and am pleased to show 13 beautiful rarities, most of which are about a hundred years old. One of the most interesting is figure 1, the first of my collection, although it is not as old as the others. It was postmarked at Singapore on 3 August 1940, just before the Japanese occupation. It shows a group of soldiers behind a dead reticulated python, *Python reticulatus*, with a large meal in its stomach. Friends have often asked me if the snake had eaten a human, and it occurs to me that this type of postcard might well have been marketed with the knowledge that such gruesome suspicions would surely boost sales. Later, in a collector's catalogue, I saw a different photo showing the same soldiers with the snake cut open, revealing that the prey was in fact a deer.

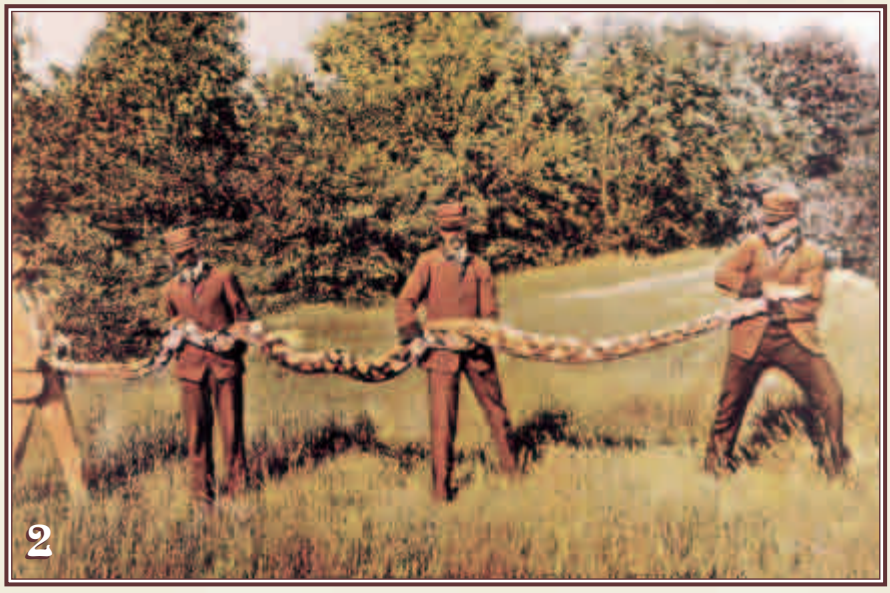
Figures 2, 3, and 4 attract attention because of the lengths of the snakes (all *Python reticulatus*) and the number of men involved in handling them. These three postcards are chromolithographs, produced by a colour printing process invented in Germany in the mid 1830s, in which the different colours are applied with separate, carefully registered stones. Valuable works of art could require more than 30 plates, but postcards had to be very cheap, so they were produced quickly and with few plates. As a result, the colours of the pythons in these images aren't at all natural.

The photograph in figure 2 also appeared in black-and-white in a book (DITMARS, 1937), where the snake was described as being 20 feet long. My colour postcard version, titled "Measuring Imperial Python – New York Zoological Park," was postmarked in 1906 with a U.S. 1-cent stamp. The beautiful postcard in figure 3, postmarked in 1911, is from the same zoo, and is titled simply "Handling a python."

Figure 4 is a postcard postmarked at New York on 5 April 1908. The photo was taken inside the New York Central Park Menagerie, and is testimony of the practice of force-feeding with a stick, which was very common at that time. Captive giant snakes often did not eat spontaneously — they were all wild-caught, and herpetoculture techniques were rudimentary.

DITMARS (1933) wrote:

"Most Regal Pythons are so nervous and irritable during the first few months of confinement, they steadily refuse food. Unless energetic measures are employed to nourish them they become badly emaciated. They are apt to deliberately continue to fast, actually starving to death, if not fed by force. When a big specimen is thus languishing, with the possibility of approaching a suicidal end, there is hope of awakening its dormant appetite by forcing food down its throat. In the compulsory feeding of the big snakes in the New York Zoological Park — say for a twenty-foot specimen — the writer kills four medium-sized rabbits, removes the skin, then ties the animals together — the hind legs of one to the neck of another; ordinary brown twine is used in this operation. A long bamboo pole is the accessory. This has a blunt tip and is forced through the neck of the leading rabbit of the string, the tip pressing against the roof of the skull for purchase. During lively work the monster is taken from the cage by a dozen keepers and held as straight as possible, the forward man holding it close to the head with both hands. By means of the pole the meal is forced down the throat for a distance of fully five feet."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Now let's look at two large boas. The English postcard in figure 5 is titled "Boa constrictor caught in New Forest, August 24th, 1904." This species has never been native to England, but the explanation of the photo is found in what the sender wrote to his son on 7 July 1905: "This snake was a pet lost in the forest. He was not recaptured for 6 weeks. Daddy."

Figure 6 is especially interesting as it shows a famous Florida personality, Owen Godwin, an intrepid adventurer who died in 1975. This postcard of him with a boa constrictor was postmarked in 1943, when Godwin supervised a small facility called Reptile Village. He later created the larger Florida Wildlife Institute, now called Gatorland, which opened in 1949 in Orlando.

The postcards in figures 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 are a complete series from 1909. They show a beautiful python named Satan, with the following description on the first card: "A reticulated or royal python, largest of all constrictors; from Malay Islands. Feeding on a 54 lb. pig. The largest reptile in America. Length, 31 feet; weighs, 340 lbs. At Edwards' Animal Show." It is curious that the name "royal python" was given for this species; the name is now used only for *Python regius*, also commonly called the ball python. These postcards were really a scientific document for those times — the swallowing process of a snake is described in captions on the cards: "Satan, Commencing to Swallow the Pig," "With the Pig in His Throat," "With Pig Disappearing," and "With Pig in His Stomach," respectively.

Figure 12 shows another huge python, named Old Satan, swallowing a pig. This snake is publicized by the Jungle Zoo as weighing 473 pounds. Although the similar name might make one wonder whether this is the same python as in the previous postcards, the pattern looks to me like that of an Asian rock python, *Python molurus*. Unfortunately I have never found any information about Edwards' Animal Show or the Jungle Zoo. But POPE (1961) vividly described such old exhibitions as follows:

"The old traveling circus of the United States was incomplete without a giant-snake exhibit. A huge, gaudy picture outside the sideshow tent often depicted a monstrous reptile performing some super-serpent feat, while a barker announced in a highly unnatural voice that the largest snake ever caught could be seen inside. The snake usually turned out to be a boa constrictor or an Indian python of moderate

size displayed by a plump woman dressed in a colorful, abbreviated costume. … The circus snake show, being neither permanent nor scientific, was never comparable to museum or zoo exhibits. As a rule, the specimens were bought at the beginning of the season and disposed of at its end after months of starvation, a practice made possible by the ability of the snakes to survive long fasts."

The audiences of the enigmatic Edwards' Animal Show and Jungle Zoo surely never complained about the moderate sizes of the snakes displayed. DITMARS (1933) was more romantic and optimistic in his description of captive snakes and traveling shows:

"Large numbers are captured annually and shipped to various parts of Europe and America, where they arrive in the spring, selling to the shows for the proverbial and favorite 'snake charming' act. In this new life the snakes' lazy motions provoke the general belief that the reptiles are drugged or hypnotized by the bespangled enchantress; but according to the latter's ideas — and snake charmers take a really sympathetic interest in their serpents — they are simply 'well broken' specimens. They are cared for with the same tenderness as so many children. Each has a name, and when the big show packs up for the night, the snakes are tucked in many thicknesses of blankets to protect them from jar or chilling. Under these conditions they live for years, becoming actually affectionate. It is not unusual to find a specimen peevishly refusing to take food from any but the hand of its mistress."

The last postcard here, figure 13, was sent to me by a U.S. dealer as printed in the mid 1920s. It shows an illustration of an Indian rhinoceros in front of a terrific python. The observer might ask: Which is the stronger of the two animals? Will they fight? If so, who will be the winner? Exciting to ponder, but the card doesn't really have much scientific value.

Three old photographs

The original 1945 sepia photograph in figure 14 came to me this year from an antique dealer who wrote that the man who was force-feeding the reticulated python could very well be the famous herpetologist Raymond L. Ditmars, who assigned the record of longest snake in the world to *Python reticulatus* (DITMARS, 1937):

"What is the greatest size attained by serpents? That is a frequent question. In over thirty years endeavor to obtain a really huge serpent for the Zoological Park's collection, my largest specimen was just twenty-four feet long. This was a Reticulated or Regal Python, *Python reticulatus*, from Malaya, which I am convinced is the largest existing species of snake. In all of these years, in an endeavor to obtain record measurements from authoritative sources the figures stand at thirty-three feet and


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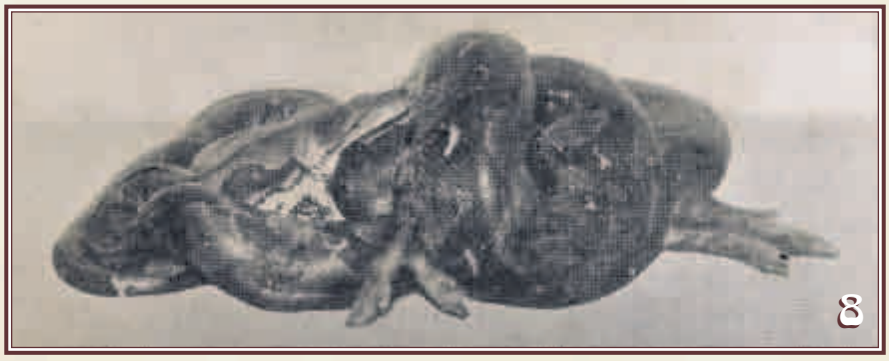
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another a few inches over thirty feet. Both of these measurements relate to *Python reticulatus*."

The snake in figure 14 could be about 4.5 metres long, but appears quite thin in comparison to many captive specimens I see nowadays. This would reflect the generally poorer conditions under which many captive giant serpents lived in the past. A very common disease among snakes in those days was stomatitis (mouthrot), described here by DITMARS (1933):

"Unfortunately, a deadly mouth disease is a constant menace to the pythons, in fact, big snakes of all species. The writer believes this to be brought about by an enervated condition of the snake, robbing the blood of its germicidal qualities — and this during a period of disordered stomach. As the mouth of a snake that is not feeding becomes stored with stagnant salivary secretions, and bacteria of many kinds always exist in the mouth, this is the region principally attacked. A slight sore — a bruise caused by striking at an annoying object — is generally the start of the trouble. The sore becomes at once infected; an intense irritation, attended with a sloughing of a white, cheesy matter, follows."

The next two figures show French photographs from the 1920s. In figure 15 we see several Indian rock pythons, *Python molurus molurus*. In figure 16, in addition to the Indian rock python, we also see what is probably an African rock python, *Python sebae*, the darker snake on the right shoulder of the lady. Indian and African rock pythons were the most common species of large constrictors used in European circuses of that period. In recent times, the more docile Burmese python, *Python molurus bivittatus*, is generally used. It is my opinion that no species of snake can feel content when being handled in such shows.

POPE (1961) described the snake charmer's job with a just severity:

"The average observer looked at her in awe; surely she must have incredible courage to handle such a dangerous creature. It was more likely that the snake was in too poor condition to care who handled it or how; the woman, being in no danger whatsoever, merely had to overcome any dread of snakes she might have. Some persons do this with ease. The 'charmer's' job was, perhaps, the easiest in the whole circus; acrobats, clowns, and other performers had to work at their specialties for years to become proficient, whereas the 'snake charmer' could be instructed in a matter of hours."

Twenty-three miscellaneous prints

Some of the prints in this collection never cease to fascinate me, as they represent a beautiful blend of herpetological life and forgotten accounts of explorations in the tropics.

Figure 17 shows the only Italian print I have. It is a beautiful aquatint titled "*Famiglia indiana sorpresa da un serpente Boa*" (Indian family surprised by a Boa snake), from the 1857 book *Geografia Storica Moderna Universale* published by Francesco Pagnoni Editore.

Figures 18, 23, 24, 25, 26, and 27 illustrate giant snakes with their tails wrapped around tree trunks while constricting prey (including human!). In the 1800s and early 1900s many naturalists believed this behaviour was necessary for a successfull kill. Figure 17 is a true rarity for those days as the tail of the snake is free.

Figure 18 is a wood engraving titled "An Adventure with a Boa," from a book by a woman who describes giant snakes with typical nineteenth-century terror (LESLIE, 1888):

"The wonderful swiftness with which the constrictor serpents will dart down upon prey from their hiding-places in


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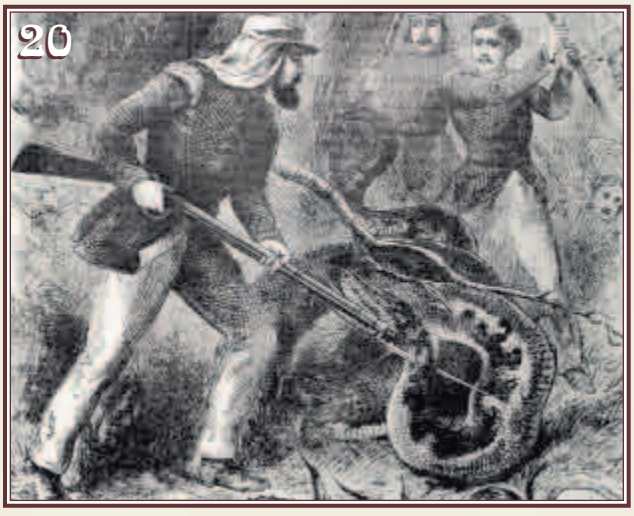
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the jungle trees is well known to the traveler or hunter in those tropical countries where this class of serpents exist. Their usual mode of securing food is to lie silently in 'perdu,' stretched out upon the boughs of the lofty forest trees, in favorable proximity to some frequented spoor (trail) or drinking-place of the jungle denizens. Lurking in some leafy security, they wait motionless for hours, if need be, and when a gazelle, a hog, or some other unsuspecting creature, wanders within suitable striking proximity, the boa falls, or shoots, rather, down

through the maze of vines, lianas, and branches, and with undeviating certainty upon the victim. Their swiftness in this predatory act resembles the glancing flight of an arrow, or, perhaps, it is more strikingly illustrated by comparing it to a flash of lightning. … After crushing his prey till every large bone is broken, and the carcass thus prepared for swallowing, the boa completes the process by lubricating it with a slimy salivary secretion, with which these serpents are provided for this object, and swallows it. … The larger boas will strike at a man quite as readily as at an animal."

Moreover, this particular picture in the book specifically accompanies the following adventure account:

"We had not been thus skirting the rank, impenetrable jungle on the river bank for more than an hour, when there was a sudden and violent crashing overhead, up among the boughs of the gigantic old primeval trees along the margin, as a tremendous boa-constrictor shot down to us, whirling one coil around the native as he snapped his distended jaws upon the latter's rascally head. This valiant eater of boa-constrictors uttered one prolonged shriek, that reverberated in echoes down the river, as I drew a bead on the serpent's head and fired. The gun was a heavy sporting piece, of Swiss manufacture, and carried a two-ounce steel-tipped cone, which blew off the top of the boa's head as it crushed through just behind the eye, though it was by the merest chance that I hit him, for the canoe was thrown half over, with such violence that I fired before hardly knowing what was the matter."

In any case it is important to take into consideration a point explained by DITMARS (1937):

"The term 'Boa Constrictor' has long been a misleading one. It originated when early naturalists applied it as a scientific title to one of the big serpents of tropical America, but to a species smaller than the anaconda. Later through lack of understanding of the actual condition, but prompted by a vague idea that it applied to big snakes and that such big serpents were constrictors, the title became a 'popular' one indiscriminately applied to not only the big serpents of tropical America, but the pythons of Asia and Africa."

Figure 19 is a beautiful wood engraving titled simply "Boa constrictor," from *Bresil, Colombie et Guyanes* by M. Ferdinand Denis and M. C. Famin (Firmin Didot Freres, Paris, 1839). The proportions of the South American snake represented here suggest that it could in fact be a green anaconda, *Eunectes murinus*. The killed snake is being skinned by three natives under the supervision of a "civilized man." The image of the reptile is not very realistic — its head seems curiously humanoid, with a long nose and the eyes opened wide with raised eyebrows.

Figure 20 depicts a man killing a giant snake. Titled "Bayonetting a Boa," it is another wood engraving from the book by LESLIE (1888), and accompanies the text that follows:

"This species is common in the Philippines, but it is rare to meet with a specimen of very large dimensions. It is possible, nay probable, that centuries of time are necessary for this reptile to attain its largest size; and to such an age, the various accidents to which animals are exposed rarely suffer it to attain. Full-sized boas are consequently to be met with only in the gloomiest, most remote, and solitary forests."

Figure 21 is a hand-coloured print titled "Boa," from the French work of Felix Edward Guerin-Meneville, *Dictionnaire Pittoresque d'Histoire Naturelle*, published in Paris in 1839. LESLIE (1888) emphasized that "the skin of the sucuruhyu serves for many different purposes in South America, and it is greatly admired by all travelers who have seen it."

Figure 22 is truly a work of art. It is taken from my original 1860 mythology lithograph by William Turner titled "Apollo killing the Python." One of the 12 Olympians of Greek myth, Apollo was the god of light, healing, prophecy, and manly beauty. One of his great deeds was the slaying of the serpent Python, a feared giant beast that lived in the hills near Delphi. It is said that Apollo came down from Mount Olympus and killed the monster with a single shot of a golden arrow. Turner (1775–1851) was one of the greatest and most prolific English landscape painters. The "serpent" in this print has two clawed legs and little herpetological value, although a modern theory maintains that snakes did have legs in the very remote past.

In figures 23–27 giant snakes are constricting very large animals. This is impressive to see, but nowadays we know that such predation is most unlikely. Figure 23, titled "A Boa strangling a jaguar," is found in the beautiful work of LESLIE (1888). It is one of my favourites, and in this case the snake actually has the pattern of a real boa constrictor.

Figure 24 is a pretty terrifying image of a true boa constrictor battling a feline, taken from the French children's book *Alphabet des Animaux Sauvages* (Alphabet of Wild Animals), printed in about 1880. The text below the picture explains that the boa is the largest of all snakes, and coils around even the strongest of animals, and crushes and devours them. The same species is also represented in the

woodcut of figure 25, titled "Boa constrictor," which appeared in the 1883 book *Animal Life* by E. P. Wright. In this image the snake is constricting a creature similar to a deer. The relative size of the snake is enormous: I don't think many modern herpetoculturists would buy a boa if it could attain such a size!

Figure 26 is a marvellous 1895 hand-coloured print with the title "Anaconda," drawn by W. H. Freeman and engraved by Sargent. The pattern of the snake is true to the species *Eunectes murinus*, but the artist must not have realized that the medium-sized specimen shown could never swallow such a large bovine.

Typical of an encyclopaedia montage, figure 27 is an 1885 hand-coloured print engraved by J. Bishop titled "Anaconda – Pedda Poda – Port Natal Python – Rattlesnake – Rattlesnake Black Variety – Cobra de Capello." In this case the snakes are painted with little scientific accuracy, but the artist gave a good idea of their great strength.

Figures 28–32 have real herpetological value as the snakes in them are uncommonly realistic. Figure 28 is a wood engraving titled "African python swallowing a bird," from the 1901 book *Young People's Natural History*, by I. T. Johnson, published in Washington, D.C. Figure 29 is a woodcut print titled "*Python molurus*," from the 1893 book *Tierleben* (Animal Life) by Brehms, published in Vienna. Figure 30 is a wood engraving from about 1895 by Jahrmargt titled "Natal Rock Snake – *Hortatia natalensis*," depicting the snake now called the Natal rock python, *Python natalensis*. Figure 31 is a woodcut print from the 1896 book *The Royal Natural History* by Richard Lydekker, published in London by Frederick Warne & Co. Figure 32, titled "The Home of the Anaconda," comes from the same work.

Figure 33 is another woodcut print from Jahrmargt. It was engraved in about 1890 and was titled "Boa constrictor." The snake is staring at some


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monkeys and seems to be smiling — implying a human sentiment that is not apparent in snakes.

Figure 34, from the book by LESLIE (1888) is titled "The Sucuruhyu, or Gigantic Boa." Even though the snake depicted here is a realistic boa constrictor, it was described in a very misleading way:

> "The sucuruhyu is, so to speak, amphibious, and is only to be found in the vicinity of lakes and rivers. Some have been captured measuring the prodigious length of sixty Brazilian palmos (equal to fifty-three feet). … In its extreme voracity it makes little choice of victims, and man or any small animals are to it easy prey. It finds more difficulty in capturing a horse or an ox; nevertheless, if one of these approach a river or lake in which the sucuruhyu have established themselves, the largest among them sets about its capture. It looks out for some rock, stone or root before commencing the attack, as an object around which to coil its tail, and then the terrible reptile precipitates itself suddenly upon the victim."

The author is probably actually referring to the "Sucuriju" studied by modern cryptozoologists — reported by natives and explorers of throughout history, and generally regarded as some sort of immense green anaconda. Other boids do not spend so much time in the water.

Figure 35 is an original 1940s colour lithograph titled "The West


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African Python," by an unknown artist. It has a short description: "This splendid snake is said to grow to a length of over twenty feet, although such giants are only occasionally met with."

Figures 36–39 are more recent, but should especially excite comics collectors. Who has never thrilled to stories of Tarzan? Over the years this legendary hero has been shown fighting with huge snakes in many comic books and films. Figure 36 is the cover of a rare coloured issue of *Tarzan of the Apes* (no. 193) published in July of 1970. Figure 37 is one of the illustrations from the same magazine. Figure 38 is the September 1957 cover of a popular 1950s U.S. magazine, *Man's Life*. It describes a woman "crushed by 20 feet of coiling death." Such sensationalized stories of humans being attacked by huge constrictors were fairly common in such magazines of that period.

Finally, figure 39 shows another way giant snakes are often depicted, as a symbol of sensuality. This is the cover of the U.S. pulp magazine *Fantastic Adventures* published in Chicago in January of 1948. Nowadays this type of image is not so shocking, but back in the forties it was sure to create quite a fuss.

The figures shown in this article are all photographs shot with a Sony DSC–F828, provided with a close-up lens VCL–M3358. These images will also become part of the book I am now writing. My aim is to provide a thorough study incorporating mythological, esoteric, cinematographic, figurative, cryptozoological, scientific, conservationist, and herpetocultural aspects of giant snakes. It will be my ultimate declaration of love to these unique creatures. ■

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