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SNAKES IN FARM AND FIELD

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MOST people who keep livestock are bound to come across a snake now and then. Luckily most snakes are not venomous and in fact the presence of snakes is indeed good luck. As soon as man clears ground for his crops, irrigates, constructs huts, sheds etc., the rats are sure to move in. The number of rats per acre in farm lands may be 10 to 100 times greater than the number in nearby forested areas, showing what perfect providers we are to the rats. When a prey animal like the rat starts getting plentiful it does not take long for its main enemy, the snake, to move in. The control of the rat population is the real job of the snake in nature; after all it is the only predator which can follow the rat right down its hole to finish off young and adults alike. The 20-30% grain dislodged by rats each year would do considerably higher if it was not for snakes,

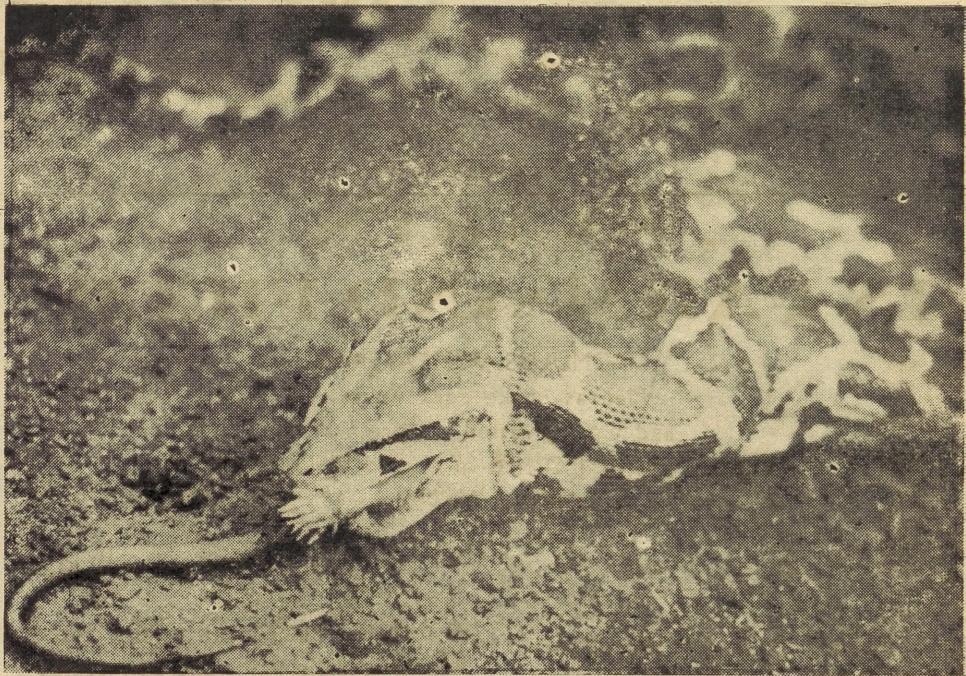
There are over 220 different species of snakes in India of which there are only

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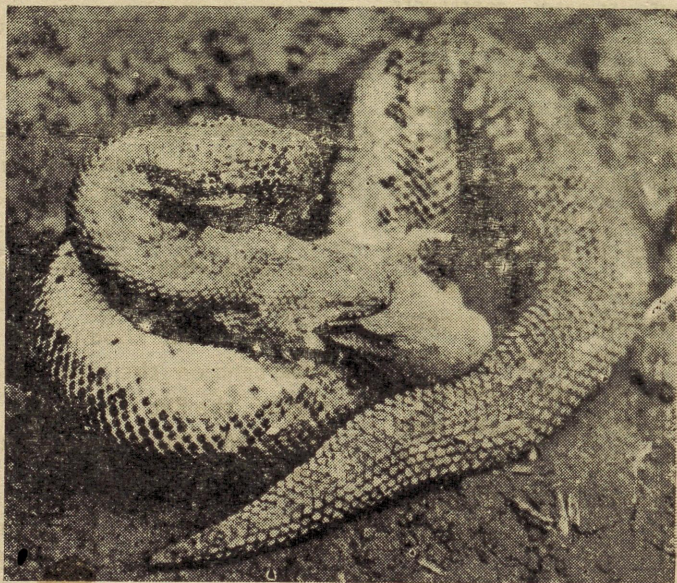
4 common dangerous snakes: the Cobra, Krait, Russells Viper and Saw-scaled Viper; (The Big Four). The most large snakes seen in fields and farms are the fast, harmless Rat Snake and the venomous but shy Cobra - The Rat-snake reaches over 3 metres in length but no Indian Cobra has been measured over 2 metres. Both may vary in colour from black to yellow but the Cobra usually has specks of white. The Rat Snake is a much thinner snake with large eyes in a thin somewhat pointed head. The Cobra has a wide head and neck with rather small, jet black eyes. The hood marking is usually obvious even when the hood is not spread as is the dark band on the underside of the neck region; the Rat Snake has thin streaks of black radiating along the scales around the eyes and "lip" area.

In a chicken house a snake's presence may be very disturbing to the chickens and he might even take an egg or two. But usually the real attraction of the snake is the

Livestock 5



Indian Python, a harmless snake, and India's largest, feeds on a bandicoot.
The tail and hind leg of the bandicoot are clearly visible. [Photo: R. Whitaker].



The Common Sand Boa eating a mice.



The Vine Snake feeds on small frogs and mice

abundance of rats and mice that generally proliferate in and around chicken houses. In Burma and Thailand it was once very common for the sugar factories and granaries to have their own resident pythons which lazily guarded the stored grain and sugar and eliminated the rodents more safely and effectively than any traps or poisons yet devised by man.

Admittedly until one gets to know about the different snakes and can learn to identify the common ones, most people would prefer to have nothing to do with

them. There is an effective antivenom serum for the bites of the Big Four, made and sold by Haffkine Institute, Bombay, which can also be used on bitten livestock. The dog is still a far more dangerous animal in India; rabies deaths outnumber snake bite deaths in most of the country. So our fears are exaggerated and all it takes is a little more introduction to the snakes for us to realize their great value and encourage their existence instead of slaughter all of them mercilessly.