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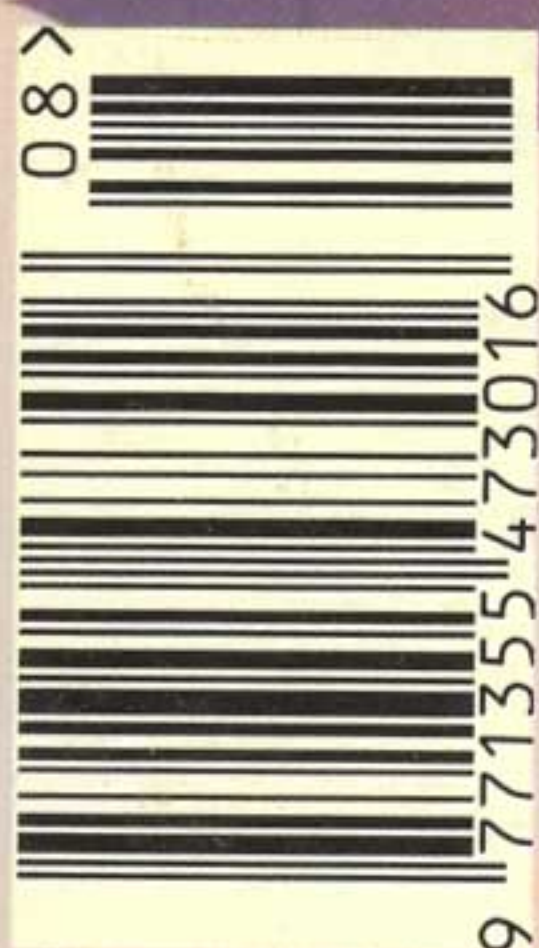
SCARED OF SPIDERS AND SNAKES?

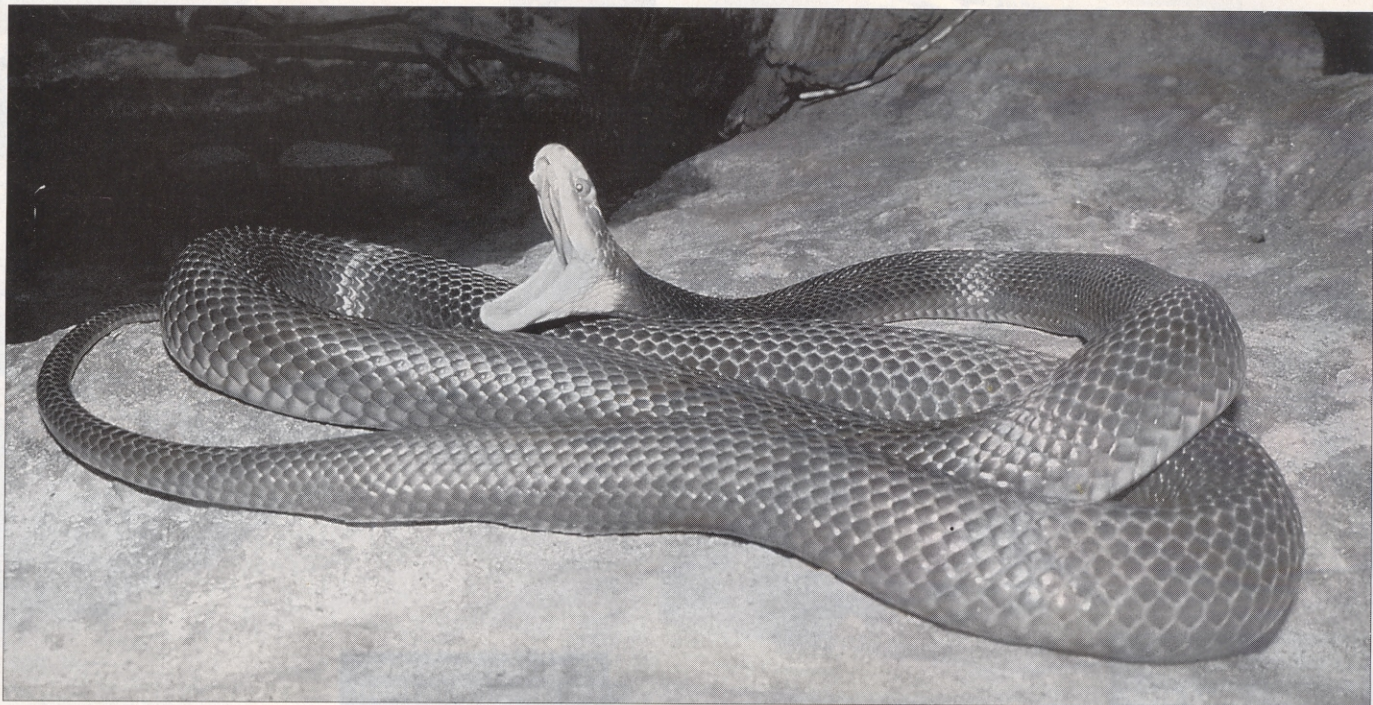
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Why do we fear spiders and snakes?

Caroline Deacon investigates

Snakes and spiders are the most disliked creatures in our culture. The overwhelming majority of those who confess to being afraid of them are women, some of whom develop crippling phobias. Yet in Britain, snake or spider bites are extremely rare, and even in parts of the world where venomous species are prevalent, there are few deaths.

It is often claimed that fear of spiders and snakes is instinctive; a survival mechanism inherited from ancestors who lived with venomous species. Yet young children often show mere curiosity (which is probably why they are the commonest bite victims), implying that the fear has to be learnt.

However acquired, these feelings have

no basis in reality. No British spider is capable of inflicting a mortal blow. British snakes are rare, and being naturally shy creatures, avoid contact with humans. Even if you were unlucky enough to be bitten, it would be unlikely to prove fatal. Statistically we would do better to fear cars, but knowing about road deaths does not cause us to react with terror at the sight of the average Ford Escort.

Another reason against the 'instinctive' argument is that these fears don't always exist in other cultures. In many countries, snakes are actively encouraged, keeping rodents away from grain stores. Our Judaeo-Christian heritage is unique in representing the snake as evil, the devil incarnate. In Britain, myths about snakes

usually involve their banishment, and several of our saints overcame serpents: St Keyne from Keynsham in Avon; St Hilda at Eskdale, near Whitby; St Birinus in Dorchester.

In most parts of the world, spiders are recognised as being incredibly useful in controlling flies, and are often encouraged to build webs in houses. Even the perception of spiders as loathsome creatures in our own culture seems to be fairly recent. In the Middle Ages they were used medicinally—webs were used to staunch the flow of blood, and spiders, living and dead, were prescribed as tonics.

Little Miss Muffet may well have been the first arachnophobe—perhaps with justification. The Reverend Thomas Moufett (1553-1604) fed his daughter ground-up spiders with the sort of zeal

Anti-phobia treatments

- **Drug therapy** (anti-depressants). This may help you deal with the feelings, but will not help you overcome them. Can be useful in giving you courage to tackle therapy programmes.
- **Psychotherapy**—a combination of coping techniques such as relaxation and self-hypnosis with cognitive therapy, which works on your thought processes to change your reactions.
- **Desensitisation**—gradually becoming familiar with the phobic object. You might start by talking about spiders, then progress to looking at pictures, and so on. The final step in a lengthy process would be being able to hold a spider without fear.

with which we might encourage our own offspring to eat greens. Spiders are eaten as a delicacy in many parts of the world; their bodies are 60% protein, only 10% fat, with a rich mineral and vitamin element.

Perhaps our feelings about spiders relate to our modern obsession with dirt and germs. Spiders' webs have become associated in our culture with dirty homes—just think how often they appear in cartoons of deserted houses or outbuildings.

So it seems that our attitude towards spiders and snakes is inherited from our culture, not our ancestors. Children learn to fear these creatures from the adults around them, or from nursery rhymes like Little Miss Muffet. Storybook snakes are deceitful, and negative expressions about snakes and spiders are embedded in our language: 'snake in the grass', 'speaking with forked tongues', 'web of corruption', 'what a tangled web we weave', and so on. In adult films, spiders and snakes are used to create fear and suspense; think of the snake pit in *Indiana Jones* or those James Bond films where our

hero is menaced in his bed by a deadly tarantula.

Most of us live with our feelings of fear or distaste, but for others, fear can develop into a phobia, which can restrict everyday life. It may start with panic attacks—perhaps caused by an unexpected and alarming encounter with the creature—which, untreated, can lead to full-blown phobia. For the arachnophobe, this can mean not entering a room until it has been thoroughly checked for spiders.

People with a phobia don't always remain anxious about just one object; they may develop more generalised fears, leading them to become agoraphobic. They become house-bound, afraid to go out in case they have a panic attack.

Self-help books are useful for the mildly anxious or those beginning to have panic attacks. They contain action plans involving positive re-education and gradual accustomisation. Progress may be slow, and it is worth keeping a diary for encouragement. For those whose phobias are crippling, the first step should be to approach your GP or a relevant organisation and ask what help is available in your area. ●

'How I conquered my phobia'



Around one million people in the UK are said to be phobic about spiders. NFWI's Cheryl Summers (pictured here with a tarantula!) was one of them. But, thanks to a course at London Zoo, she's conquered her fear. She talks to Sue Scott on page 49. ▶

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