

# A RARE FIND: THE VARIABLE QUILL-SNOUDED SNAKE

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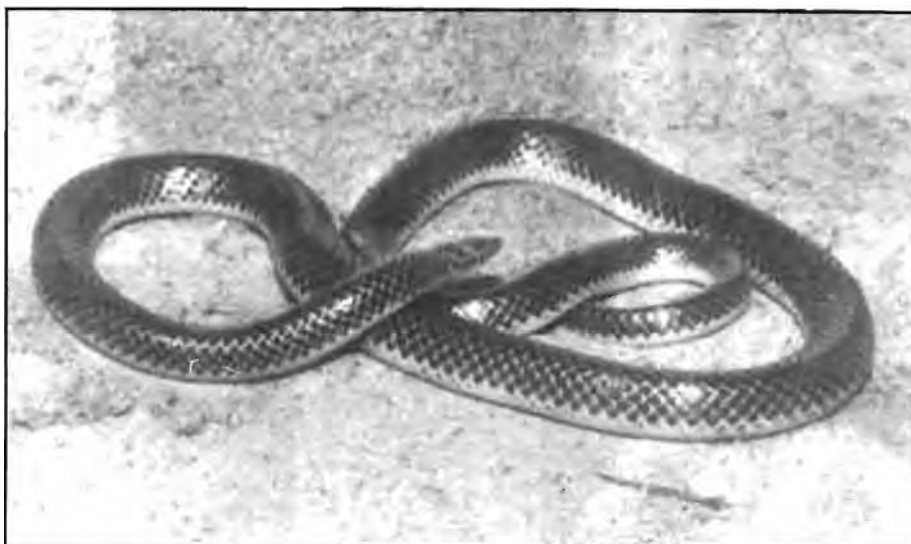
Snakes, lizards and gecko's are frequently found inhabiting old disused termite mounds. Such mounds, which are commonly seen and very characteristic of the Orange Free State landscape are built by the Snouted-harvester termite, *Trinervitermes trinervoides*.

Recently, while engaged in an ecological project on, and in search of the Lesser dwarf shrew, *Suncus varilla* (see Newsletter no. 29), a disused termite mound was excavated which contained an unfamiliar snake which was subsequently identified by our herpetologist, Mr J.H. van Wyk, as a Variable quill-snouted snake, *Xenocalamus bicolor bicolor*.

Further investigation revealed that this was indeed a remarkable find as this is only the second Variable quill-snouted snake ever collected so far south in Africa. The only other snake of this kind was a single specimen collected forty-six years ago by Dr Hoffman, a former director of the National Museum, Bloemfontein in approximately the same area, namely Kelly's View in the district of Bloemfontein.

Up until 1971, authoritative scientific books considered the single specimen collected by Hoffman to be the only one of its kind ever found in Africa. It was only during 1971 that Dr Broadley of the The Natural History Museum of Zimbabwe, concluded that the snake, known then as Hoffman's quill-snouted snake, *Xenocalamus bicolor concavo-rostralis*, was merely a variation of the quill-snouted snake, *Xenocalamus bicolor bicolor*, which are found further northwards in Africa.

This burrowing, nocturnal, semi-poisonous snake, with the undercut snout closely resembling that of a quill pen and which is confined to sandy terrain and eating burrowing limbless reptiles therefore indeed proved to be a rare and interesting find, more so for a mammalogist searching for Lesser dwarf shrews. Albeit that it is no longer only the second of its kind in the world, it remains the most southerly distributed *Xenocalamus* collected thus far.



*The rare Variable Quill-snouted Snake.*

(Photo: J.H. van Wyk)