



St. Paul

did the trick

The Leopard Snake

Research and
photographs by
Mark Christopher
Mifsud

We all know that since the famous visit in 60 AD the four types of Maltese snake are perfectly harmless(!). Not only that, when you compare them to reticulated pythons or anacondas which can reach over a staggering 10 metres in length, local varieties are all relative tiddlers, squirming about at the lower end of the scale at around 100 cms.

Snakes do not take kindly to big noisy humans and their heavy boots. You have to rely on pot luck to spot one, like the photographer on these pages, who spent

seven years tramping through the fields in places like Dingli, Rabat, Xghajra and Marsaxlokk to get a total of six photographs. Information about the local varieties is, in fact, scarce. The Algerian whipsnake was probably first brought over by travellers from Africa, though some claim it was here even before the first settlers arrived. There are quite a few black whip snakes to be had; they are the big mamma of the group, stretching out at 150 cms. Children probably know the leopard snake or *lifgha* best, it is perhaps the easiest one to spot basking magnanimously in the sun. And finally,

the small nocturnal hunter - the cat snake at 75 cms, with its startling vertical pupil, has the charming habit of keeping a lizard lunch in its mouth un-swallowed, until its snake venom finishes it off.

But the fearsome persecution local snakes undergo, at the hands of bloodthirsty little boys and self-righteous picnickers is completely unnecessary and increasingly worrying. Maltese fields, countryside and rubble walls are being eaten up by urban development at an incredible rate, and the precious snake habitat, on sunny valley floors and in rubble nooks



The Leopard Snake

and crannies, is vanishing fast. And along with it, so is the food source snakes need to survive - gheckoes, frogs, field mice, large insects.

All four Maltese snakes - they belong to the Colubridae family - are firmly protected by law and though this is a little-known fact, capturing a live snake is punishable by a fine in the Maltese Courts. World-renowned sources too have highlighted the problem. As long

ago as 1979 the Berne Convention listed all four Maltese snakes as protected fauna, and the leopard snake particularly so.

Not that snakes are defenceless. Every one of them gave little bites to this photographer as they tried to retreat from the camera lens, though not hard enough to

puncture human flesh of course. Smaller mammals have a harder time of it. The *lifgha* or local leopard snake coils its body round small gheckoes or mice until they suffocate and die. Very tiny creatures which need an uninterrupted supply of oxygen usually pop off pretty quickly at this stage. Cold-blooded prey, such as lizards, suffer slowly. Sometimes they merely become

torpid and get swallowed alive. But such is the law of nature. If you ever are lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a local snake in the grass, let well alone. They are perfectly harmless and keep the rodent population under control. More importantly, they are an endangered species and believe me, much more afraid of us than we are of them. ☺

The Black Whip Snake



Introducing BERGER 1 UNO One-Coat emulsion!

Less Time



Less Paint



Less Effort

