

REPTILES IN THE RAFTERS

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Whether you live in an elegant villa or a modest cottage, chances are that you will have rats. Rats are survivors. Along with cockroaches, rats were the only creatures to survive the nuclear bombing of the Bikini Atoll. So imagine how well they do on tropical Bali with its abundant food and gentle climate. I have more than my share. When the elementary school next door got a new roof, all the school rats moved to my house on a single Saturday afternoon. Some were carrying small parcels and each gave me a cheery grin as it scurried and jumped off the schoolhouse wall and into my rafters a few feet away.

They mock me, these rats. We find peanut shells in the oven and behind the fridge. They dance on top of the walls in plain sight, and at night it sounds like bears dancing as they race each other across the bedeg ceiling. Rats carry viruses and leptospirosis, they are destructive and once caused a house fire where I was living by eating through the electric wiring. It's an ongoing battle. I won't use poison or glue, and the satisfyingly effective Rat Zappers don't last long in this climate because the humidity affects their delicate electronics. For years I've been muttering that I need a python in the roof. My staff roll their eyes at each other... Ibu and her crazy ideas. But last week I installed my ecologically sound, mobile rat management system.

An international television program about Asian snakes was shooting in Bali, and Sanur-based snake expert Ron Lilley mentioned to Joe Yaggi that I wanted a python for rat patrol in my roof. Joe, of Jungle Run Productions in Ubud, was organizing the visiting television crew's schedule. He called and asked me whether I'd like a python released in my rafters, filmed for posterity. Of course I said yes.

So it came about one Saturday afternoon that five large, affable young men strolled through my gate loaded with cameras and sound equipment. They were accompanied by a genial lady producer from Singapore, a liaison lady from Jungle Run, two Balinese officers whose job it was to ensure that the film crew did not stray from their mandate and, unaccountably, two small children. My staff came to watch the fun. It was quite a crowd, with my three dogs and two screaming parrots adding to the general mayhem.

Dr. Brian Fry, the show's host, handed me a sturdy calico bag containing a reticulated python. Eve, as I named her, was well over a metre long and fairly heavy. Brian, a reptile enthusiast and venom expert, explained that the crew had rescued this particular snake the day before from a farmer who was keeping it in a tiny wire cage in the sun. It would have died of dehydration in a day or two, and was quite thin.

Unlike film, a television shoot is fast and flexible. John the director had a look around and decided to shoot three scenes: one inside the house, one on the patio and one in the roof. Brian and I walked into the house four or five times, chatting about rats in the roof, until the lighting and sound were right. Then it was time to introduce Eve to the camera.

I opened the bag carefully, expecting her to poke her head out, but Eve was tightly coiled with her head towards the back of the bag; she wanted no part of this. Brian gently teased her out and she anchored herself firmly around his forearm. As we talked about pythons for the camera, Eve nosed around grumpily, struck at me and then urinated on the table. This was evidently one pissed-off snake.

You really couldn't blame her. Pythons, like other snakes in Bali, are routinely killed by farmers and householders for their skins or just because they're snakes. The venomless python is important in the control of rats, and can consume a couple of thousand of these troublesome rodents over its lifetime. (Cobras kill two or three times that many.) The steady decline in Bali's snake population is in part responsible for the massive destruction of rice crops by rats in Tabanan and Gianyar.

Pythons are also at risk from Bali's uncollected garbage. Ron had captured a python which was preying on kittens in the house of Eleanor, a conservation-minded woman living in Sanur. The snake had somehow swum through a plastic jerrycan sealing ring which was stuck around its neck, making it impossible for food to move through its system. If Ron hadn't snipped the ring off, the python would have starved to death.

On Sunday afternoons, Bali's snake fanciers show off their pets at the big park in Renon. Brian was impressed by the health of the snakes and the public decorum of the owners. He was less impressed by the snakeskin bags for sale in Bali's shops. "A farmer might get only Rp 50,000 for a three-metre python, but a snakeskin handbag can be sold locally for millions of rupiah," he told me.

Eve would be safe from all this. If she ever managed to consume the entire rat population in my rafters, she was just a quick slither from the jungle and freedom. (Brian assured me that my parrots were too large to be considered as prey – for the time being anyway!.) Perhaps once Eve reached the undercliff she would meet a nice male python and together they would produce more mobile rat management systems. Maybe by that time people will appreciate these useful creatures and tolerate them around the house.

Bali's reticulated pythons have beautiful markings of gold, silver and black with an iridescent sheen. Newly hatched snakes are about 60 centimeters long. Reticulated pythons in the wild reach sexual maturity in about four years. Captive snakes grow more quickly due to a better diet, and a well-fed python in a good captive habitat can grow to three metres in a single year. Breeding in the wild takes place when males are between two and three meters long and females are three to four metres. Sadly, Bali's pythons rarely live long enough to reach their full length of

four to five metres. "Big snakes need a big range and large prey," Brian explained. "So they are easier to spot – and kill – than smaller snakes." The longest python ever measured was from Sulawesi; it was about ten meters long and weighed 150 kilograms. Reticulated pythons can live about 430 years in captivity.

The last scene to be filmed was Eve's release into the roof. Brad the cameraman was a robust chap and it wasn't easy getting him up there. Nyoman held the ladder and carefully handed up his heavy camera. When Brad was setting up, Brian waited in the kitchen with Eve tightly coiled around his arm. Snakes are private creatures, and she was not happy with all the people and activity around her. Tired, hungry and disoriented, she was striking at everyone who passed her. It was high time to introduce her to her new habitat. In the rafters above, I sensed the collective shiver of my rat population.

The director called for silence and the camera rolled. Brian carefully mounted the ladder until he could rest his arms on the rafters. "Usually I'm asked to take snakes out of houses," he mused. "This is the first time I've been asked to put one in. Off you go, darling. If I was a snake, I'd like it up here."

Reluctantly, Eve allowed herself to be unwound from Brian's now-familiar arm and began to make her way across the rafters to the central beam. In tense silence, a dozen pairs of eyes tracked her progress as she began to climb. She went straight up, a fluid tapestry of silver and black against the wood. She paused when she reached the top, then her head disappeared, her body flowed after it and she was gone. Luckily it was a good shot. Filming animals is challenging; you don't get a second chance if they decide not to follow the script.

Packing up, John told me that it usually took about 60 hours of shooting to obtain an hour of finished film. "The difficulty of making a show about snakes is finding a balance between depth and popular appeal," he explained. "Snakes are so often demonized. We want to show that interaction with snakes can be a positive experience."

It seemed very quiet after everyone had filed out again. Eve kept a low profile. No bears danced in the rafters that night. There were no peanut shells on the counter in the morning. I liked to think that Eve had calmed her hunger with a furry snack. A python senses by heat. Eve will track the warm-blooded rats initially by scent trails, then when she is near enough the heat sensors will lock onto the target like radar. Eve will anchor her tail around a rafter, bide her time and then strike with lightening speed. Reticulated pythons have an intense feeding response, which means they will strike at anything warm without doing their research first, but there is nothing warm-blooded up there but rats. I toss a few peanuts into the roof every morning to tempt the rodents into Eve's space. Brian calls this 'habitat enrichment'. I call it bait.

For a couple of days there was no sign of her at all. Then I found copious evidence on the bathroom floor that she was still in the rafters and that her digestive tract was in perfect working order. If I had every wondered what snake scat looked like, now I knew. There was no rat fur in that particular offering. Perhaps next time...

Just for the record, Bali has five kinds of venomous land snakes the king cobra, spitting cobra, banded krait, green viper and the much rarer coffee viper. But Bali's snakes are all quite shy and snake bite is very rare. Snakes see us far more often than we see them and keep out of our way. Killing them upsets the balance of nature, both in the rice fields and in our homes. If you live near Sanur and find a snake on your property that you would rather was somewhere else, call Ron at 0813 3849 6700.

For more information on Brian's work with reptiles (and especially his recent discovery that the Komodo Dragon has venom glands) see www.venomdoc.com

Ibu Kat's book of stories *Bali Daze - Freefall off the Tourist Trail* is available from:

1. *Ganesha Books in Ubud and Seminyak*
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