

WHO SAYS RINGING ISN'T HAZARDOUS?

Frank Douwes

In March 1983 a Puffadder got caught in Paul Whitehouse's crake traps in the Pilanesberg Game Reserve and I got the job of removing it - which wasn't easy - but we managed with neither injury to snake nor to me.

On Friday, February 19 1988, at about 11h30 a male Masked Weaver flew right into the corner of one of my nets on the farm in the Magaliesberg, and managed to get himself into an incredible tangle. I realised that it was going to be a long job so a friend, who had dropped in to visit, came along to watch. After about three minutes I had just managed to clear the legs when my friend quietly told me to get my hands away as there was a snake six inches from my hand and closing in fast. Needless to say I didn't require too much persuading to remove my hands from the path of the most single-minded juvenile Boomslang that I have ever encountered! This cheeky individual had come up the thin guy rope straight for the bird regardless of the presence of two people standing there.

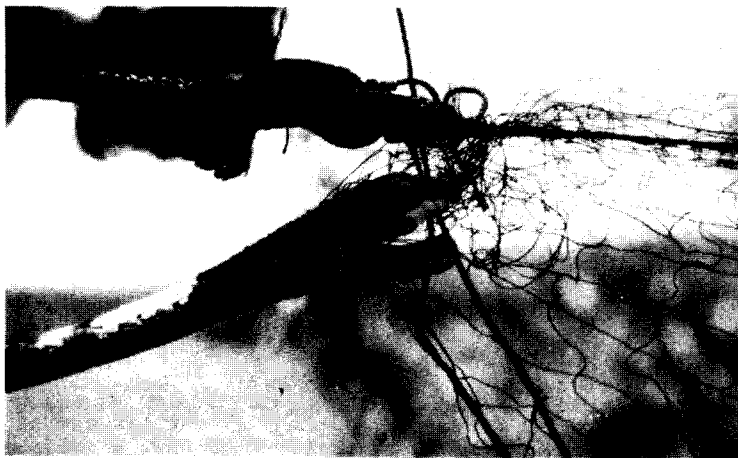
In my concentration, while battling with the nipping, kicking and unco-operative Masked Weaver, I had not even seen the Boomslang coming. Just as I got my hand out of the way it lunged at the bird but, fortunately, came up about two inches short where it collected a good mouthful of net. I then got hold of the bird by the legs and pulled it a bit further away but had to drop that idea quite quickly when the snake gave an even more forceful push forward and got the weaver by the head.

I thought the poor bird had had it! My friend rushed off and fetched my camera so we were able to take a few slides. On careful examination I then saw that the snake only had the weaver by the beak and that said beak was not staying still but behaving like a normal nipping weaver. So I went back in to try and pull the bird and snake away from each other. Needless to say I got no help from anyone else: all watchers offering uncalled for advice from a safe distance! Eventually, during the tug-o'war, the snake let go and pulled back - I supposed for a fresh assault - but, fortunately, the net now held it so that it was unable to move very much in any direction. At this point I broke the world speed record for Masked Weaver extraction and, with only a little bleeding from the first Primary of one wing, I got said weaver out of the net and into a bag.

It took another twenty minutes, with the aid of croquet hooks and tweezers, to extract one helluva tangled Boomslang, which was approximately 75 cm long. It seemed to have netting under every scale and hooked to every tooth! Fortunately the snake was quite passive during this operation. After some more photography I released the snake some 200 m away in the bush and returned to see how the weaver had made out. As I got two good nips when I put my hand in the bag I knew that he had come out alright! The poor Boomslang, however, had a badly mangled sensory forked tongue which should teach it not to let a bird into its mouth again! To further this good advice, we've adapted the lyric of "Never let a woman in your life" from 'My Fair Lady' which we sing to all passing Boomslang. It's called "Never let a Mossie in your Mouth"!

So now the new rule for ringers is: never extract a bird from a net without someone watching all round for a hungry Boomslang, lest your hand intervene between it and its lunch!

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THE BOOMSLANG WITH A MOUTHFUL OF NET

The Boomslang (Afrikaans for 'Tree Snake') *Dispholidus typus* is a back-fanged snake with a potent venom. In humans the bite causes a slight stinging and minor local swelling but little other immediate effects. After about 4 hours, however, the victim starts to bleed copiously from all mucous membrane surfaces; those brave enough to slash the site of the bite to 'release' or suck out the poison are liable to bleed to death from the effects of their own surgery.



above:

"..the snake gave an even more forceful lunge and got the weaver by the head."

right:

Frank with the extricated Boomslang. A happy ending. Fortunately the snake is not aggressive towards man and the only people at risk of being bitten are snake-catchers and handlers!



Postscript:

In case there are any readers who suspect that the bird suffered from delayed reaction to its ordeal, it was netted again, alive and well, on 18 June 1988, one day short of four months after the above event.