

SERPENTS and DRAGONS

Finding Beauty in the Beast

Michael D. Kern

FOREWORD

I have always been fascinated by the intricate beauty of reptiles. These creatures can be spectacularly rich in color, line, texture and form — classic elements of artistic style and composition. However, in many cases, appreciating this beauty requires one to get close enough to study the complex scale patterns, color palettes, and textures that nature combined in creating these species. Getting close enough to discover this beauty is difficult. Geographic distribution, animal disposition, and, for many people, fear of these animals prevents an appreciation from developing. This is where photography helps. It can provide an intimate view of these animals, and do so in a non-threatening manner.

Helping people “find the beauty in the beast” is my primary objective in creating this book. This is more important than you might realize. Reptiles and amphibians represent some of the most endangered species on our planet. I hope that readers of this book develop a better appreciation for these animals and support conservation efforts which protect their diminishing habitats. This is a critical step toward their ultimate conservation.

For the title of the book, I purposely used the terms *serpents* and *dragons* (rather than snakes and lizards) as an allusion to the many deeply ingrained cultural biases we have toward these animals. In Western culture, these biases are almost always negative and likely originated when snakes represented a real daily threat to mankind. Ironically, today we are more of a threat to them than they are to us. Perhaps it is time to change the current cultural paradigm of fear towards these creatures to an appreciation of their natural beauty and a respect for their right to survive.



San Francisco Garter snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis tetrataenia*); San Mateo County, California. Endangered.

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S E R P E N T S

*The infernal serpent; he it was, whose guile,
Stirr'd up with envy and revne, deceiv'd
The mother of mankind.*

Milton, Paradise Lost

There are over 2900 different species of snakes throughout the world. Of these, about ten percent are venomous. However, virtually none are outwardly aggressive. Snakes will only attack if they are provoked or feel that they have no other means of escape. This is not to say they are benign. The bites of some can cause significant pain, tissue loss, and even death. But these are not sufficient reasons to vilify a species. Lions, tigers, and bears are each aggressive and deadly toward humans yet they remain popular species within our culture.

Almost every culture and civilization has stories to tell about serpents. Most often our opinions of these creatures are well shaped in our psyche before we ever encounter one in the real world. In Western culture, they appear almost universally as antagonistic symbols in religion, folklore, and mythology. These myths and legends have only served to reinforce the negative biases and perceptions of the nature of the snake. The snake's forked tongue has been associated with deceit, Medusa's hair (made of snakes) was so hideous one look could turn you to stone, and the dictionary definition of the word "snake" includes a treacherous person or an insidious enemy. Even the Bible presents the devil in snake form, tempting Eve with the forbidden fruit and ultimately leading to the exile of mankind from paradise. Furthermore, it was hailed as a miracle when St. Patrick drove the snakes, symbolic for Pagans, out of Ireland.

I hope these images make it easier to appreciate the splendor nature has created in these animals and reverse some of the negative cultural associations of the past.



Variable Bush Viper (*Atheris squamigera*); Tropical forests of Equatorial Africa. Venomous.



Green Tree Python (*Morelia viridis*); New Guinea and surrounding islands.



Variable Bush Viper (*Atheris squamigera*); Tropical forests of Equatorial Africa. Venomous.



Sedge Viper (*Atheris nitschei*); Swamps and grasslands of Eastern Africa. Venomous.



Side Striped Palm Viper (*Bothriechis lateralis*) Mountains of Costa Rica and western Panama. Venomous.



Pope's Tree Viper (*Trimeresurus popeorum*); Northeastern India, Burma, Thailand, west Malaysia, Singapore, and Laos. Venomous.

DRAGONS

Come not between the Dragon and his wrath.
Shakespeare, King Lear

There are over 5000 species of lizards on earth. Of the 5000, only two are venomous, the Gila Monster and the Beaded Lizard. Like snakes, lizards are non aggressive unless they are provoked or perceive a threat.

Lizards, and their fictional counterpart, dragons, have played important roles in both Eastern mythology and Western folklore, contributing to the various ways in which different cultures perceive them. In the East, the dragon served as the symbol for the Chinese Emperor and signified power and excellence. In Western culture, the dragon was typically evil, fire breathing, and destructive, greedily protecting a hoard of treasure.

Early discoveries of dinosaur and reptilian fossils were occasionally mistaken for the bones of dragons and other mythological creatures. Because dinosaurs were presumed to be aggressive and lizard-like in appearance, aggressive dinosaur behavior became associated with lizards. Even the name “dinosaur” coined in 1842 by Sir Richard Owen translates from the Greek as fearfully great or terrible lizard. Hollywood can also be thanked for furthering the perception that lizards are aggressive and destructive. In early motion pictures, dinosaurs were portrayed by iguanas where they towered over and destroyed miniature city sets. And then there is Godzilla, the king of monsters, a lizard-like dinosaur created by Toho Co. LTD., who repeatedly terrorized Tokyo as the star of over twenty feature films.

Given this depiction in mythology, folklore, and popular iconography, it is no wonder that people’s perceptions of lizards differ greatly from reality.



Panther Chameleon (*Furcifer pardalis*); Ambilobe local, Madagascar.



Strange Horned Chameleon (*Chameleo xenorhinus*); Renzori Mountains of Uganda and Congo.



Johnstons Chameleon (*Chamaeleo johnstoni*); equatorial Central Africa.



Mossy Gecko (*Rhacodactylus chahoua*); Forested areas of southern, central and Isle de Pines Island of New Caledonia.



Mossy Gecko (*Rhacodactylus chahoua*); Forested areas of southern, central and Isle de Pines Island of New Caledonia.



Satanic Leaf Tailed Gecko (*Uroplatus phantasticus*); Eastern forested regions of Madagascar.



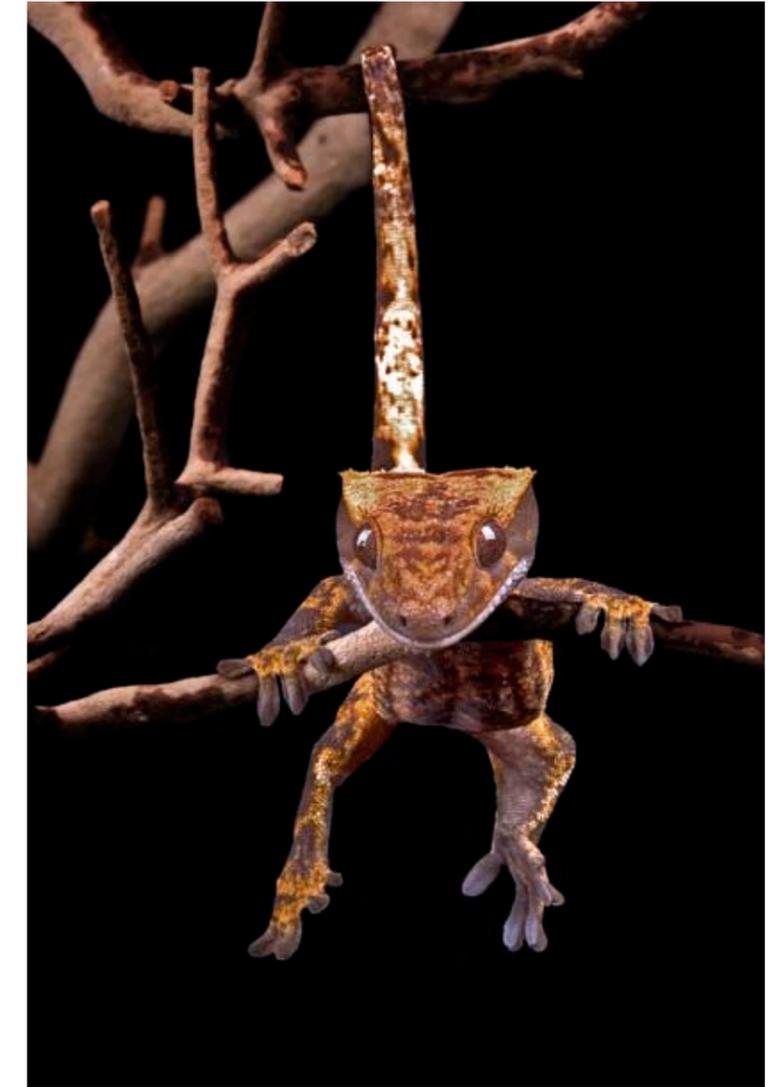
Gargoyle Gecko (*Rhacodactylus auriculatus*); Central and southern scrub vegetation and forests of New Caledonia.



Gargoyle Gecko (*Rhacodactylus auriculatus*); Central and southern scrub vegetation and forests of New Caledonia.



Cat Gecko (*Aeluroscalabotes felinus*); Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.



Crested Gecko (*Rhacodactylus ciliatus*); Warm moist lowland forests of New Caledonia.

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False Cobra (*Pseudoxenodon bambusicola*); Mountain regions of China and Vietnam.

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Finding Beauty in the Beast: Frogs (Available 2009)

White Spotted Glass Frog (*Cochranella albomaculata*); Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Panama.

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Finding Beauty in the Beast: Arachnids (Available 2009)

Costa Rican Tiger Rump (*Cyclosternum fasciatum*); Costa Rica.

