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REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

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By

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Chapter 29

Blair's Country

As Gordy Johnston and I motored northward from Tampa that day in 1965, we discussed the potential of the trip upon which we were embarking. Gordy had left his home in New Jersey some days earlier, and driven southward to collect me and my paraphernalia. Together we would zig-zag our way northward and westward to Little Rock, Arkansas. There Dennie Miller would join us and the three of us would proceed southward to west Texas and continue on to southern Arizona.

We had left Tampa at mid-day and drove hurriedly that we might meet Dennie at the specified time. We did stop periodically in the hill country, hunting through likely-looking areas near Little Rock to look for black ratsnakes, *Elaphe o. obsoleta*, and speckled kingsnakes, *Lampropeltis getulus holbrooki*, both of which were common in the area.

We met Dennie right on schedule, spent the night and began our way southward on what was to prove to be one of the most enjoyable trips in which I have yet participated.

As we motored through the countryside, Dennie happened to mention that we would soon be well within the range of a "rare" kingsnake of which he had only recently heard. The existence of the species was news, then, to both Gordy and me. As we queried Dennie about this mystical serpent, he related to us his limited experience with and knowledge of the snake. It was, he said, known as Blair's kingsnake, was a beautiful but variable species, and he had seen only a few specimens a year earlier in the little west Texas town of Langtry.

We all three mused as to whether or not we would be fortunate enough to see this creature in the wild, and decided that if we didn't, it wouldn't be because we didn't look.

Let's take a moment to look at the history of what was then known as Blair's and is now known as the gray-banded kingsnake.

In 1950 A. Flury described as a species *Lampropeltis blairi*, based upon a single specimen that he and a companion had collected some two years earlier in Terrell County, Texas. The snake continued to be known under that specific nomenclature until 1962, when Gehlbach and Baker reassessed both it and the Davis Mountain kingsnake, *L. alterna*. The latter had been recognised since its description in 1901 by Brown. Gehlbach and Baker argued that all compiled data indicated blairi and alterna to be subspecies of the widely ranging *Lampropeltis mexicana*, and so they became. Then in 1970 a young herpetologist, Ernest Tanzer, concluded since both blairi and alterna morph neonates emerged from various eggs in a single clutch, that the snakes actually represented opposite ends of the spectrum in a single polymorphic race. The name "alterna," being the elder, was the name that took precedence. Blairi was synonymized. But the odyssey was not yet over. In 1982 William Garstka, in working on the systematics of the kingsnake complex *mexicana*, concluded that the characteristics of alterna were sufficiently distinct to consider them a true species. And so, at least as I write, the beautiful and extremely variable gray-banded kingsnake is again its own man, so to speak, a species in its own right.

Perhaps the species is now too well known to warrant a detailed description, but for those of you who may not be familiar with the creature, I will include a superficial one. This is one of the most polymorphic of serpents. Virtually all, however, have a ground color of some shade of gray. The second most constant feature is the white bordered black crossbands. These may be either narrow or wide and entire or narrow and broken. Some may be represented merely by rows of black dots. If wide, the black often contains a saddle of red or orange, widest dorsally. On some specimens the red bands may reach the ventral scutes, on others they may terminate laterally. The eyes are protruberant and the species, like all kingsnakes, is a powerful constrictor.

While Blair's kingsnake may no longer be valid, the terminology "blairi phase" remains an easy method of describing the snakes of that morph. Likewise, "alterna morph" is often used when one is talking about the snakes that fit the original description for that phase. For simplicity's sake I will do likewise.

Before leaving the subject of literature, however, I feel it incumbent on me to mention that over the years, Dennie Miller, the executive director of the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute, has continued to champion the gray-banded kingsnake. In 1979 he completed his booklet entitled "A Life History Study of the Gray-Banded Kingsnake, *Lampropeltis mexicana alterna* in Texas." Within this booklet, Dennie has compiled all known data on the animal.

Now, back to our story.

After what seemed an interminable drive, we arrived in Langtry, Texas. Situated on the Rio Grande, it is, perhaps, most famous for the Museum dedicated to "the Hanging Judge," Roy Bean, who played such a dramatic part in frontier history. (The town itself is, of course, named for the "other half" of that notorious team, Lillie Langtry.) It was still early, allowing us ample time to familiarize ourselves before embarking upon our evening hunt. Dennie took us into the little general store and introduced us to its owners, the Chamberlins. They, it turned out, were amateur naturalists who collected all manner of wildlife. I was soon drawn from the store by a cacophony of raucous squawks and found their originators, a trio of very young, very tame ravens, caged in the rear. I simply couldn't stand the thought of leaving without one of these engaging birds, and I made a deal with the Chamberlins. Much to the distress of both Gordy and Dennie when we left, it was with a new mascot.

Certain things are remembered even long after their occurrence. One such event was the demonstration offered by Dennie that day (intrepid naturalist that he is!) on the proper way to "freehand" a grasshopper (or locust if you will). We had walked a dry riverbed and were in the process of ascending a low rise. Our quest was for the beautiful Trans-Pecos copperhead, *Agkistrodon contortrix pictigaster*. Dennie and I were working close by one another, turning debris, rolling stones and acting much as if we knew what we were doing. Dennie saw a very large and very attractive grasshopper high on a blade of dry grass. He made a grab for it and caught the hapless insect which, I hasten to say, was swift to retaliate. With a sudden scream Dennie flung the insect from him and from his finger oozed a steady trickle of blood. The disgruntled orthopteran had bitten him! The fearless snake hunter, undaunted by the most venomous of reptiles, had just been bested by a bug! As you may well imagine, Dennie was subjected to many pointed jibes for the remainder of the trip, all of which he accepted with a typical good-natured grin.

While Dennie and Gordy both had some first hand knowledge, the area was all new to me. Roadside signs directing one to Comstock, Alpine, Pumpville or Ft. Davis brought to mind stories told me by persons who had been there. With each town name I had associated some serpent or other creature that would have been the find of a lifetime for me. The sign to Big Bend National Park especially conjured up long dormant images, for it recalled the experiences so glowingly described by Carl Kauffeld in his tale, "On the Trail of Subocularis."

Finally evening drew near. The dusk fell rapidly about us. The pyrotechnics of the setting sun were obscured somewhat by a light cloud cover as we stood chatting with the Chamberlins. We had prepared to

roadhunt long into the night. The most obvious place to begin was the tiny secondary road that fronted Chamberlin's store but, although we were wished luck, we were assured that it would be most unlikely that we would find anything there. We had hardly gotten in the car to begin our hunt when the headlights showed a snake slowly crossing the road. We all piled out and knew immediately that the gods were smiling on us. It was a blairi morph kingsnake! We literally jumped for joy but knew that this would be a hard act to follow as far as the other finds were concerned. The snake was of the dark phase which, when compared to the light, is not particularly pretty. But to us, at the moment, that specimen was the most beautiful thing in the world. He crawled slowly through our fingers seemingly not at all perturbed by the strange goings-on. We bagged him continuing to comment on the stroke of luck that had allowed us to collect this snake, one of a species that I hadn't even been aware existed until the previous day.

Now back in the car, we drove that short stretch of road until I'm afraid we wore grooves in it. While no more kings were found, we did find a fair number of Texas banded geckos, *Coleonyx brevis*, and one each checkered, *Thamnophis m. marcianus*, and black-necked garter snakes, *T. cyrtopsis ocellatus*. These latter two are among the prettiest of the natricine snakes. The little banded geckos have always evoked my interest. They usually cross the road in a series of darting runs, tail arched and waving, managing to look dignified even when a vehicle threatens. On those rare occasions when they are inclined to hurry on their way, they remind me of little wind-up toys.

Dennie now suggested that we proceed up the dirt road to Pandale, where we could either make an aboutface and retrace our way or we could follow an intersecting road to Comstock. It sounded like good advice, so we left the Langtry area and headed out on a dusty desert road. We soon confronted another snake, this one a four foot long western diamondback rattlesnake, *Crotalus atrox*. Unlike the kingsnake, but typical of western diamondbacks, this creature showed no inclination towards docility. As we jumped out and approached him, snake-sticks ready, he drew into a loose coil, raised his head high and prepared to strike. Diamondbacks of any kind are at any time an impressive reptile. This specimen, now fully on the defensive, prompted us all to approach with the greatest caution. Once, when aroused well beyond what he considered his tolerance, he struck, lightning fast and with deadliest intent. We then hurried him into a bag, and with a sigh denoting both satisfaction and relief, carefully tied it.

A short distance down the road we happened across a second diamondback. He, too, was bagged. As we turned towards the car a glossy snake, *Arizona elegans* ssp., began to cross the road, only to be unceremoniously collected.

The glossy snake is one of the commonest of serpents, being represented by one or another race throughout most of the southwest and far down into tropical America. They are rather closely allied to the bull, pine and gopher snakes. Unlike these latter which are typified by coarsely keeled scales, the glossy, or faded snakes, as they are also known, have smooth scales. They are powerful constrictors. Although common, we were delighted to find this one for it was the first glossy of the trip.

As we were driving up the road, accompanied only by the fleeing kangaroo rats, we decided to turn around in Pandale and return via the same road. We soon found another snake, this one a beautiful Texas longnose, *Rhinocheilus lecontei tessellatus*. This type is one of the tri-colors, beautifully ringed with broad bands of red and black that are separated by narrow bands of cream or white. Each color is heavily encroached upon by those neighboring, producing a speckled or tesselated appearance. This three foot long snake is basically a lizard eater, although some specimens also accept newly born rodents. Numbers of banded geckos continued to cross before us but as we had collected a sufficient number we sought only to avoid the little insect eaters. At one point we were amazed to find an alert round-tailed horned lizard, *Phrynosoma modestum*, lying on the side of the road. That he was there was not in itself surprizing, but that this diurnal species was alert and active at night was.

Another snake! This one was one of the little racer relatives known as the patch-nosed snake, *Salvadora grahamiae* ssp. These attractively patterned and colored striped snakes have a greatly enlarged rostral scale. This may help them in unearthing their ectothermic prey. We bagged the patch-nose and continued on.

Soon we were back at the main road and elected to make another pass to Pandale. From there we would continue to Comstock and return to our motel. We began our turn, jockeying carefully to remain out of the desert sand. Just as we turned another snake began crossing. *Another blairi*! This second specimen of this coveted serpent was considerably lighter than the first but Dennie assured us that, pretty though it was, when we saw a *real* light phase blairi we would know it. It would eclipse this specimen as this one did our first. It was with renewed vigor that we set off through the desert for Pandale.

The second blairi was the last snake, indeed specimen, of the evening. Nothing more was seen all through the long ride. But then, how much good luck is one entitled to?

It was now time to begin thinking about the next morning. We decided that a hunt of the cliff faces on the U. S. side of the Rio Grande would create a pleasant diversion through the morning hours. We turned in happy and very tired.

Just as the sun was beginning to peep above the horizon, we arrived at the canyon through which runs the Rio Grande. A little time

had yet to elapse before Sol would be sufficiently high for his rays to begin warming the cliff faces. While waiting, Gordy, Dennie and I chose the areas that we would hunt.

The creature that we wished most to see here was the mottled rock rattlesnake, *Crotalus l. lepidus*. This attractive creature is one of the small, ledge dwelling, montane forms. It rarely exceeds two feet in length and is of immensely variable ground color and pattern. This varies according to the substrate upon which the individual snake is found and may range from gray through tan to pinkish. The dark stippling on the scales may vary in intensity but is most profuse midway between the dark crossbands. The bands, themselves, become more prominent towards the tail of the snake. There is a dark streak, running from the eye rearward to the angle of the mouth.

The sun continued its ascent and finally the purple shadows topmost in the canyon were replaced with the golden glow of morning. We could now see cacti and resurrection ferns, among others, clinging precariously to the cliff face, their roots penetrating deeply into some infinitesimal crack. We began our individual searches just as the canyon scaly lizards, *Sceloporus merriami* ssp., became active. It would seem quite likely that these attractive lizards figure largely in the diet of the rock rattlers.

We had been carefully picking our paths along the precipitous canyon face for almost an hour when Dennie's acknowledgement of a find rang out. I was nearing a small northward projecting cul-de-sac, whose night-cooled rocks were now bathed in the warming rays of the early morning sun. Shadow darkened fissures extended deeply into the face, some large enough to admit a man, others so tiny that even an ant would find access difficult. The scaly lizards were now basking in abandon, thermoregulating in the ever intensifying heat. Turkey vultures left their evening roosts, buoyed aloft by the beginning thermals, soaring out on their daily carrion patrol. The scaly lizards were now warmed enough to be wary, and darted around rocks at my stealthy approach. From their places of seclusion they would peer quizzically at me. I stopped for a moment to contemplate that strange selaginella, the resurrection fern. Coiled into a tight ball, its brown fronds reflected the dry, dewless weather. If given only a little moisture, it would green and stretch, and open as if in supplication. Large gray millipedes "chugged" along the bands of vegetation like miniature express trains, pausing to munch some succulent lichen or coiling into a watchspring of alarm as I extended a finger towards them.

It had been some time now since Dennie's hollered confirmation, and I had begun to think that his was the only rattler in the canyon. That I was wrong was proven only moments later for as I edged around a projecting boulder, I found myself virtually next to a beautiful rock rat-

tler, its posterior still in the fissure from which it had just emerged. It remained unaware of my presence and as I watched, it arranged its two foot length into a graceful coil. It was a beautiful animal, of green-gray ground color, and blended perfectly with the dusty, lichen covered rocks among which it dwelt. Its long rattle was comprized of evenly sized segments, showing it to be an adult and its stocky body showed the bloom of health. It continued to arrange its coils until it was satisfied that it was receiving the greatest benefit from the rays of the morning sun.

I could delay capture no longer and stepped the rest of the way around the boulder. The little rattler realized only then that his privacy had been violated. It began rattling and quickly swung from a resting to a defensive coil. Facing me all the while, it began to inch back into its crevice. I blocked its retreat with the end of the snake-hook while I found secure footing. I was then able to carefully maneuver it, still rattling, into the open bag that would be its home for the next several days. Once bagged it quickly became silent and I continued on my way.

Further searching disclosed no additional specimens and we were soon all gathered in conference at the car. We found that Gordy had also collected a single rattler, and we were all more than satisfied with the results of an enjoyable morning.

Our mascot, the raven, was squalling from the shaded car, announcing with no uncertainty he felt feeding was long overdue. As I opened another can of fish-flavored catfood, its odor permeated the vehicle. I could almost appreciate my collecting partners' protests.

Before returning to the motel for a nap, we decided to try our luck at hunting earless lizards, *Holbrookia* sp., and whiptails, *Cnemidophorus* sp., an endeavor in which we failed miserably. I prefer to think our failure was because we didn't really try, rather than the lizards were smarter then we. We had decided to direct our evening's hunt into the Big Bend area in hopes of seeing a Trans-Pecos rat snake. It, too, proved a fruitful endeavor.

As we turned southward from the main road a sign proclaimed "Big Bend National Park, 69 miles." Back in the days of gasoline that cost 29.9c a gallon and posted speed limits of 70 mph, this was less than a hour's drive. We had left Langtry in the mid-afternoon and had made the 120 miles to Marathon in well under two hours. Even at our cruising speed, which exceeded slightly the posted limit, Texas cars barreled by us as if we were standing still. Our plan for the evening was to make a big loop, traveling southward on 385, westward on 170 and returning to Alpine where we would spend the night on 118. The total distance was about 175 miles, a lot to cover when hunting but, then, we were in Texas where everything was big. Certainly the lengthy drive of the previous evening had proven lucrative.

We arrived at Big Bend National Park about an hour before sun-

down and continued southward into its interior. While we realized fully that we would be unable to collect within the confines of the Park, we did want to see some of the exact areas about which Kauffeld had written. It seemed only a few hours earlier that we had watched the summer sun peer tentatively above the eastern horizon, and now we were watching that same sun, blood-red and tired, sink slowly from view in the west. It painted the rugged, boulder strewn cliff-faces and canyons with a firey glow. With the dying of day came the awakening of of the creatures who seek their livelihood under the cover of darkness. Bats fluttered erratically overhead, hawking the sky for insects. A small sounder of collared peccaries rooted for succulent tubers and grubs within easy sight of the road. They were bothered not at all by the passing of our vehicle. The mournful hoot of a great-horned owl echoed through the canyons. Aptly enough, the first snake that we saw that evening was a night snake, *Hypsiglena torquata* ssp. These are tiny nocturnal serpents and are a familiar sight throughout most of our southwest. Although classed as an opisthoglyphid, a rear-fanged snake, they are entirely harmless to humans. Lacking even venom conducting grooves on their enlarged rear teeth, they have no effective way of administering their weak venom. Night snakes are adult at about 14 inches in length and are profusely spotted dorsally against a ground color of paler gray. Additionally, they have a prominent dark blotch on either side of the neck and a dark stripe through either eye.

As we were carefully making our way around hairpin curves and switchbacks, we spied a snake coiled by the side of the road. Although Gordy was a little reluctant to stop on a road offering such limited vision to the drivers of approaching vehicles, we did find a secure area. After trekking back to the specimen, we were glad that we had stopped, for it was another new species, an adult black-tailed rattlesnake, *Crotalus m. molossus*. Like most of the others that we have subsequently seen from west Texas, this specimen was of a gray-green ground color, with a dark nose and a jet-black tail. The dorsal pattern was of open centered crossbands, and a broad dark stripe began at each eye and ran diagonally rearward to the angle of the mouth. It seemed not at all disturbed by our attentions and lay with tongue extended, forked tips widely spread, testing the air. And so we left him.

Rattlesnake! This time there was no wondering, for the specimen was crossing directly in front of us, head and tail both well away from the pavement. Again we bounded from the car to surround our find. Initially we thought it to be another western diamondback, but something wasn't quite right. Its tail! Its tail was different. It was a Mojave rattler, *C. s. scutulatus*, one of the diamondbacks which superficially resemble the big western but which is possessed of lesser size and more virulent venom. Our thoughts harkened back to a conversation of last

evening when we compared descriptions of the two. The big western diamondback is colloquially called "coontail" rattler because no matter how pallid the background of diamonds, its tail, ringed in black and white bands of nearly *equal* width, stands out in bold relief. On the tail of the Mojave, also ringed, the white rings are of much *greater* width than the black. There are numerous other differences, one being the position of the light line which begins at the eye and runs diagonally down. On the western diamondback, it reaches the mouth anterior to the back corner. On the Mojave, it passes above the back corner and extends beyond the mouth. The Mojave is unique among North American rattlers in that is has a highly neurotoxic venom. This affects the nerve centers, including those controlling respiration. As might be imagined, envenomation by a large example of this species may have serious consequences.

We were now beginning our northward turn onto Route 118. All that had crossed our path since the sighting of the Mojave rattler were banded geckos. We didn't even stop for them, but had we known then what we now know we would have scrutinized each and every one carefully. It seems that in 1956, a new species of gecko, *Coleonyx reticulatus*, had been described from the area where we now were. It was called the Big Bend gecko and, ironically, its existence was learned of when a specimen was caught and killed in a mouse trap. Its overall length may exceed six inches. I can attest to the fact that ignorance is bliss, for we only commented on the number of geckos.

As we drove northward, the desert night cooled noticeably. Poorwills called all about us. We had been lulled into complacency by the humming of tires and the lack of action. Discussion, as we left the park boundaries, centered on the remarkable luck that we had experienced so far. But there was more in store. In the headlights' glare was a crossing snake, one of fair size and light coloration. Gordy brought the car to a screeching halt as he tried (successfully) to avoid hitting the animal, the animal for which we had been searching all night, a Trans-Pecos rat snake, *Elaphe subocularis*!

As the glare of our flashlights mingled with that from the headlights, the snake looked almost white. In actuality it was a light straw-yellow. The characteristic markings of the species, the longitudinal stripes of the neck and the series of "H's" posteriorly, seemed light but they were really quite normal in contrast. Indeed, this would have been a fitting close to our Texas chapter, but we weren't done yet! On our way north we found a second Trans-Pecos rat snake, similar in most respects to the first. That one was, in fact, our last Texas catch.

But a lot of trip remained ahead of us. Our next stop would be the famed Chiricahua Mountains of eastern Arizona.