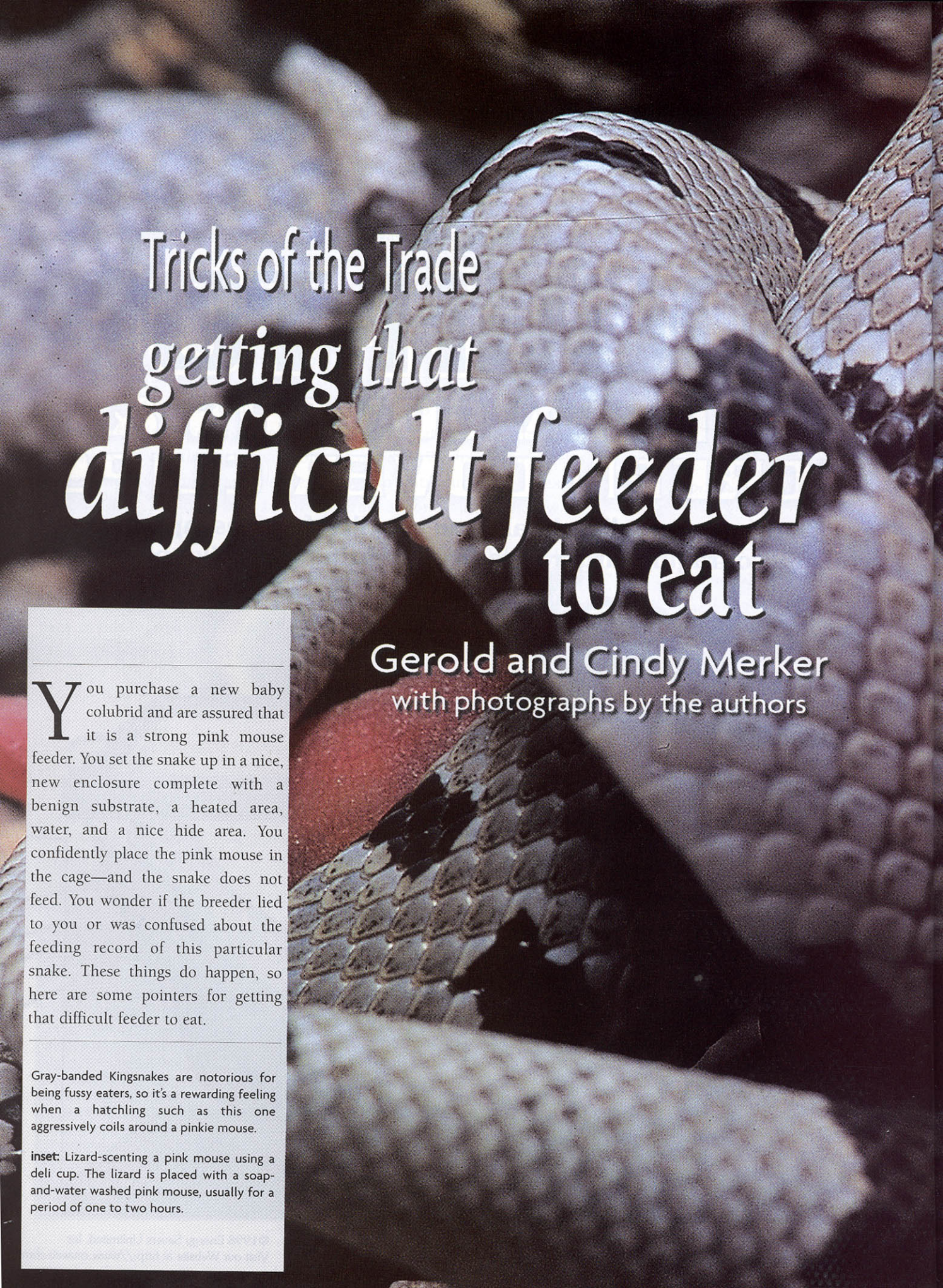


Tricks of the Trade

getting that difficult feeder to eat

Gerold and Cindy Merker
with photographs by the authors

You purchase a new baby colubrid and are assured that it is a strong pink mouse feeder. You set the snake up in a nice, new enclosure complete with a benign substrate, a heated area, water, and a nice hide area. You confidently place the pink mouse in the cage—and the snake does not feed. You wonder if the breeder lied to you or was confused about the feeding record of this particular snake. These things do happen, so here are some pointers for getting that difficult feeder to eat.

Gray-banded Kingsnakes are notorious for being fussy eaters, so it's a rewarding feeling when a hatchling such as this one aggressively coils around a pinkie mouse.

inset: Lizard-scenting a pink mouse using a deli cup. The lizard is placed with a soap-and-water washed pink mouse, usually for a period of one to two hours.

top: A captive-bred white-footed deer mouse (*Peromyscus* sp.) whose parents were purchased by the authors at a herp show. By purchasing captive-bred mice, the likelihood that the mice will harbor the Hanta virus is greatly diminished. Never capture wild white-footed deer mice and attempt to breed them.

bottom: The captive-bred Russian dwarf hamster, *Phodopus sungorus*, has many of the same characteristics of wild rodents, and the authors sometimes try feeding their snakes this species to stimulate feeding.

facing page left: The final alternative for inducing a difficult feeder to feed on its own—the pinkie pump. This method is not without its problems, and should be used only as a last resort, after all other alternatives have been attempted.

facing page right: This is the correct way to offer a baby Gray-banded Kingsnake *(Lampropeltis alterna)* a pink mouse. Often, by feeding the snake in a confined area such as the deli cup, the animal is induced to feed.

In very general terms, fewer than 10 percent of our more difficult hatchling feeders (such as Gray-banded Kingsnakes or Sonoran Mountain Kingsnakes) feed on pink mice after their first post-hatch shed. That means we have to resort to some form of "trickery" to get them to feed on pink mice.

Most of our difficult feeders will feed on lizards from the start, but we do not like to feed them lizards for several reasons. The first is that lizards are difficult to acquire. Secondly, they often harbor harmful parasites. Thirdly, we have found that our baby snakes seem to grow faster and look healthier on a mouse diet. Lastly, as reptile lovers, we like lizards and do not enjoy keeping animals that prefer other reptiles as their main diet.

Be Patient—Wait & Try Again

One of the easiest tricks we use is to just wait for a period of up to three weeks before we again attempt to feed an animal a newborn pink mouse. Oddly, another 20 percent of our difficult eaters feed on pink mice using this be patient, wait, and try again strategy.

Often in the fall, we attempt to sell some of our offspring at the local herp shows. This involves taking along the animals for sale. We place all of our offspring in eight-ounce delicatessen cups, clearly labeling whether they feed on pink mice or not.

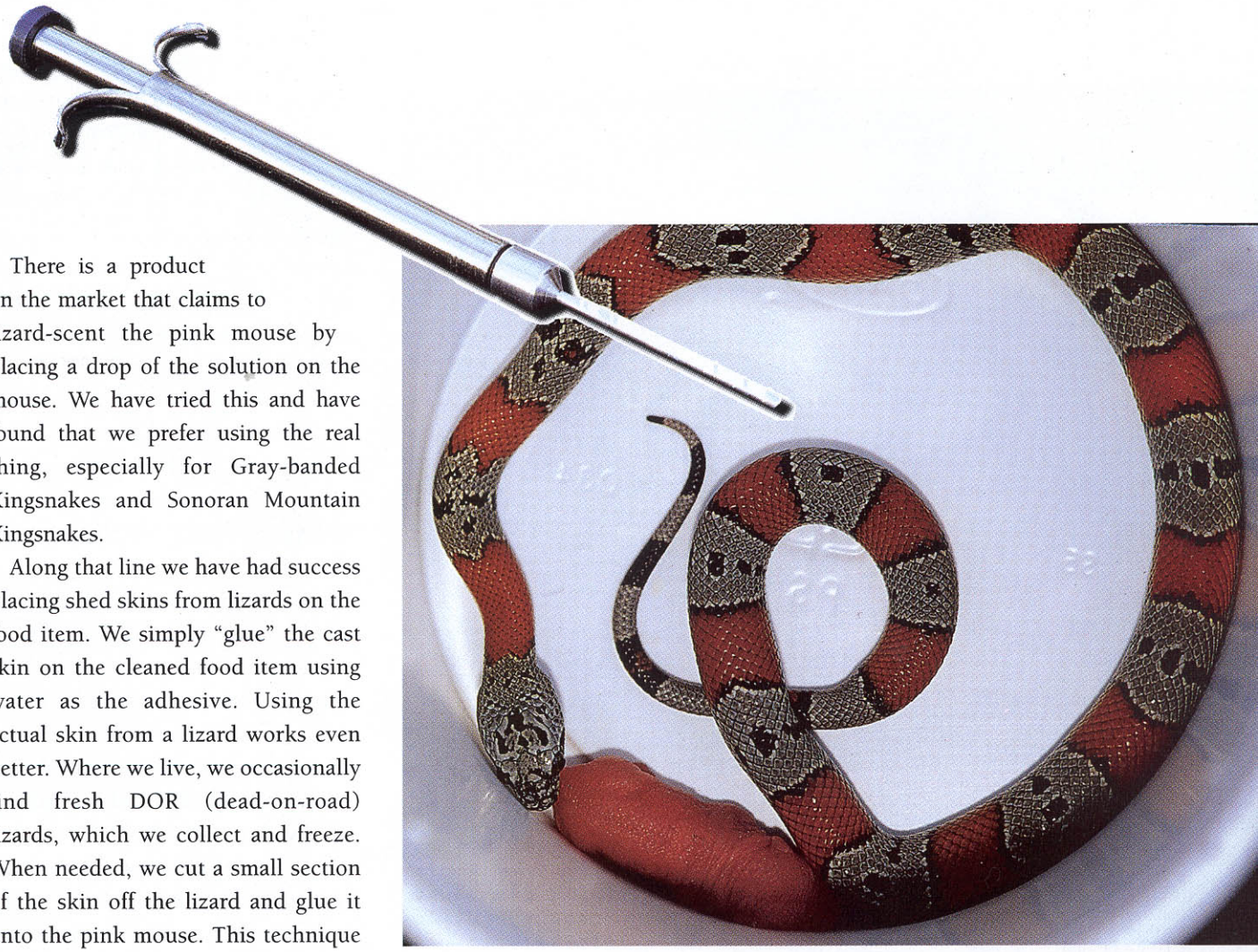
We have found that the movement resulting from the drive to the show and back home again will often stimulate another 10 percent to 20 percent of the nonfeeding animals to accept their first pink mouse meal. Now that approximately half of our captive-born hatchlings are feeding on pink mice, you may wonder what we do with the other 50 percent.

Lizard-scenting

One of the best strategies is the use of a lizard to scent the pink mouse, or pinkie. We simply wash the pinkie in a mild soap and warm water solution, rinse the mouse, and place it in a container with a lizard.

The lizard scent with which we have had the best success is the Side-blotched Lizard, *Uta stansburiana*. Where we live, we have access to the Sagebrush Lizard, *Sceloporus graciosus*, which also works well for lizard-scenting food items.

We usually leave the pinkie in with the lizard for several hours. The scent of the lizard is picked up by the pink mouse. We then place the snake and the scented pink mouse in a deli cup. This strategy induces quite a few of our baby snakes to accept their first meal of a domesticated pink mouse.



There is a product on the market that claims to lizard-scent the pink mouse by placing a drop of the solution on the mouse. We have tried this and have found that we prefer using the real thing, especially for Gray-banded Kingsnakes and Sonoran Mountain Kingsnakes.

Along that line we have had success placing shed skins from lizards on the food item. We simply "glue" the cast skin on the cleaned food item using water as the adhesive. Using the actual skin from a lizard works even better. Where we live, we occasionally find fresh DOR (dead-on-road) lizards, which we collect and freeze. When needed, we cut a small section of the skin off the lizard and glue it onto the pink mouse. This technique has been our number-one lifesaver with several of our more difficult-to-get-feeding animals.

Wild Rodents

Along the lines of using a lizard for scenting is to use a wild rodent pinkie instead. This involves capturing the adults and then breeding them under captive conditions. The baby rodents from these breedings are often accepted by difficult feeders with no lizard-scenting required.

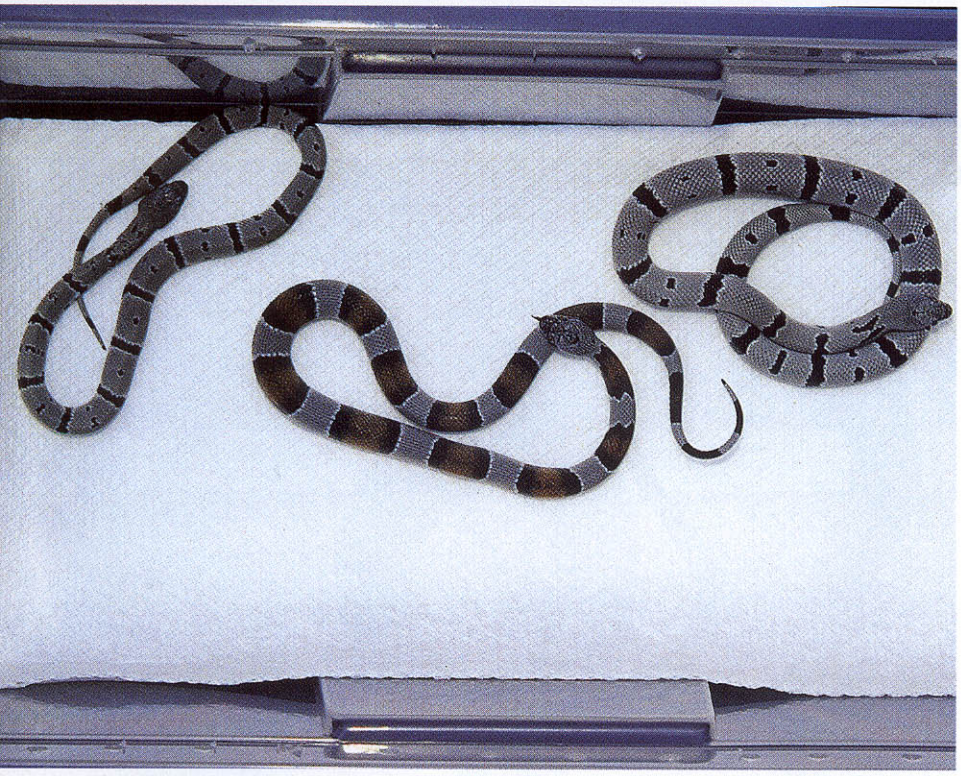
With some rodents, such as white-footed deer mice (*Peromyscus* sp.), there is the potential for exposure to the dreaded Hanta virus, so the above suggestion is not always the safest alternative, especially for the snake keeper. The Russian dwarf hamster has many of the characteristics of wild rodents, and we have had success using these for inducing some of our baby snakes to feed.

Split-brain Technique

Another technique (albeit very gruesome) that seems to work is the "split-brain" technique. A pink mouse is humanely killed, and the brain case is exposed with a scalpel. The smell of the brain seems to stimulate some of the babies to feed on their first meal.

Occasionally baby mice are born dead and are shoved aside, sometimes after having been chewed upon by the adult mice. Once in a while, these tiny dead pinkies are taken by baby snakes that have refused every other meal.

Along similar lines, we also have tried the "freeze, thaw, and feed" technique. Again with this technique, we humanely dispatch the pink mouse and then freeze it. The food item is then thawed and offered to the snake. There is some evidence that certain snakes almost prefer the frozen, then thawed, food item (Veer, et al. 1996).



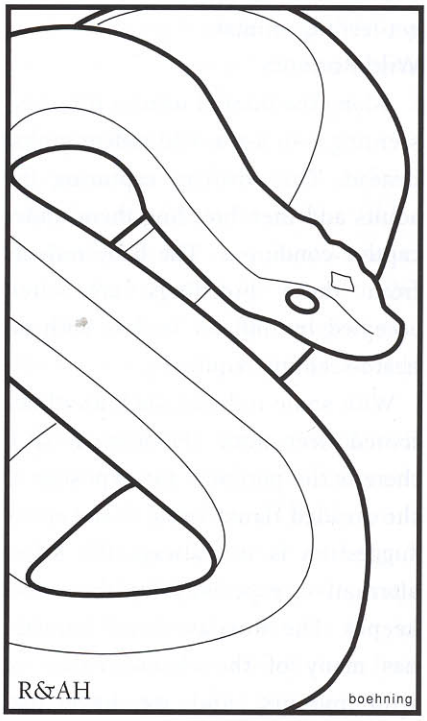
The snakes that feed on pink mice soon outgrow the animals that do not. The two animals on the right started eating pink mice soon after their post-hatch shed. The animal on the left feeds only on lizards.

This represents our arsenal of tricks to get our more difficult snakes to feed on a food item other than a lizard. If all else fails, we will incorporate several of these tricks at once in an attempt to get a baby snake to feed. That is, we may freeze, then thaw a pink mouse and glue some lizard skin on it to feed the animal after it has fasted for a few weeks.

Force-feeding

Unfortunately, there are always a few captives that exhibit symptoms of "failure to thrive" (phrase from J. Bergman, pers. comm.). At this time the keeper may decide to resort to one final method for getting a snake to feed: force-feeding. This strategy is extremely hard on the snake and should be utilized only as a last resort. Currently, we only use this strategy with animals that are irreplaceable.

To further the non-feeding characteristic is a decision that you as the keeper must make. If that snake lives because it is force-fed, grows up,



A four-gram pinkie feeding Gray-banded Kingsnake. When you're dealing with picky eaters, a nicely fed specimen such as this one is your goal.

and reproduces, it may pass the trait of not readily feeding on to its offspring. Typically, we have found that our animals with the failure to thrive characteristic tend to be smaller and more slender from birth.

Force-feeding involves either placing a dead newborn pink mouse lubricated with water or egg white into the baby snake's gullet and forcing it into the stomach or using a force-feeding device, such as a pinkie pump. We have experienced problems with both methods. Using the former strategy, we have had babies regurgitate the food item within several hours. It is extremely important that a small food item is used with this technique.

The pinkie pump, which uses a set of blades at the end of the plunger to macerate the body of a pinkie, can also cause numerous problems. We have ruptured the esophagus of the baby snake by using the pump. With this strategy it is important that the nozzle of the pump is lubricated with water or some other slippery substance such as mineral oil before gently placing it in the snake's esophagus. Also, it is prudent to run the pink mouse through the pump twice to ensure it is fluid enough not to build up large amounts of pressure before going into the esophagus of the snake. It is best to use only a portion of the processed pinkie in the pump to feed the snake, thereby decreasing the chance of trauma. Personally, we have not used the pinkie pump for the last two seasons because of the stress it causes for the animal.

Rather than using the whole pink mouse or the pinkie pump, a viable alternative is to use the tail of an adult mouse. The serpentine shape lends itself to easily getting this food item down into the gullet of the baby snake. We usually have a small number of tails on hand from our frozen mouse supply. The tail is soaked in water for about 15 minutes. We gently pry open the mouth of the snake and place the tail in. Then we gently twist the tail until it corkscrews down into the gullet of the snake.

At this point, usually the snake will ingest the meal the rest of the way. The very obvious disadvantage of this technique is that it does not provide all the nutrients that a pink mouse does. However, this strategy has saved several of our baby snakes from starving.

Other Considerations

As with anything, other problems may be associated with your baby snake not feeding. These may warrant examination before attempting any

force-feeding strategies. The culprit may be the enclosure itself. Does the snake cage have an adequate thermal regime so that the snake feels comfortable? Is there a hide area that the snake can utilize to escape the prying eyes of the snake keeper? Is it possible that the substrate on which the snake is lying is giving off noxious fumes? Check over your cage and remedy any potential problems. If the baby snake regurgitates the food item, it may indicate a physiological problem with its gastrointestinal tract. A trip to the veterinarian may be in order. Another problem can be how the food item is presented to the baby snake. Are you offering food to a nocturnal snake during the day when it is usually inactive? Are you providing your captive with a food item that is too large for it to engulf?

Are you offering the snake a dead food item when the snake wants it to be alive or vice versa? Would the snake benefit from being fed in a smaller, more confined area such as a deli cup? Again, consider these factors before reaching despair.

Finally, consider the species of snake involved. Some baby snakes, especially Gray-banded Kingsnakes and Sonoran Mountain Kingsnakes, will not accept a pink mouse as their first meal unless you incorporate some of the tricks mentioned previously. If you purchase such an animal, be prepared to get creative in order to get it to eat. Using some of the strategies mentioned may prove just the incentive you need to renew your commitment to getting your baby snake to feed.

Acknowledgments

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