

Herpetological Review

DRYMARCHON COUPERI (Eastern Indigo Snake). **DEATH
FEIGNING**

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for wild *D. couperi* when threatened (Stevenson et al. 2008. *In* Jensen et al. [eds.], *Amphibians and Reptiles of Georgia*, pp. 339–341. University of Georgia Press, Athens). Ambient temperature at the time of capture was 18°C, following an overnight low of 12°C; skies were cloudy and a very light, misty rain was falling. The snake had recently shed its skin, and appeared in good health.

When I attempted to pose the snake for photographs, it became motionless, rolled its head and neck to one side, and gaped (Fig. 1). It lay on the ground stationary and immobile, its mouth continuously open in the same position, for ca. 5 minutes. Occasionally, its tail would slowly and weakly twitch back and forth. Similar to Gehlbach's (1970. *Herpetologica* 26:24–34) description of death-feigning in the Western Coachwhip (*Masticophis flagellum testaceus*), the head and neck of the *D. couperi* were rigid while the posterior part of the snake was limp, and a bend in the neck caused the snake's head to face downward. When I moved to a distance of 5 m, within 45 seconds the *D. couperi* closed its mouth, fully righted itself, and crawled off normally. Twice, I captured the snake and elicited the behavior described above—both times followed by the snake again closing its mouth, righting itself, and crawling away within ca. 45 seconds when I retreated. It never struck or made any attempt to bite during the entire time it was being handled.

On 3 December 2008, I observed a second adult female *D. couperi* (SVL = 1295 mm; Wheeler Co., Georgia, USA) exhibit the same behavior. This snake, eyes opaque and nearing a shed event, was captured as it emerged from a tortoise burrow at 1210 h on a clear, sunny day (temperature at time of collection = 10°C) following a cold night (2.2°C) and frost event. The snake displayed the behavior for ca. 1 minute during my processing and marking; it moved slowly, albeit normally, when released at its capture burrow.

I interpret this behavior as death-feigning (thanatosis), a defensive strategy that has not previously been reported for *D. couperi*. Over a 15-year period (1992–2008), I have captured and handled over 150 *D. couperi* in southern Georgia as part of population moni-



FIG. 1. An adult female Eastern Indigo Snake (*Drymarchon couperi*) exhibiting death-feigning behavior (McIntosh Co., Georgia, USA).

DRYMARCHON COUPERI (Eastern Indigo Snake). **DEATH FEIGNING.** At 1100 h on 5 November 2008, I captured an adult female *Drymarchon couperi* (SVL = 1080 mm) ca. 10 km SW of Townsend, McIntosh Co., Georgia, USA. When found, the snake was on the ground, moving through open-canopied sandhill habitat, vegetated with scattered clumps of Saw Palmetto (*Serenoa repens*); numerous Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) burrows were located within 100 m of the capture site. Upon capture, the snake actively struggled in my hands, rattled its tail, flattened its neck vertically, and released musk—characteristic defensive behaviors

toring studies (Stevenson et al. 2003. Southeast. Nat. 2:393–408), and had never observed this behavior. Similar death-feigning behavior has been observed in Eastern Coachwhips (*M.f. flagellum*) in North Carolina (Palmer and Braswell 1995. Reptiles of North Carolina. Univ. of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill. 412 pp.) and in the Coastal Plain region of southeastern Georgia, including the Wheeler Co., Georgia site mentioned above (D. Stevenson, unpubl. data).

I thank Jeff Beane for reviewing the manuscript. Eastern Indigo Snake studies in Georgia are supported by Georgia Department of Natural Resources Scientific Collecting Permit 29-WBH-08-206, issued to Christopher L. Jenkins.

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