



How Charming!

The other day I went down to the river below my workshop for my noon break, taking my lunch with me. It was very sunny and hot, so I had a little dip before eating. The river isn't deep enough to allow full swimming, but in places near the bank there is enough depth that I can get myself submerged and float along, pushing on the bottom with my fingers. Perhaps I look a bit like an alligator ...

After I got cooled off I found a place in the shallows where I could lie down and let the water flow over and around me, and no sooner had I settled into place when I noticed something moving through the water just upstream. It looked for all the world like the periscope of a submarine heading directly toward me! A moment later it came close enough that I could make it out - a snake was swimming down the river, with his head held up above the surface, and his body swishing from side to side, propelling him along.

Although we do have some poisonous snakes in this area - the *mamushi*, a kind of pit viper - they are not an aggressive species, and bites usually result from stepping on one which has been 'hiding' in undergrowth, waiting for small prey to come close. So there was no particular danger to me out here in the water, if indeed, this were a *mamushi*. But I wasn't to find out, because when it was about five or six meters away, it stopped suddenly, then turned off to the side and climbed up onto the bank. Even though I had sat very still, I assume that it must have detected my presence and decided that discretion was the better part of valour.

So we had no actual 'encounter', but it did immediately remind me of an episode when I *did* manage to get 'up close' to a snake. I was twelve, and our family was living on the Canadian prairies, a grassland zone in which there were many snake species, nearly all completely harmless. My father was in those days a member of a military band, and one day when a group of the band families were together for some reason, one of the kids caught a fairly long snake and brought it in for inspection. One of the band members - flute player John Wheeler - went off and came back with his instrument, and an interesting experiment began; was it really possible to 'charm' a snake, or was that just a folk tale from India?

The boy held the snake gently just behind the head, and Mr. Wheeler began to play. He kept the music soft and fairly low key, and as he played, he swayed his instrument gently back and forth. The snake instantly stopped struggling to escape, and a moment later, was riveted by the music. Its head followed the flute from side to side, and its long body hung perfectly still. Whether it was due to the sound or the motion I have no idea, but it was clear that the snake was transfixed. We all watched in amazement, and now that I think about it, if somebody had been watching our group, he would have thought that the whole crowd of kids had also been 'charmed' by the flute. Perhaps Mr. Wheeler could have led us all out of Hamelin!

Alas, the spell wasn't to last very long. One of the more rambunctious kids reached out and grabbed the snake's tail, and it reacted instantly by snapping out of the trance and resuming its attempts to escape. The boy holding it let go, and the snake dropped to the ground and disappeared in a flash.

But I am able to report that yes indeed, snake charming is no myth. I'm not so sure that I would like to try this with a local *mamushi*, but if I were to find myself trapped in my basement with a snake one day, I know that all I would have to do is hunt around, find the box that contains my old flute, and hope that I could still remember how to play it!

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