

Dr. Snake

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

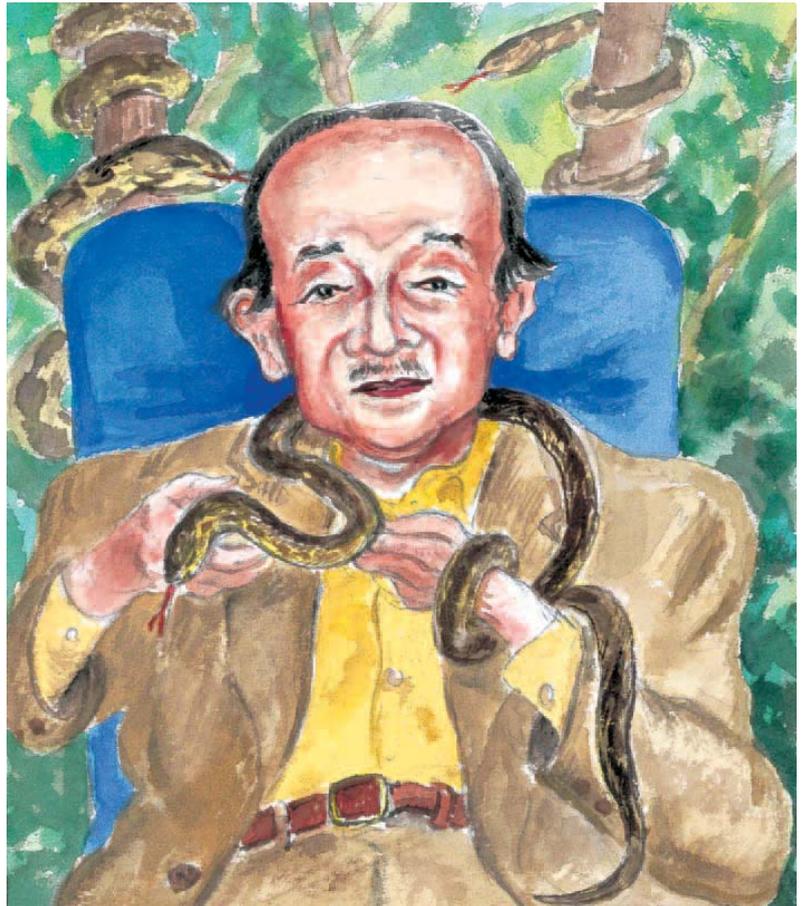
MY neighbor across the street was watering camellia trees in front of her home one morning about ten years ago. It was a crisp, sunny day in Tokyo that followed a typical autumn evening of cricket and bell bug noises. Our old area, despite its location in downtown Tokyo, remains a chummy town full of friendly people. There is so much nature here you have to remind yourself that you aren't in a country town. What Mrs. Hato had first thought was an enormous branch of her camellia tree started moving. To her horror, it was a five-foot long *aodaisho* (A Japanese blue rat snake), reacting to the water from her garden hose.

The police were called immediately and three arrived with a burlap sack, but none had the nerve to approach the serpent. Then someone remembered "Dr. Snake" who lives nearby, and he was summoned to solve the crisis. He climbed a rickety ladder dredged out of a nearby garage, plucked the reptile from the branch and plopped it into the burlap bag. This was accomplished only after several abortive and rather comical attempts where the police kept dropping the bag in terror. The magnificent specimen – enormous by *aodaisho* standards – had a happy ending. It now lives in the southern island of Kyushu with an acquaintance of "Dr. Snake," a fellow reptile fancier.

Typical of my old area, the entire neighborhood rushed out of their one and two-story homes to observe the incident. It is an event still remembered with wonder among my neighbors. Mrs. Hato later confided that she had wondered why all the mice and rats scampering in her walls had suddenly disappeared that year. Once the reptile began its life in Kyushu, she told me, the scampering began again.

THAT was how I met Takada Eiichi, known in Japan as "Dr. Snake." It sometimes takes a special event to get neighbors together, and this was one that would open up my life to reptiles. Several weeks later, out of curiosity, I visited his home with a box of sweets to inquire about the fate of the blue rat snake. Takada invited me in through an old wooden gateway with a sign "Reptile Fancier's Association" in English and Japanese. He showed me in to his traditional wooden home where snakeskins hang off his family altar and served me tea. After I was assured that the *aodaisho* had found a good home, he got down to his favorite topic.

"Snakes are mysterious and magnificent," Takada told me. "And totally misunderstood." Indeed, although snakeskin is



believed to bring good fortune, snakes themselves are sometimes connected with unlucky and unhappy events. An example can be seen in one of the most popular dance dramas of the Kabuki theatre, *Kyogonoko Musume Dojoji* originally based on a Noh play and later adapted to Kabuki features the vengeful spirit of a prince named Kiyō. Prince Kiyō, disguised as a temple dancer enter the Dojoji grounds intent upon getting revenge on young priest who had rejected her advances. She dances in celebration of a newly made temple bell and finally transforms into a fearful serpent-demon. Born in 1934 in a somewhat impoverished Japan, Takada, out of a lack of toys and other diversions, spent his youth playing with all sorts of living things – turtles, snakes, worms and insects along with the more run of the mill cats and dogs.

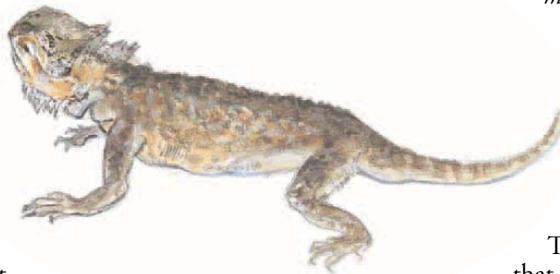
"Reptiles appealed to me partly because they are hated so much. I live near the Ueno Zoo, which has an extensive reptile

section, so I could observe the snakes molting, and I became increasingly fascinated. Did you know that when a snake molts – and an adult snake molts about once every 40 days – that it rolls its skin off inside out? Even the cornea-like covers of its eyes come off, leaving a brand new skin and eyes. How's that for regeneration? It takes about an hour for the process to occur during which time the snake is vulnerable to prey."

Takada insisted that I handle some of the snakes. I was hesitant, but with encouragement, I overcame my fears. The brilliant colored American milk snake was soft and dry as it wound itself around my arm and hands. It felt like a moving wax candle, not at all clammy or slimy as I had expected.

Takada is not just a snake man, however. His inner garden contains buckets of snapping turtles, a mud turtle from Florida, an African turtle and an enormous tortoise, lively as can be. He has a parrot and a cat along with his many reptiles. All together he has cared for over 100 types of living creatures, including a lion cub, an anteater and a puma. All were refugees he had taken in. But the majority of the unwanted, thrown out pets of the city these days happen to be reptiles.

ABOUT 15 years ago there was a reptile pet boom in Japan. Ornamental snakes, iguanas, even alligators became popular partly due to their low maintenance. Single people living in high-rise condominiums who were lonely and wanted companionship could keep these pets because they make no noise to disturb neighbors. It takes no great effort to move reptiles in without anybody noticing. And as there is no need to walk them, they don't smell and most need feeding only once a week, they were companions thought suitable for a busy city lifestyle. They were also companions that many soon tired of – 40 alligators, for instance, that became too unwieldy for their respective homes and ended up with Takada. When Tokyo police find such abandoned pets, their first move is to contact him. Takada says once he sees a reptile he cannot refuse. These lucky cast-offs have a chance to live out their lives full of raw meat, fresh vegetables and loving care. Takada says that he's not "keeping them," rather he is "living with them".



TAKADA was second in command at a trade newspaper until he was 35 years old, when he resigned to start a reptile study association, the first in the country. About 40 years ago there were no herpetology teachers in Japan. He now teaches at two schools in Tokyo to prospective veterinarians and zookeepers who often stop by his home to chat. The last time I visited him two young women were talking with him about Africa.

At the moment Takada is living with 15 cast-off "companions." He proudly showed me a bearded lizard, an

exotic Australian newcomer. I watched Ruby, an albino snake, have her weekly feeding session. With forceps Takada extended pieces of newly killed chicken heart. Ruby's red forked tongue immediately flickered. Her tongue is her smell organ. She senses the heat and size of prey through pit organs near her eyes. A snake can swallow animals up to ten times their head size by detaching their jawbones. The prey is then decomposed whole with the aid of strong digestive juices. Ruby's tongue flickered again and in a split second her jaws snapped up the raw meat.

LAST year Takada published a best-selling book titled *Good Fortune Comes to Those Born in the Year of the Snake*. In it he relates that right from the beginning snakes have played an important part in human history. Snakes were feared and revered for their rodent eating propensities. They are the only creatures with a spinal cord without appendages. Takada says that these characteristics are part of the reason that snakes are connected with many religions. He cites the biblical story of

Adam and Eve. The Japanese Shinto religion also reveres the snake, and Takada claims that the New Year's rice cake decorations called *kagami-mochis* are formed in the shape of coiled snakes. He also believes that many other Shinto symbols are derived from the snake, including the round metal mirrors that originally came from China.

OF all the interesting bits and pieces of information Takada has told me about, the one that has made the deepest impression is about boa constrictors. Should you happen to be in a jungle and a boa constrictor drops on you from a tree, what should you do to prevent it from squeezing you to death? It's not likely to happen, but it's interesting to think about. Takada claims that boas aren't interested in humans even though they have been known to kill them. This is because we are not their "size." But if you try to pull one off of you (the natural reaction of anyone set upon by a boa constrictor) it will only squeeze tighter and kill you. Snakes have a strong sense of place and a great fear of falling. This is the reason, Takada told me, that all snakes curl around your arms or neck when you handle them. The next time a boa constrictor lands on you, quickly lie down on the ground so the snake can slither off you and go about its own business. **JS**

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Her husband, Kiritani Itsuo, is an artist, writer and newspaper columnist based in Tokyo.