Natrix as a Predator of Fish in the Dallas Area

Pierre Fontaine

The common non-poisonous water snake, Natrix, has long been recognized as one of the greatest predators, the cause of considerable destruction of fish in our lakes and streams.

The accompanying photograph (1941), and account of two Natrix taken (1941, 1943) at the City of Dallas Fish Hatchery, show clearly that the water snake can swallow fish of considerable size. That its appetite is not easily satisfied is seen when one considers that a fifty-inch snake (May, 1943) caught and successfully swallowed a catfish of some two and a half pounds. This snake was killed in attempting to swallow a second fish of about the same size and weight, which lodged in its throat. Both fish, the one which was swallowed, and the one lodged, were in a good state of preservation when the predator was found.

It is the practice at the Dallas Hatchery to pair channel catfish [Ictalurus lacustris punctatus (Raf.)] in brood pens for spawning. These pens are constructed of wooden laths,
forming a square of eight feet, with an old milk can anchored in two feet of water for the nest.

On May 3, 1943, twelve pairs of fish were placed each in their separate pens. Four days later, a daily routine-check on the fish showed one fish missing from one of the pens. No trace could be found of the fish; no laths were broken or holes present by which the fish might have escaped into the larger pond. On May 12 (five days later), I found on inspection of the ponds, a *Natrix* fifty inches long and ten inches in girth. This *Natrix* had a two and one-half pound catfish lodged in its mouth. Both snake and fish were dead when found. The snake had swallowed the head and the body of the fish to a point just behind the pectoral fins. The spines of these fins had pierced the cheeks of the snake, and protruded on either side of the head, making the fish unable to swallow or discharge its prey. The stomach (which was two inches larger than the rest of the body of the snake) contained the mate of the fish lodged in the throat of the snake: the two fish were of about the same size.

The photograph is of a *Natrix* killed at the hatchery in the summer of 1941, after a fingerling catfish had become lodged in its mouth, as in the case of the (later) larger specimen described above. The snake illustrated was 15½ inches long and 1½ inches in girth; the catfish is 4½ inches long. The spine of one of the pectoral fins is seen protruding (at a) through the cheek of the snake, and would undoubtedly in the course of time have caused its death.