

A case of scavenging of *Vipera latastei* Boscá, 1878 in the south of the Iberian Peninsula

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RESUMEN: Se presenta un posible caso de necrofagia de víbora hocicuda (*Vipera latastei*), que no había sido previamente descrito en condiciones naturales. La serpiente fue hallada alimentándose de un ratón de campo (*Apodemus sylvaticus*) atropellado en un camino forestal. Se desconoce si la presa pudiera haber sido mordida con anterioridad por la serpiente, aunque ya presentaba rigor mortis y vísceras desecadas en el momento de la observación.

Classical research on vertebrate diets often underreport the role of scavenging. In Sebastián-González *et al.* (2023) the authors highlight how carrion consumption is frequently overlooked in diet studies. In the case of snakes, this underestimation has been studied in DeVault & Krochmal (2002). One of the main problems is being able to quantify scavenging events in diet studies, usually carried out by studying stomach contents. It is therefore significant to publish cases detected under natural conditions, not induced by direct human intervention. Thus, cases have been reported of Montpellier snake (*Malpolon monspessulanus*) feeding on road-killed animals (Valverde, 1974; Ventura, 2012) and two personal observations on March 9th, 2002 of one adult run over in the moment of ingesting an adult of ocellated lizard (*Timon lepidus*) in Loja (Granada, Spain) and one juvenile dead on road trying to feed one adult of *Podarcis virescens* in Sierra de Andújar (Jaén, Spain) on May 11th, 2005 (L. García-Cardenete, unpublished data). Cases of scavenging on badly decomposed carcasses that

had not been run over have also been observed, such as a juvenile North African cobra (*Naja haje*) which died trying to consume an adult toad that had previously been trapped in a water cistern (Jiménez-Cazalla & García-Cardenete, 2022).

On the other hand, although the diet of the snub-nosed viper (*Vipera latastei*) has been relatively well studied (Bea & Braña, 1988; Brito, 2004; Santos *et al.*, 2007; and references therein), its feeding strategies remain only partially understood, both in terms of foraging strategies as well as prey types. Thus, it is considered an ambush predator (Brito, 2017), using its tail as a lure to attract prey (caudal luring; Parellada & Santos, 2002). Behaviors such as the consumption of invertebrates, both in adulthood and immaturity (Bea & Braña, 1988; Brito, 2017; Santos *et al.*, 2007), ophiophagy, and even cannibalism (Martínez Freiría *et al.*, 2006) have also been described. No references have been found to the consumption of animals previously dead in the wild for this species, unlike *V. aspis*, another species that is closely related both phylogenetically and in terms of habits and



Figure 1: Specimen of *V. latastei* feeding on a roadkill individual of *Apodemus sylvaticus*.

Figura 1: Ejemplar de *V. latastei* ingiriendo un individuo de *Apodemus sylvaticus* atropellado.

diet (Gagliano *et al.*, 2025). Although it has been demonstrated in captivity (Bea *et al.*, 1992) that vipers eat dead prey (amphibians), it is not specified whether *V. latastei* is one of those species.

A possible case of necrophagia in a snub-nosed viper is reported here, observed on October 1st, 2024 on the western slope of Sierra Nevada (province of Granada, Spain) in the 10 x 10 km side UTM 30S VG50, at an altitude of approximately 1,660 masl. At 10:44 solar time, in stable and sunny weather, an adult female specimen was found ingesting the carcass of a Long-tailed field mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*) on the platform of a forest road. The mouse showed clear signs of having been run over by a vehicle, as it was completely crushed dorsoventrally, in a supine posi-

tion and with severe traumatic evisceration (Figure 1). At the time of the observation, the viper had partially ingested the carcass from the head to the forelimb region, where it had difficulty continuing to swallow due to the extended position of the forelimbs after being run over. In addition, there was a partial rigor mortis already present in the rodent. Given the imminent arrival of a vehicle and the exposure and vulnerability of the snake, it was decided to scare it away from the road. The rodent's carcass was analyzed and moved a few centimeters from the place where the snake had stopped.

The partial rigor mortis and desiccation of the viscera indicated that some time had elapsed between the accident and the consumption of the rodent. It cannot be ruled out that the mouse might have been bitten by the snake beforehand and, in its flight until the poison took full effect, had been run over. If this had not been the case, it would be the first documented observation of *V. latastei* scavenging in the wild. This behavior would be interpreted as opportunistic, differing from the usual ambush-based hunting strategy described for this species.

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