



GTP's *and the School of Experience*

Text & images: Doc Rock

Introduction

When I was first told about this special issue of *Reptiles Australia*, I volunteered to write a different style of article. Different because, unlike most articles you will read in magazines, this is about the mistakes I have made and the trials and tribulations experienced as a Green Tree Python keeper.

It was only about three years ago that I finally decided to bite the bullet and try keeping and breeding Green Tree Pythons (also known as GTPs or Chondros). I had observed other keepers, for whom I had great respect, having all sorts of problems and suffering more than the occasional fatality. Given the value of these animals, I had been in no rush to suffer the emotional and financial hardship of animals dying in my care. However, my wife and I had over 500 animals and had bred virtually every species of python native to Australia, so surely we had enough experience to keep and breed Chondros now?

Buying my first GTPs

The first step was to find out what was available and then to decide who I would trust to buy the animals from. This proved a problem, as the reptile world seems to be well populated with shady, silver-tongued characters intent on making a quick buck and, with the high price of GTP's in Australia, this species attracts a large number of them. Luckily, over the years I had developed quite a network and so sourcing animals was not a problem. However, sourcing legitimate animals from reliable, honest breeders proved quite a challenge. I won't dwell on this further than to say it was a frustrating process and I recommend extreme caution to those of you contemplating buying GTPs.

Eventually, I organised to re-

Opal arrived as an adult and although healthy, she always had a tendency to hang her tail loosely from her perch. Eventually, she had to be euthanised because of a degenerative spinal condition.

ceive three GTPs from someone I thought I could count on. This trust proved ill-founded, but eventually one animal did arrive (and much later a second). When I saw it, I was completely taken by the tiny perching creature I had just collected from the airport. No amount of pictures can adequately represent the delicate beauty of baby GTP's.

The problems begin

I had been told that this animal was eating fuzzy mice, so I waited a few days to let it settle in before the initial feed. With relief, I watched the first meal being snatched up and thought – “well, that wasn't too hard”. Wrong. Two days later, when I went to check that all was OK first thing in the morning, I was confronted with an awful smell and a regurgitated fuzzy mouse on the bottom of the container floor. Panic set in.

I immediately contacted everyone I knew in Australia and emailed GTP keepers in the USA that I had met during my travels. From all that I could tell, the husbandry environment was satisfactory. However, I was informed that some GTPs are very sensitive about being transported to new homes and that they can become stressed. The regurgitation was probably a result of this effect. Although some GTPs will readily accept moving home, some struggle and so it is best to allow a much longer settling in period before feeding. I was informed by Dave Barker in Texas that he rarely saw Chondros regurgitate and when it happened, it was not uncommon for them to breathe in some of the acid contents from the stomach which could lead to infection and death. Great!

As it turned out our little friend “Irish” survived this ordeal and eventually settled down to continue growing well, although he always proved easily stressed and a bit finicky with his food. I'll come back to Irish later.

More GTPs and more problems

The following season I sourced three more baby GTPs from another breeder on the east coast. By this time the original two I received earlier were doing alright, and I couldn't

wait to get my hands on some more. In due time, they arrived and with more confidence than last time, I placed them in their new containers.

Disaster. Two days after arriving, I noticed during my late-early morning check (my wife and I had one of our rare sleep-ins) that one of the new arrivals had this funny looking pink growth hanging down from the bottom of its tail. It took a moment to realise that this was a case of the dreaded rectal prolapse. Prolapse occurs when the bowel is everted and protrudes through the cloaca. This occurrence is evidently quite common in certain lines of GTP. I knew enough about the condition to know that it is often fatal and that the longer it is left the more the tissue swells and the harder it is to push back into place. This one was really swollen and so had probably happened many hours ago. I couldn't help blaming myself and thinking “why didn't I get up earlier and check”!

I immediately phoned a local friend, who breeds GTPs and who had dealt with this problem many times before, to see if he would come over and help me. He explained he was too busy and couldn't help for a couple of days which was far too long for the poor little GTP to survive.

Although I talked to others interstate, I couldn't find anyone else close by that had first hand experience to help me – so I'd have to learn the hard way by fixing it myself unguided and unassisted.

There are many views of what causes prolapse in GTPs. Normally, the bowel protrudes each time this species defecates. The problem is that it sometimes fails to retract. The list of causes includes stress, dehydration, infection and irritation caused by unnatural foods (i.e. rodents). Because the bowel is folded backwards on itself during prolapse, the blood supply is cut off and the everted tissue swells making it very difficult to replace. Added to the resultant lack of blood flow, the tissue also dries out so that if the condition is left for long the bowel will die and the snake is doomed.

Before attempting reinsertion of

the protruding tissue, I checked with my vet to see if he had any suggestions. He had never attempted it and knowing my skills he suggested I should proceed straight away and then see him for some antibiotics afterwards. Probably the best book on GTPs is by Greg Maxwell called “The Complete Chondro” or his latest version “The More Complete Chondro”. Greg explains that one way to reduce rectal swelling is to put the swollen tissue in a saturated sugar solution. I did this for a while and after enormous frustration and no doubt great pain to my little Chondro, I replaced the offending tissue only to have it pop out again almost immediately. It took a while before I learnt the trick of inserting the bowel, holding it in place by putting pressure on the cloaca with my thumb and then placing a piece of tape (from a bandaid) around the base of the abdomen to hold it in.

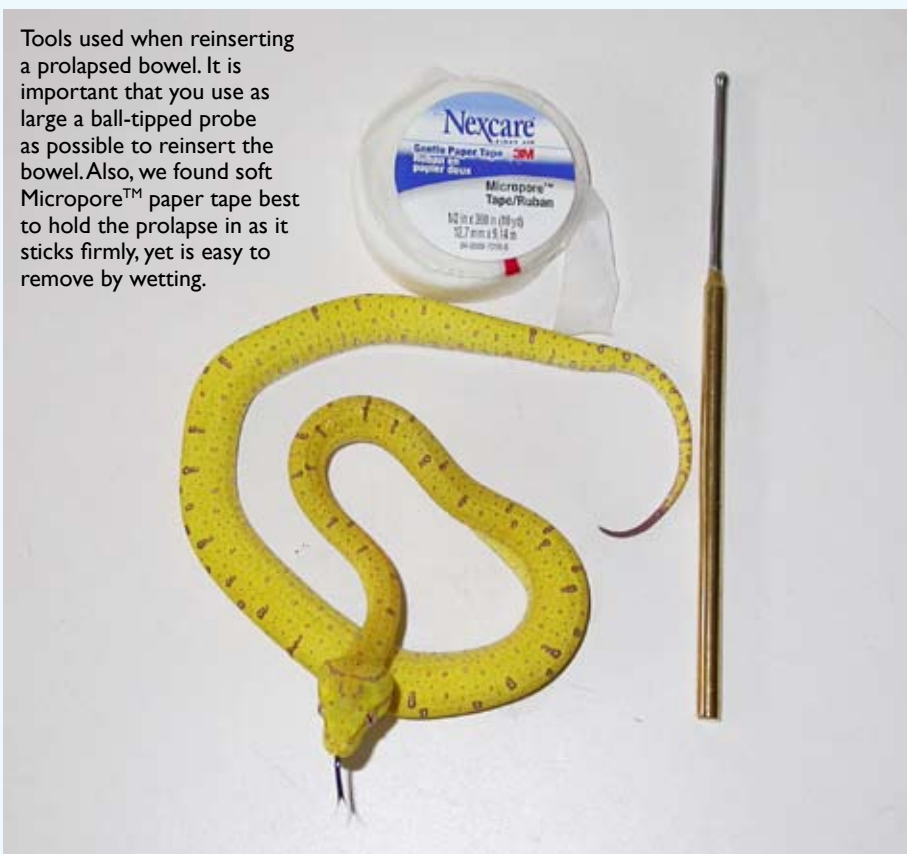
The various books and people I spoke to advised that I remove all perches and objects from the cage so that the little python was restricted to lying quietly on the floor rather than climbing around and risking the prolapse reoccurring from his muscular exertions. Also, conventional wisdom was that I did not feed him for at least a month to let the bowel recover. All of this advice proved wasted, as early in the morning six days after prolapse the problem baby was found dead.

Oh well, I still had the other two new additions and they seemed to be settling in well, so it was time to see if they would feed. Both instantly gobbled down the very conservative sized pinkies I offered them. All was going well at last. Wrong. When I did my very early morning check on day two after feeding (I had learnt from my previous experience that early morning checks with young GTPs are paramount) I could not believe my eyes. One of them had prolapsed. My wife was in tears when I showed her – she can't bear to see anything suffer.

This time I knew what to do. I didn't muck around with bathing in sugar; I immediately lubricated the appropriate probe with aloe vera gel and reinserted the rectum. I had



Rectal prolapse is not an uncommon condition in some lines of GTP. It occurs when the bowel fails to retract after defecation. The longer it is left the more the tissue swells and the harder it is to push back into place. This picture shows a well advanced case in a baby GTP which died days later.



Tools used when reinserting a prolapsed bowel. It is important that you use as large a ball-tipped probe as possible to reinsert the bowel. Also, we found soft Micropore™ paper tape best to hold the prolapse in as it sticks firmly, yet is easy to remove by wetting.

learnt previously that it is best to use a ball-tipped sexing probe that is as large as practicable, but can still fit through the cloacal opening. Also, the best tape to hold in the prolapse was Micropore™ paper tape because it stuck well, but could be removed easily by wetting it.

The whole operation went smoothly compared to the initial attempts with my unfortunate first patient. This second subject seemed to settle down well and after a month of continual monitoring and worry, I gave it a second feed with no problems. However, on the third feed ... and the fourth ... and sixth ... and seventh, the snake prolapsed again. Each time I became faster and more proficient at the process. Unfortunately this was to no avail as the second baby died after many months of careful nurturing. In contrast, the third baby never showed a hint of this problem and has now grown up to be a lovely girl GTP.

Adult GTP blues

My problems with GTPs didn't end with the death of this second neonate. Around the time I purchased the original babies, I also sourced an adult pair of GTPs. It is extremely rare for us to take in any adult snakes because of the disease risk and because we have learnt that we get the best breeding results by growing our snakes up from hatchlings. But this was an exception, because I felt the seller was reliable and because I was just plain impatient. But, history repeated itself and once again I learnt my lesson the hard way.

The adult female (we named Opal) was beautifully coloured with an array of yellows and whites and black dots distributed over her delicate green body. She proved to be healthy and a good feeder, although I noticed early on that she had a tendency to hang the last third of her abdomen loosely from her perch. Other GTPs do this, but not as often as this particular snake.

Over the next 24 months this habit gradually grew worse. Working with my vet, we found that anti-inflammatory drugs would temporarily improve the situation,



Irish as a baby and a sub-adult. He joined our collection at about four months of age and promptly regurgitated his first meal. A bit over a year later he died from an intestinal problem.



and started to spend time on the bottom of his cage. I took him to the vet, but we could find no definitive problem. Shortly afterwards, I found him one morning dead on the bottom of his cage. The autopsy showed an opportunistic protozoan infection in both kidneys which apparently had taken hold because of kidney problems. There was no way of determining the sequence of events and so what was the original cause of the problem, although it is probable that at some stage in the snake's history it suffered kidney damage (possibly through dehydration) and the kidney eventually gave out.

The luck of the Irish

Earlier I described the problems I had when Irish first arrived and regurgitated his meal. After the initial fright, he grew and developed well. He was always a little finicky and I was careful not to feed him too much or too often. After two years (about 9 months ago), I was short of small rats and fed him a largish rat which admittedly was at the upper end of the range I would normally feed a snake of his size. He wolfed it down with no problems and shortly afterwards entered a shed cycle. Since he was milky, I didn't want to

disturb him and left him alone for the next fortnight until he had shed.

Checking him after he shed, as we do with all our snakes, I noticed that he had a large lump in his lower intestine about the right size and shape to still be the rat I fed him a couple of weeks previously. Immediately I took him to the vet and x-rays indicated that indeed it was the partially digested rat. All attempts to help him pass the rat failed and as a last resort after a month or so he was operated on and the rat removed. It was apparent that the partially undigested rat had forced a pocket in the wall of intestine so that it had remained there unable to move forward or backward. Irish gradually grew stronger after the operation and even fed again, but shortly after this he died from kidney failure. It seems that he always had a weakness in his digestive system and eventually it had caught up with him after being fed a large, unjudicious meal.

Summary

Last year Southern Cross Reptiles ran a survey which, amongst other things, asked which type of reptile was the most desired by herps in Australia (see Reptiles Australia Vol 3:2). By a clear margin, GTPs were the most popular followed by the albino carpet python. I have often heard it said by so-called experts that Chondros are just ordinary carpet pythons coloured green and shouldn't be treated any differently than the rest of your snakes. Well this is not my experience.

Out of all the hundreds and hundreds of snakes we keep, we have had one snake die in the last ten years and this was from egg binding. In the last three years I have lost five GTPs of various sizes and it is not as if we are inexperienced keepers. GTPs are like other pythons to keep, but they are also a lot more sensitive and unforgiving. If you are one of the majority that have your heart set on keeping and breeding GTPs, then by all means have a go. However, I would like to make a few suggestions before you do ...

Firstly, gain some experience keeping and breeding other python

species before you contemplate betting thousands of your hard earned dollars and the well being of some of these baby snakes on the belief that "she'll be right mate". When you buy them, be very careful who you get them from and do not be fooled by the supposed "big name breeders". Be patient with your desire to breed and be wary of older animals that can often come with historic problems. Remember to ask why would someone want to sell a perfectly good Chondro of breeding age? When your baby charges arrive in their new home, be well prepared and allow them lots of time to settle in. Don't be too ambitious with your feeding and let them grow at a steady and conservative rate.

When I was at University doing a PhD, my supervisor used to often say to me "Experience keeps a hard school, but a fool will learn at no other". Hopefully you can learn from my experiences and not need to attend this hard school. Today, we have fifteen GTPs and they are all thriving – but I still get up early each morning to check them just in case ...



Simon Stone (alias Doc Rock) began keeping reptiles when he was 8 years old. His nickname originated from Uni when he got his PhD in Biology. Simon and his wife, Diane, have worked together breeding pythons and goannas for the last couple of decades. Together, they now run Southern Cross Reptiles in Adelaide which specializes in breeding "top end" reptiles like the albino carpet pythons. Doc's two greatest passions these days are developing spectacular new python variants and collecting books on reptiles.

but eventually she lost all control of the bottom portion of her abdomen and then could not defecate properly. I finally had her euthanised. An autopsy showed that she had a degenerative spine condition above her cloaca. It appeared to be the result of a long standing problem which may have resulted in damage done to her as a very young snake.

The adult male I called Kermit and he also proved to be healthy and a good feeder. However, not long after the loss of Opal, he stopped feeding