Off the Rails: Harassment of a South-Italian Asp Viper by Moorhens

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The South-Italian Asp Viper *Vipera aspis hugyi* Schinz, 1833, is a venomous snake endemic to southern Italy and Sicily, and introduced to Montecristo Island (Masseti and Zuffi, 2011). Sometimes regarded as a distinct species, its natural history and precise geographic distribution are still relatively poorly documented. Recent publications reported the first cases of melanism (Di Nicola and Meier, 2013), of autophagy (Carlino and Pauwels, 2015), of predation on a centipede (Carlino et al., 2017), and of a patternless morph (Di Nicola and Faraone, 2020).

We report herein an unusual interaction between a South-Italian Asp Viper and birds in Litorale di Ugento Natural Park, Lecce Province, southern Italy. On 28 October 2023, while driving at 1:30 P.M. on a dirt road (39.885954°N, 18.123231°E) bordering the canal leading to Bacino Bianca water basin, in Torre San Giovanni, the attention of one of us (RG) was attracted by two Moorhens (Aves: Rallidae: *Gallinula chloropus* [Linnaeus, 1758]) which were deliberately following and pecking at an animal on the ground. It turned out to be a South-Italian Asp Viper, about 70 cm in total length, showing the typical adult dorsal color pattern of the species (Figure 1). The conditions of the observation were ideal, with a clear, sunny sky, and a temperature of 26°C. At this location the six-meter-wide road is bordered by a vegetation dominated by common reeds (Poaceae: *Phragmites australis*) and black rush (Cyperaceae: *Schoenus nigricans*). The viper crossed the road in a straight line, continuously followed by the rails which regularly pecked at it, until it disappeared into the vegetation on the other side. Although being harassed, the viper showed no signs of panic or aggressiveness, and continued its way.

This observation is the first documented interaction between the South-Italian Asp Viper and rallids. Moorhens feed mostly on plants, in a lesser proportion on small invertebrates, and only occasionally on small vertebrates such as small fish and tadpoles; extremely rarely they also feed on carrion (Lardjane-Hamiti et al., 2015). A live, adult viper is not a potential prey item for Moorhens, and hunting is definitely not what motivated the birds involved in our observation. Interactions between Moorhens and snakes are rarely reported in the literature, harassment of snakes is uncommon, and predation by rails on snakes is only exceptionally observed (Cutten et al., 2013). It is possible that the behavior of the rails was rather motivated by the fact that they regard the snake as a danger for themselves or as a potential predator of their offspring, and want to chase it out of their area of activity. Small birds are indeed known to be part of the diet of this viper (see Carlino et al. [2017] and references therein).

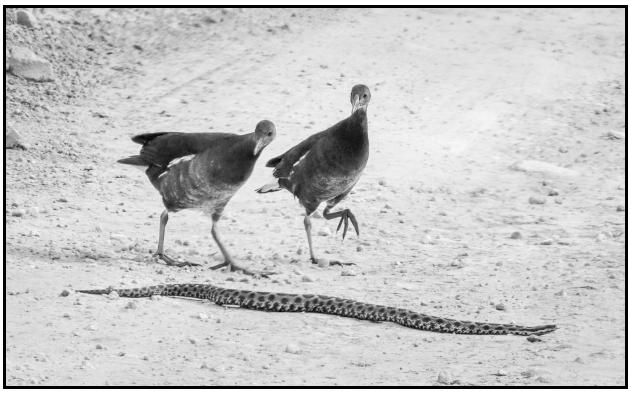

Figure 1. Moorhens following and harassing an adult *Vipera aspis hugyi* in Litorale di Ugento Regional Natural Park, southern Italy. Photograph by R. Gennaio.

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