

CREATURE FEATURE

the spotted hyena

by Cyril Brass



Colourful but deadly, the Eyelash Palm Pit Viper is one of the most dangerous of the venomous snakes in Central America. It is also one of the smallest snakes, rarely exceeding 75 cm (29.5 inches).

The most prominent features of the Eyelash Palm Pit Viper are its colourations, triangular shaped head, and most of all, spiny scales positioned above the eyes. These pit vipers get their name from this distinctive patch of upright pointed scales over each eye, resembling eyelashes.

surroundings. It is amazing that such vibrantly coloured snakes can become invisible amongst the jungle vegetation. I would guess that in all my treks through tropical rainforests, I have passed by several of these snakes without spotting them in the thick vegetation.

But I did see two of these deadly creatures during a hike in the coastal rainforests of Tortuguero National Park, Costa Rica. The first one was situated about a meter above the ground. Grey-green in colour this pit viper was clinging to the bark of a towering tree and blending in with

position, they are paradoxically, always in an ambush position and ready to strike. Certain death lies only a few meters away

Patiently they wait for potential prey such as small rodents, frogs, lizards and small birds to pass by them. These vipers possess heat sensitive organs or pits located on either side of the head between the eye and nostril which allows them to identify the direction of potential prey. This is of great value to a night hunter. As most snakes are nocturnal, the Eyelash Viper hunts from late evening through the early morning.

They attack prey quickly, inject venom, wait for the quick and inevitable death of their victim and then swallow it. Pit vipers have large hypodermic needle-like fangs positioned in the upper jaw. Even though they carry only a few milligrams of venom, just one drop of this potent venom is extremely toxic to humans.

Possessing a prehensile tail, these tree dwelling predators are able to catch and eat prey while suspending midair from a branch.

Sometimes they wrap themselves around colourful heliconia blooms waiting for unsuspecting hummingbirds searching for juicy nectar. What an excellent ambush sight.

While hiking in the lush jungles, tour guides stress to visitors not to get too close to wild tropical flowers like heliconias for that very reason.

The Eyelash Palm Pit Viper . . . a colourful snake . . . a nocturnal hunter . . . a deadly predator. **ca**

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Unlike most snakes whose scales are smooth, the Eyelash Palm Pit Vipers possess rough and sharp scales believed to protect themselves against tree branches and to aid in their camouflage against potential predators. Their arboreal habitats are situated in humid tropical regions with dense lush foliage consisting of shrubbery, vines, and trees not far from permanent water sources like swamps, streams or rivers

The wide array of colours like red, yellow, brown, green, tan, rust, and various colour combinations thereof, helps them blend into their

the colours of the bark. Then just several meters further along the trail, the second pit viper, a golden yellow colour, was spotted curled up on a flat broad leaf right beside the walking trail. Cautiously I took a couple of steps closer to the small motionless snake which enabled me to see clearly the distinctive ridges above the eyes. Yes, that was an Eyelash Palm Pit Viper. Slowly, I backed away.

When spotted, these snakes can be seen resting on branches or broad leaves sunning themselves until an opportune time presents itself for a meal. Appearing to be in a resting