

The Appearance of the Giant African Snail in Arizona

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The giant African snail, *Achatina fulica* Bowdich, has recently made its deepest penetration into continental United States by showing up alive in the city of Mesa, Arizona, for a period of two weeks. The story behind its appearance is an all too familiar one in theme and brings to mind Pemberton's account of the origin of the Oahu infestation (HAWAIIAN PLANTERS' REC. 42 (2) :135-140, 1938) and Benson's account of the start of the Calcutta population (J. CONCHYL. 7:266-268, 1858).

Regrettably, the particulars of the introduction are hearsay; but this notwithstanding, they should be entered in the record if for no other reason than that they will serve to warn and remind that the ingredients for a successful introduction are simple and few.

A man and his young son from "somewhere in eastern United States" visited in Oahu during April, 1958. The young son became so fascinated with specimens of the giant African snail that he decided to keep them as pets and return home with them. In accordance with this plan, "two live specimens, 3-3½ inches long" were secreted in the boy's suitcase and were neither declared nor discovered during port agricultural inspection. In the early phases of a leisurely auto tour across the country, the snails remained in satisfactory condition. However, the elevated temperatures of central Arizona, even in early May, seemed to provide a real threat to the snail specimens whose accumulated excreta only intensified the feeling that it was not proving practicable to continue further east with them. The decision to abandon the snails was reached at a time the boy and his father were visiting a wild animal farm near Mesa. As an apparent happy thought, it was agreed that the owner of this wild animal farm might be glad to have them with, surely, a tacit but obvious understanding.

Two weeks later, on 19 May 1958, it was decided by the owner of the farm to show these interesting animals on a television program scheduled for that evening. He realized suddenly that he did not know much more about them than the fact that they are a serious pest. In his search for additional data with which to fortify his talk, he recalled my article which appeared in the October 1949 READER'S DIGEST. In an effort to

get quickly the latest information, he called me long distance to explain his needs. He was warned soundly of the inherent danger and illegality, both state and federal, of having these animals alive in his possession. He was admonished not to show these animals on television and persuaded, instead, to contact the State Entomologist immediately so that he could be relieved of further responsibility. He was thoroughly impressed and promised to follow completely the advice given him. But as a safety measure, I telephoned both the Arizona State Entomologist, W. T. Mendenhall, and the Chief of the Federal Plant Quarantine Branch, E. P. Reagan.

State quarantine agents confiscated the giant snail specimens and destroyed them later that day. No eggs reportedly had been laid. The owner of the animal farm then wrote me a letter of confirmation, a part of which follows: "Had it not been for the magazine article that you wrote, I would probably still have these little creatures here in my office. I am certainly happy that the snails were given to me instead of some other person unfamiliar with animals. We can now feel reasonably safe in the fact that they are dead. Due to the circumstances surrounding their importation, I really don't think that there is anything to worry about." We can only hope that this latter statement is not overly optimistic. The persons involved are predestined to remain unknown and it is therefore not possible to determine for certain whether any presumed "dead" snails were earlier discarded in California or whether overlooked specimens remaining in the boy's possessions were subsequently discarded further east.

This case serves as still another abject lesson in how easily the giant African snail can become established in continental United States despite some of the most effective quarantine regulations in existence. Although some persons may be given to minimizing the element of danger by rationalizing that this species could not survive the arid conditions of central Arizona, research at the University of Arizona currently being conducted on alien terrestrial gastropod infestations present abundant evidence to the contrary. The rich, moist truck garden areas of the Salt River Valley in central Arizona appear particularly vulnerable to attack.
