

# Speckle-headed whip snake (*Ahaetulla fasciolata*) grabs Sumatran gliding lizard (*Draco sumatranus*)

A rarely observed drama in nature is captured by an amateur photographer.

By S.C. Ng



**F**or the new year of 2016, I made a resolution to practise and become a better nature photographer. This idea came along with my purchase of a super-zoom camera last December. In the past, I had often regretted my inability to capture interesting objects because they were outside the zoom range of my previous camera.

I took my new camera with me recently for a walk in FRIM (Forest Research Institute Malaysia). A *Cassia* tree with yellow flowers and long green pods caught my attention. A pretty butterfly was hovering over an inflorescence.

While watching the butterfly, I noticed a movement about ten meters away. It was a lizard, but it was sort of hanging curiously at the end of a long thin stick and its body was twitching. I pointed my camera at it. It was indeed a gliding lizard, but what looked like a long thin stick was actually a long thin snake. The lizard was held by its neck and shoulders in the jaws of the snake. The rest of the snake was coiled round a tree.

At that moment it felt like I had just hit a million-dollar jackpot! I got so excited that I couldn't stabilize my camera. Fortunately there was time for me to compose myself. I then managed to position myself and to steady my camera for a series of pictures.

How was the snake able to catch the lizard? Was the attack launched when the lizard was at rest on the tree trunk or while it was gliding towards the trunk? In any case, it would have been a lightning-fast strike with absolute accuracy—the sort of seemingly effortless strike that kungfu devotees dream about and spend years in physical and mental preparation to master. But nobody has ever seen a snake in physical training. Without limbs, the snake would have had to steady itself by coiling round a support before striking, hence its long whip-like body.

The lizard continued to twitch from time to time, but could not break free. When I left the scene, the lizard was still twitching, but obviously it was going to end up eventually in the snake's stomach.



I was later asked why I didn't help the lizard to escape. The simple answer was that the struggle was taking place at a height of four to five meters above ground and quite completely out of my reach. But I was also not sure whether I should interfere at all.

I am grateful to Dr B.L. Lim for the identifications of the snake and the lizard.