

Photographing a Green Leaf Mantis
Choeradodis rhombicollis and
a Sri Lankan Pit Viper *Trimeresurus*
trigonocephalus (bottom left) with the
Scorpion strobe bracket in
conjunction with our Nikon D300
and SB-R200 flashes set-up.



STING OF THE SCORPION

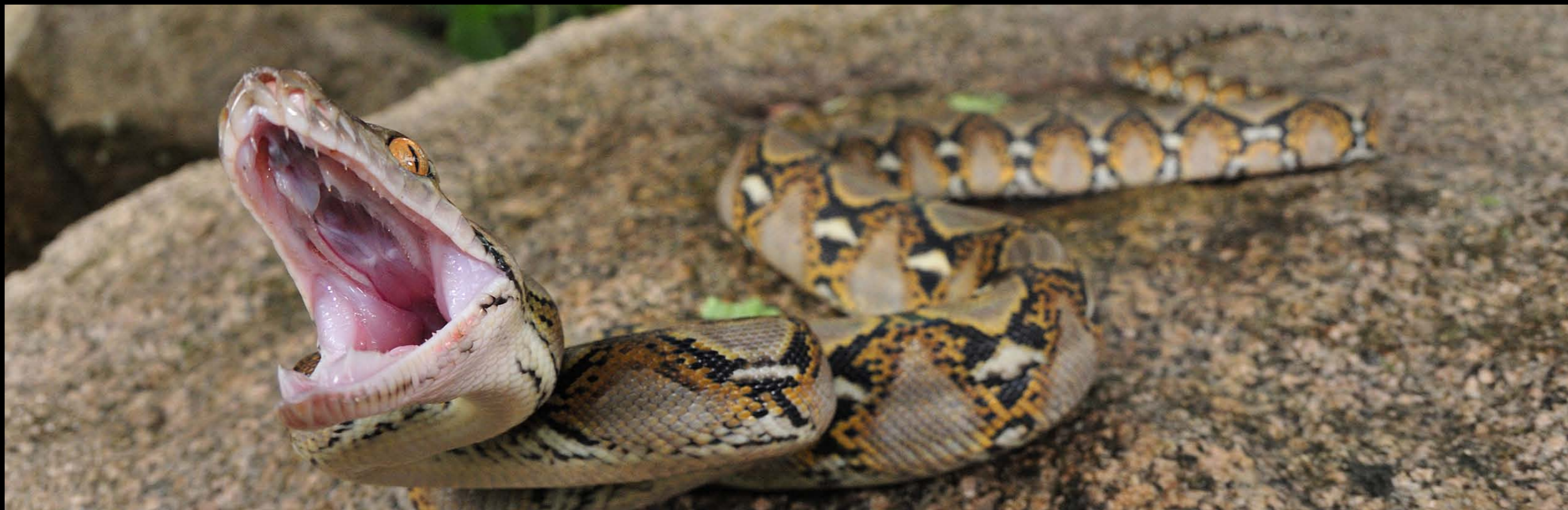
Flexibility and protection are top priorities when shooting dangerous subjects in macro mode



We love macro and we love photographing dangerous animals - small venomous insects, arthropods and snakes usually make highly interesting and often stunning subjects. Being exceptionally cryptic or - on the opposite - brightly colored (but always very hard to find), such creatures never fail to elicit our enthusiasm in the field. However, small or smallish venomous species can also be rather pugnacious and quick to defend themselves from a real or perceived threat, and the last thing one wants to happen while in the field and far from medical attention is

being stung or bitten by a dangerous animal - even non-life threatening venoms can cause an acute degree of discomfort, painful infections and local necrosis. Just the same, one desperately wants to get really close to such beautiful subjects, especially since several of them will not flee or display signs of aggression if not actually touched. Finding oneself in very close proximity to many of these animals (we are talking about centimeters/inches here) can however prove dangerous. Pit vipers - usually treacherously lethargic by day - are quick to lash out by night,

as they can detect body heat and minute temperature variations via their loreal pits, which are beautifully effective infrared detectors; many boas and pythons have a nasty attitude and are quick to bite; large scorpions have the disconcerting habit of actually running at breakneck speed towards the camera (and the hands which are holding it); several huge bird-eating spiders can release their urticating hairs and bristles; and in general one simply doesn't really want to put bare hands holding camera bodies or strobes within striking distance of such



The real trick is getting close to the subject while staying out of reach of its strike



Above, a good example of what one is really trying to avoid when shooting wide-macro in the field! Many snakes - such as this Reticulate Python *Python reticulatus* - have a long strike and an impressive array of sharp teeth, while venomous species are even riskier for obvious reasons. Left, the Scorpion strobe bracket system shown ready for use (3) and with its disassembled components (1 and 2). While not perfect (what is?), this sturdy, light and reasonably flexible bracket has shown its worth on several occasions in demanding field conditions.

nuisances. Bulky, heavy camera set-ups or the use of assistants can prove dangerous and counter-productive, as one wants to remain agile to quickly move out of harm's way and simultaneously intrude as little as possible in the subject's environment - clumsily bumping into a branch might easily scare it away or provoke a defensive reaction. After some thinking and a little research, we have successfully solved the conundrum with the adoption of a very simple, light and highly flexible system. We use two Nikon SB-R200 strobes -

extremely powerful, light and compact units, which work only in remote (being controlled by the camera pop-up flash or by a separate controller as per Nikon's Creative Lighting System) - mounting them however on the highly innovative **Scorpion Medical Close-up bracket** rather than using Nikon's own cumbersome ring SX-1 mount. The Scorpion bracket was designed and developed in Italy by a specialist company, **Agnos**, for indoor dental close-up photography, but it has in fact proven itself as a reliable strobe mount which allows a high degree of flexibility in

difficult field conditions thanks to its robust alloy components, which can be almost limitlessly articulated. It is a light, easily dismantled metal structure comprising an extendable sled (which is fixed by means of a screw to the camera body bottom) and two modular arms which can be positioned at will using friction joints - a simple, no-frills and highly effective design. We like it so much that we now use it on all our flash-lit macrophotography field work, occasionally adding a third, hand-held Nikon SB600 for backlighting effects. Whenever a third strobe

(technically a fourth - we are not counting the camera pop-up flash here) is not present, one can easily and rapidly detach one of the SB-R200 units from its mount - thanks to its quick-latch system - and use it for backlighting effects, since it's remotely controlled by the camera. The whole contraption, partially or completely dismantled, can easily be taken on-board when flying with one's carry-on luggage, together with cameras and lenses. However, while the Scorpion bracket offers a highly practical solution to multiple strobe positioning by the field photographer alone -



Above, shooting a wide-macro close-up of a venomous Eyelash Pit Viper *Bothriechis schlegelii* while using our rubberized cardboard home-made shield. Left, using the shield in conjunction with the Scorpion strobe bracket and a wide-macro lens set-up to shoot a venomous Cameron Highlands Pit Viper *Trimeresurus nebularis*.

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effectively doing away with assistants - its use alone obviously does not solve the safety problems inherent with small dangerous subjects. To deal with this we have come up with a ridiculously simple gadget - a semi-foldable (or rather, semi-rigid) heavily rubberized cardboard shield with a hole in its middle. The shield fits in our LowePro backpack's external pocket but once mounted on the camera/bracket combo is large enough to (barely) protect the photographer's exposed fingers and knuckles (the most exposed parts), while the macro or wide-macro lens fits

neatly in the central opening, protruding ever so slightly beyond. The face of the photographer is effectively protected/hidden by the camera body. After having been rubberized (using a tube of sealing silicone), the cardboard shield has been then painted in a mildly disruptive camouflage pattern on the side facing the subject, hiding the complex, cumbersome array approaching it. It works! Concealed behind this admittedly amateurish and cheap contraption we have been able to approach within inches several snake species which would have otherwise reacted with

quick aggression and potentially dangerous bites. Obviously this is not something we would trust when getting really close to much larger species - to deal with those we have come up with our own home-made polecam, which will be described in a future issue - but our little contraption works like a charm with the great majority of dangerous species, as you can see watching our little videos. Having successfully tested the design of the shield on several occasions, we have then developed a better, sturdier version designed as two interlocking plastic plates, which should protect a

broader area and withstand the strike of larger species. But we have to confess we are too lazy to proceed with the new version, and so we'll keep on using the same old wrinkly cardboard one...at least until it won't finally give up under one of those torrential tropical downpours!

Disclaimer: Do not try this if you are not seriously experienced in dealing with venomous and/or dangerous animals! The authors of the article and the publishers of ANIMA MUNDI - *Adventures in Wildlife Photography* cannot accept responsibility for any accidents which might occur to those trying to imitate the techniques described above.