

THE DORSAL SCALE ROWS OF SNAKES

IN these days when so much attention is being given to the variations and minute characters of animals it seems remarkable that such an important trait as the number of dorsal scale rows in the snakes should receive careless treatment. This character is given considerable weight in delineating species and deserves careful attention. From the descriptions one could only conclude that each species has a rather definite number, 17, 19 or 21, as the case may be, and that the variations are abrupt. The facts are far from being as simple as this. As a rule the number of scale rows decreases posteriorly, and there is often a decrease anteriorly, so that the maximum number of rows (the number now given in descriptions) may either extend from the head to beyond the middle of the body, or be restricted to a longer or shorter distance on the middle, sometimes only for the length of two or three scales. Furthermore, the species that exhibit a variation of two or more entire rows on the anterior part of the body also show the intermediate stages in which the extra rows are present on the middle of the body only, which leaves no doubt that the variations in this character are not abrupt but gradual.

From these facts it is evident that the average number of rows characteristic of a species in any region can only be expressed by a formula that gives the number of rows on the different parts of the body. It is not enough to say that a species has a maximum of 21 rows; one should at least know whether the number is 21 for the greater part of the length or only on the middle of the body. Quite evidently a form with an average of 21-19-17 scale rows, which means 21 to beyond the middle and 19 and then 17 posteriorly, is not the same as one in which the scale formula averages 19-21-19-17, any more than one with 21-19-17 rows is the same as one with 19-17 rows, although such variations are thrown together under the present way of recording the rows.

It is a simple matter to count the number of rows on the different parts of the body and this may be conveniently expressed by the

formula given above. At least this much should be done by the herpetologist, if not for the systematist then for the student of geographic variation, for only with this data can one determine the variation in this character and the type in each locality.

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THE QUESTION OF TEXT-BOOKS IN COMPOSITION

WHEN a Harvard man thinks of books on English composition he thinks of Professor Wendell, and before him Professor Hill, and before him the dark. Professor Hill's books, though immensely comforting and instructive, ought to be considered as reference books rather than as texts. Therefore, in the winter of 1890-91, when Professor Wendell found himself confronted with the problem of lecturing on composition to a Lowell Institute audience, he looked about him to see what had already been done. He was surprised to find that nothing then in print quite served the turn. All these earlier fellows were too technical and too much absorbed in detail. They laid down hard and fast rules. They had no patience with the growing tendency to say, "It is me." Students could scarcely tolerate their etymology, their prosody, their similes and their metaphors. Professor Wendell felt already, we may assume, something of his present fine impatience with the details of scholarship; he was already, on his academic side, professionally unconventional. Here, then, was a man peculiarly gifted by nature for the work of cleaning house in rhetoric. There resulted the Lowell lectures, and, in time, the "English Composition."

Since then nobody, I believe, has dared to depart from Professor Wendell's ways. We have had composition books written by nearly everybody, for nearly every important institution and academic grade; but none in any essential respect different from the first. Latterly they become more full of illustrative material and exercises. They present examples of faulty and correct writing from