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## **PURPLE HERON CONSUMES LARGE PREY**

by

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On 5 January 1996 at 13.00, I observed a Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* consume a large snake like prey. The incident occurred on the sandy reef flats with their sea grass beds on the SE shores of Pulau Serangan ("Turtle Island") in Benoa Bay, Bali. When first observed, the heron already held the writhing prey in its bill, apparently head first. With the heron standing upright, the exposed portion of the prey was at least as long as the height of the heron, and substantially thicker than the bird's neck.

The entire operation took about 20-30 minutes from the moment I first observed it. Although the heron was clearly struggling as the prey wriggled and writhed, it did not give the impression of being concerned about possible danger. Eventually, my attention was distracted by other bird activity, and when I next viewed the heron, it was standing at the same location but no longer holding any prey. Apparently it had succeeded in severing the prey in half, as it next picked up the now lifeless remaining half from the water and swallowed it in a single gulp. The bird's neck visibly bulged as the prey passed down its gullet. A few seconds later, the heron calmly flew off to another section of the reef, apparently not weighed down by the contents of its stomach.

At the time, the prey, which was banded cream and black, was assumed to be a sea snake. However my boatman assured me that the prey is non poisonous, and it is more likely that it was a Banded Moray *Gymnothorax enigmaticus*, which occurs on the coast of Bali and lives at shallow depth.

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