

Pet dog saved by grandfather after tussle with python

Simon Parry

A 60-year-old grandfather has described how he wrestled desperately with a four-metre-long python to save his pet dog from being crushed to death on a popular hiking trail near Sai Kung.

Robert Stearns, head of the secondary section at the English Schools Foundation Renaissance College in Ma On Shan, hit the snake with an umbrella then tried to prise open its jaws before grabbing it by the tail and dragging it to free his dog Phoebe.

The snake shot out of undergrowth at the side of the hiking trail at Pak Tam Chung near the entrance to Sai Kung Country Park and grabbed 18-month-old Phoebe when Stearns was walking his two dogs on May 23.

The snake had its jaws over the top of 15kg Phoebe's head and was winding its body around the dog's neck, lifting her above the ground as she thrashed and whimpered helplessly, when Stearns reached her.

Burmese pythons generally crush the life out of their victims before ingesting them and the attack on Phoebe is the third on a large dog in the same area since 2006. One dog died and the other was rescued by its owner in the previous attacks.

In a written account of his rescue, Canadian Stearns, who has three children and three grandchildren, said: "I bent the metal tip of my umbrella trying to repeatedly stab the body of the snake and then I tried with all my might to unwind the coils.

"But nothing was having any effect whatsoever. I could see that Phoebe was weakening. Her eyes had rolled back and her cries were low and muffled as the snake's grip squeezed her breath out.

"I tried to prise open its jaws to free Phoebe but that was useless too. The snake was unbelievably strong. Finally, in desperation, I grabbed the snake's tail and started heaving it backwards down the pathway.

"Miraculously, as I pulled, the snake uncoiled like a garden hose

about four metres long. My other dog [a beagle] was agitated and barking in an effort to help and Phoebe, now released from the snake's coils, managed to twist her head, sinking her own teeth into the snake."

Once Phoebe was free, Stearns and his two dogs fled the scene, leaving behind the broken umbrella and the dogs' leads. Phoebe was later treated by a vet who also bandaged one of Stearns' thumbs which was cut by the snake's teeth.

Stearns said he reported the incident to Agriculture Fisheries and Conservation Department staff at the country park office, expecting that they might close the trail, but was told by staff there was no point as the py-



Robert Stearns with his pet dog Phoebe. Photo: Red Door News

thon might have moved on. Warning signs were placed along the trail at Pak Tam Chung by the department in 2006 after a fatal attack on a 22kg pet husky.

Stearns' wife Yvonne, who reached the scene of the attack within five minutes, said parents with small children should be careful on the trail. "I wouldn't trust that python," she said. "He is hungry and he is big."

Department spokeswoman Diana Wong said that despite Stearns' visit to the country park office, details of the python attack had not been passed on by staff and no further action was planned.

"The AFCD has not received any reports on pet dogs attacked by pythons in Sai Kung [this year]" Wong said. "Pet owners should always keep their dogs under effective control."

Rogue snake suspected of attacks on dogs

An aggressive Burmese python may be responsible for all three attacks in the past four years on large dogs on the Pak Tam Chung walking trail beside the Sai Kung Country Park.

Burmese pythons, believed to number hundreds in the rural New Territories, are known to be territorial and live for up to 30 years meaning the same reptile could be responsible for last month's attacks as well as the ones in 2006 and 2007.

Catherine Leonard, who freed her 20kg pet, Poppy, from the grip of a python in September 2007, is convinced the snake was the same one that killed Esther Leenders' 22kg husky, Paro, a year earlier.

Speaking after the attack, Leonard, warned: "That snake meant business. These two attacks have both been close to the family walking trail and people do go out hiking with young children. A small child would weigh less than my dog."

After her experience in July 2006, Leenders said: "Paro was not a small dog. He was light on his feet and the size of a small child and I felt the snake could have taken on me if it had wanted to."

Asked what he thought should be done with the python, Robert Stearns, the owner of the latest victim, Phoebe, replied: "Nothing, I think. It's just trying to live its own life and I hope if it did suffer any wounds from Phoebe's teeth that it recovers well.

"People with pets and young children should heed the warnings on the posted signs. Pets should be kept on a short leash and children advised to stay behind the lead adult."

Most recorded attacks on humans by Burmese pythons occur in captivity. Attacks in the wild are rare.

Simon Parry

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