

The squirrel grips the cobra by the neck and kills it.



Buffalo weavers screech at the cobra's carcass deposited by them in the tree.

# The Rikki Tikki Tavi of Kora

by Daniel Stiles

I was sitting recently in the open dining banda at George Adamson's camp in Kora about to pour myself a second cup of breakfast coffee, when a slithering movement in the sand caught my eye. I abruptly froze when I identified the object as a spitting cobra (*Naja pallida mozambica*). I was not pleased with the snake's arrival since a toe of mine had once been mistaken by one of these creatures as a tasty morsel while I was sleeping in the Chalbi Desert area, resulting in great inconvenience for myself — and death for the importunate cobra.

The cobra stopped, lifted its head, shot its tongue out a few times, and continued its advance towards the table where I was sitting. There was no retreat. The only escape route was through the front of the banda, which was now under the baleful scrutiny of *Naja*. I was about to jump onto the table when another darting movement caught my eye, coming from a hole in the ground. It was only a pallid ground squirrel (*Xerus rutilus*), probably coming to see if George was handing out breakfast peanuts yet.

The squirrel sighted the cobra. Its fuzzy tail bristled and jerked and it flattened its body against the sand. I thought the thing would turn around and hightail it back into its hole, but instead it started creeping up on the snake from the rear, hugging the ground like a good soldier. I couldn't believe my eyes! Maybe this

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***Few cobras are the victims of a savage attack by a squirrel, yet a remarkable eye-witness account describes just such an incident in Kenya's Kora National Reserve.***

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squirrel had had a mongoose for a grandmother. Or maybe its mother had been eaten by a cobra and it was after revenge, though if the snake ever spotted it I didn't give much for its chances.


The snake moved towards me again and my adrenalin started pumping. Not again, I whined. Then came the unexpected. The squirrel darted up to the snake and took a big bite out of its backside. The snake stopped and swung its head around to the rear. The squirrel hopped over the snake and took a great chunk out of the snake's right flank, spitting it out as ground squirrels are vegetarians. If the snake didn't die this way, it still had a chance of dying later from infection since a squirrel's salivary glands are full of harmful bacteria.

The cobra now flashed its head over to the other, newly bitten, side of its body, only to be attacked by the squirrel further up on its left-hand side. The snake tried to escape, but the squirrel went for the jugular this time and caught the snake around the throat with its powerful jaws and long, sharp teeth. The snake

writhed in agony and bared its fangs, spitting out venom, but it was too late. The brave squirrel shook the dead snake's limp head between its teeth, then let it drop. The squirrel was shaking all over.

Suddenly there was a great commotion, and the yard started to fill up with vulturine guineafowl, superb starlings, various kinds of weavers and ring-necked doves. They gathered around the dead snake and squawked their hatred for the nasty egg-eater. Some buffalo weavers then landed on the corpse's back and picked it up, flying with it to an *Acacia tortillis* tree just outside the fenced-in compound. The birds dropped the dead cobra in the branches and proceeded to screech at it for at least an hour.

The others in the camp were roused by the racket and came drifting into the banda. 'What's going on?' asked someone. How could I tell them...?

April Fools! The snake was actually blasted by George Adamson with a 12-gauge shotgun, but the squirrel and birds did take a great interest in the leftovers. 

*Note: For those of you not familiar with the tales of Rudyard Kipling, the original Rikki Tikki Tavi was a mongoose who killed a snake.*

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