

Two coral snakes recorded battling for prey in a scientific first

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Two coral snakes competing over amphibian prey. Credit: Henrik Bringsøe and Niels Poul Dreyer

Two red-tailed coral snakes have been observed competing over a caecilian in the first documented wild case of kleptoparasitism within the family Elapidae.

Kleptoparasitism, or food theft, is a well-documented behavior in many

[animal species](#), but is seldom reported among [snakes](#) in natural habitats.

The observation, detailed in a [recent study](#) published in *Herpetozoa* by Henrik Bringsøe and Niels Poul Dreyer, showcases the two *Micrurus mipartitus* snakes engaging in a tug-of-war over the limbless amphibian.

Elapid snakes are venomous and among the deadliest serpents in the world. There are more than 400 species comprising a very diverse group of snakes such as mambas, cobras, kraits, taipans, tiger snakes, death adders, [sea snakes](#) and coral snakes.

The battle occurred in the dense rainforests of Valle del Cauca, western Colombia. Surprisingly, in the tussle, one snake also bit the body of the other. However, the researchers suggest this was likely accidental.

After 17 minutes of observation, the losing coral snake released its bite hold on the caecilian. The winner then moved away from the losing snake, which did not follow.

The study suggests that while such behaviors may be more common in captivity due to controlled environments, their occurrence in nature has been largely underreported, likely due to the elusive nature of these reptiles and the challenges of observing them in their [natural habitats](#).

"Snakes in captivity do that often when only one prey is offered in a terrarium with two or more snakes. But it is rather surprising that it has not been observed more frequently in the wild," says lead author Henrik Bringsøe.

This case sheds light on the coral snake interactions with [prey species](#). Caecilians, such as the one in this study, have shown remarkable adaptations such as toxin resistance and increased mucus production.

More information: Henrik Bringsøe et al, Kleptoparasitism in *Micrurus mipartitus* (Squamata, Elapidae) competing for the same *Caecilia* sp. (Gymnophiona, Caeciliidae) in western Colombia, *Herpetozoa* (2024). [DOI: 10.3897/herpetozoa.37.e112716](https://doi.org/10.3897/herpetozoa.37.e112716)

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