



HOW I BEAT CANCER

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Slippery customers

We meet the Bangkok firefighter who deals with snakes invading homes in the Thai capital on a daily basis. He is joined by an expert filming an episode for YouTube

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Firefighter Pinyo Pukpinyo receives his first phone call of the day before he has even had breakfast. The woman calling the station has found an unwelcome visitor in her suburban home: a yellow snake.

Pinyo, a firefighter stationed in the Bang Khen district of northern Bangkok, hops into a pickup and heads off to deal with the intruder. His destination is a town house in a small street 20 minutes away.

The woman, 62-year-old housewife Somporn Inchoowan, is distressed. Somewhere in her front room, where she keeps songbirds in wicker cages, a snake is hiding.

"I noticed the birds were getting startled so I took a look," she tells the firefighter. "I saw a snake slithering up to a cage. I'm really scared of snakes."

"With those birds around, you had better get used to them," Pinyo says.

Somporn doesn't dispute that. A few days earlier, she discovered a reticulated python curled up on a ledge above the roll-up door of her front room. "We've had several snakes," she says. "The birds alert me when another one is in the house."

Her home is far from the only one in the Thai capital frequented by snakes. Last year, about 37,000 home intrusions were reported around Bangkok – or more than 100 a day.

The reptiles are thriving around the Thai capital, where they lurk in sewers and canals. They feed on frogs, rats, cats and even dogs. They regularly make their way into people's homes and, now and then, a python makes headlines by slithering up a toilet and biting someone answering the call of nature.

I've been bitten so many times my buddies call me 'Venom Man'

PINYO PUKPINYO, FIREFIGHTER

"Snakes are everywhere," says Nirut Chomngam, a snake expert who is accompanying Pinyo today to shoot a new episode for his popular YouTube channel, where he showcases his exploits with various serpents. "Bangkok has been built in a river delta on marshy ground, which is a breeding ground for snakes. They aren't invading our territory. We have been invading theirs."

Pinyo indicates the environs around Somporn's house. "See that?" he says, pointing to a patch of lush vegetation on an untended plot near a muddy stream flanked by reeds. "Snakes love hiding in places like that."

The snake is still hiding in Somporn's home, so Pinyo and Nirut set about ferreting it out. They locate it behind some empty plastic bowls. Grabbing it by the tip of its tail, Pinyo teases the animal out from its hiding place. The snake, dangling from the fireman's hand, begins thrashing about furiously.

Pinyo remains unfazed. A burly 50-year-old with rugged good looks, he is dressed in a navy blue boiler suit dappled with sweat stains. His thick leather workman's boots have seen better days, but they have saved his feet from many bites over the years.

He has been less lucky with other parts of his anatomy. The firefighter doesn't wear gloves to catch snakes, and his right thumb was left disfigured after a king cobra bit him in May last year, injecting deadly neurotoxins into his bloodstream.

"Crazy snake," he says. "I was putting it in a bag when it whipped its head around and bit me. The pain was excruciating."



37,000

Number of home intrusions by snakes reported in Bangkok last year – an average of more than 100 per day

Pinyo made it to a hospital where he was injected with anti-venom and had some dead tissue surgically removed from his thumb.

Over the years, he has also been bitten by pit vipers and other poisonous snakes. "I've been bitten so many times my buddies call me 'Venom Man'," he says.

Yet despite his repeated brushes with death, he carries on handling snakes with casual indifference as if they posed no threat to him.

"I used to get bitten a lot," he says. "But I've learned on the job how to deal with snakes."

The snake now dangling by its tail from his hand is a copper-headed racer, a honey-coloured rat snake with black stripes. "It's harmless," Pinyo tells Somporn. "It doesn't have venom."

Unconvinced, the woman stands back just in case.

Nirut takes the snake from Pinyo. It is about to star in a video on Nirut's YouTube channel, which has 400,000 subscribers.

Until a few years ago, Nirut worked a nine-to-five job as a communications officer, but his heart was set on conservation. Snakes are not widely seen as worthy of protection, Nirut says, so he learned everything he could about them and started making informative videos.

Despite living in proximity with snakes, few Thais can tell a harmless rat snake from a pit viper, or a Burmese python from a king cobra.

"Most people don't know which snakes are dangerous and which are not, so they often kill them all on sight," says the boyish-looking Nirut, 37, who is wearing cargo pants and hiking boots, as if ready for a wildlife adventure.

"Snakes are the most misunderstood creatures in Thailand."



For his mini-documentary series, Nirut gets up close and personal with snakes in the wild in the style of the late Australian animal expert Steve Irwin, whose exploits he says have inspired his own.

For one viral video, Nirut allowed himself to be bitten by a sunbeam snake – a metre-long non-venomous constrictor with iridescent scales.

"Many Thais have this old belief that if they get bitten by one of these snakes at night, they will die after sunrise," he says.

"I wanted to show them that this isn't the case."

Suddenly, the copper-headed racer goes limp, hanging inertly like a plastic toy. "It's playing dead," Nirut says, patting it gently.

He places the reptile back on the ground, and it promptly resurrects and tries to slither away. It doesn't get far. The snake is placed in a plastic container with air holes. It will be released later into a patch of urban undergrowth.

"I'll call you if there's another snake in the house," Somporn tells Pinyo.

"Please do," the firefighter replies. "But don't call me if there's a fire."

He is only half-joking. These days he has to deal far more with intrusive snakes than burning houses. On some days Pinyo handles as many as 10 snakes.

Most people don't know which snakes are dangerous and which are not, so they often kill them all on sight

NIRUT CHOMNGAM, SNAKE EXPERT

"This is what I do all day long," he says. "I jump on my motorbike, dash off to an address, grab the snake, put it in a bag, then get back on my bike."

Two-thirds of the snakes that slither into homes in Bangkok are pythons, most of them several metres long.

Back at the fire station, Pinyo heads to a breeze block building behind the parked fire engines and removes the padlock from a door. Inside the cluttered, dimly lit room are dozens of plastic boxes, wooden crates and round laundry hampers with their lids weighed down by rusty car brakes placed on top. A zoo-like stench hangs in the air.

The firefighter removes the lid from a plastic hamper. At the bottom is a coiled monocol cobra, which has just laid eggs. In a small plastic box on the floor lies a spitting cobra, which can blind you by shooting venom from its fangs. A wooden crate is home to a large python.

The room houses two dozen species Pinyo and the other firefighters have retrieved recently from homes in their precinct.

Pinyo's Nokia phone rings; it is time to deal with another snake.

His latest destination is another town house, which he reaches after slogging through heavy traffic. The owners, a middle-aged man and his wife, found the door of their kitchen jammed. Blocking it from behind on the floor was a large snake.

It is a monocol cobra. Pinyo drops to his knees in front of the snake, which responds by raising its hood, hissing and lunging at him repeatedly. The man's wife starts hyperventilating with cries of alarm.

Pinyo climbs to his feet, seizes the tip of the snake's tail between thumb and forefinger and lifts it gently off the floor. He manoeuvres the animal into a plastic sack – but not before accidentally dropping it, to further cries of alarm. "This one was a bit aggressive," he says, "but that happens."

Snake secured, Pinyo gets back on his bike and heads to the station to await the next call-out.



Nirut Chomngam shows how to catch a cobra by distracting it (above); skin shed from a cobra's head. Photos: Tibor Krausz

