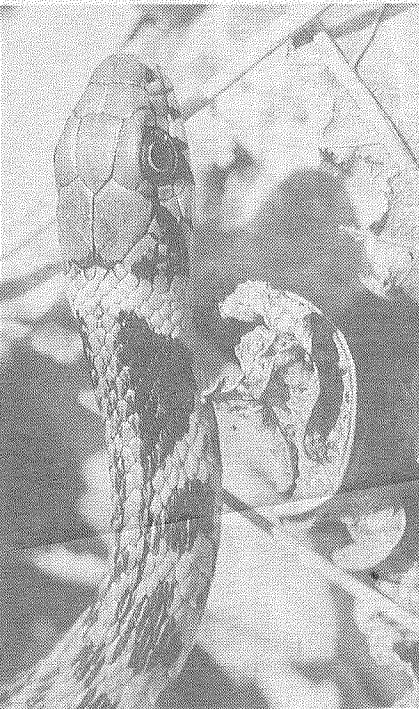


the *shima-hebi* garter snake; and the short, thickset, slow-moving blotched snake, the one that somehow manages to command your immediate attention, is the feared *mamushi* pit-viper.

Most of the common Japanese snakes belong to the family Colubridae, often called "typical" snakes. The aodaisho rat snake is Japan's largest, reaching lengths of close to 3 meters. This harmless snake is common around

low delivery fangs, and the poison simply drips from glands located way in the rear of the jaw. It has to hold its victim tight long enough for the poison to seep in through the wounds created by the small back-fangs.

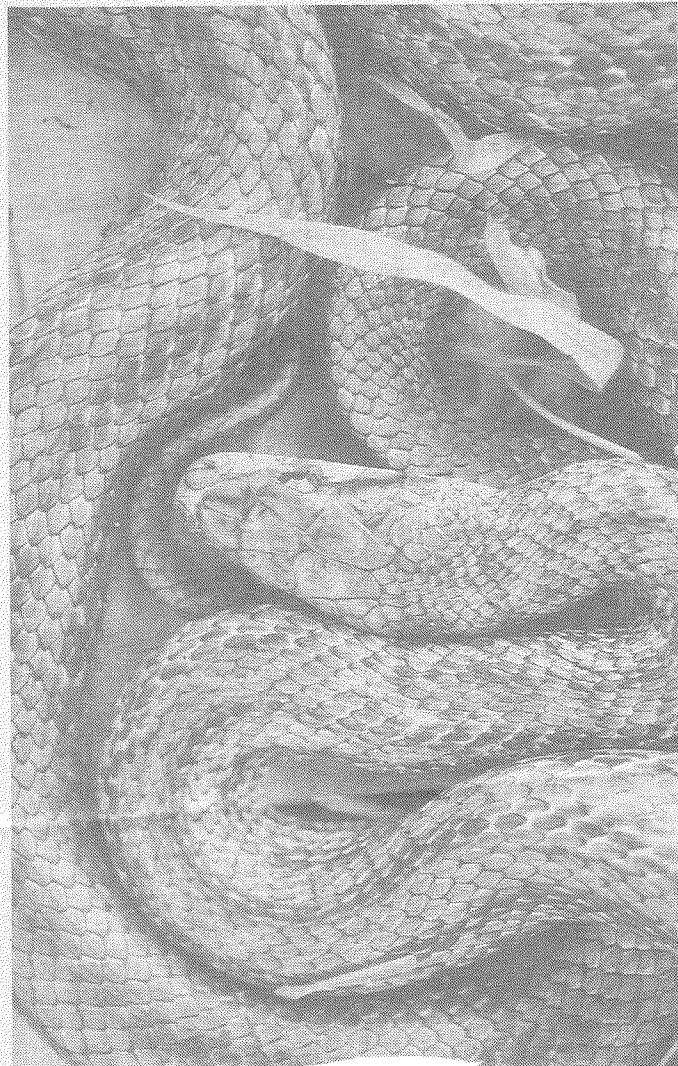
Several other small Colubrids may be encountered in the Japanese countryside, but there is one snake that is never far from the minds of rice farmers and autumn mushroom hunters. This is the ma-



A YOUNG yamakagashi keelback displays its striking warning markings. Special glands, located in the bright yellow band behind the head, produce a poison that can be ejected directly into the mouth of an attacker.

snakes as a sort of farcical aesthetics: subtle variations, the shape of a nose-tip, the number of scales across the neck — within the limits of a restricted body plan."

Note: The snakes described here are the most common species found on Japan's main islands. When one crosses the Tokara Straits between the islands of Yakushima and Amami Oshima, one enters the domain of a completely different snake community. This southern group includes some members of the Elapidae (cobra) family, and also large and aggressive pit-vipers of the genus *Trimerurus* (*habu*).



THE AODAISHO rat snake is Japan's largest snake. It emits a foul odor when disturbed, and is quick to bite when carelessly handled. PHOTOS BY KEVIN SHORT