

# A most distinctintive specimen of *Conus regius*...or beginner's luck !

David Touitou

In the rainy season of 2001 – I was living in Martinique at the time – a few friends and I profited from a sunny day to go snorkelling off a beach in the northern Caribbean, a place where few tourists went at all.

At 11:00 hours, having just arrived and parked our cars, we went directly into the sea. I was the only shell collector in the group. I had already spotted a few empty shells of *Cypraea cinerea* Gmelin, 1791 as well as a few promising *Strombus*, when we reached a zone where I felt that I was entering a *regius* area.

I dived to the bottom in order to search the base of the big rock boulders. My first specimen was right in front of me. On that day I found no less than 14 specimens.

After a few hours of searching we decided to go back to the beach to rest under the sun. Only my friend Cyril chose to carry on his search, so I lent him one of my pots (coprology recipients used in laboratories for medical analysis), so that he can bring back any shells he may chance to find. It must be said that Cyril was a beginner; in fact that was one of his very first snorkelling expeditions ever.

One hour and a half later he rejoined us. His plastic pot was full to the brim and he proudly hands it to me, so that I can examine his catch. The plastic material of the container deformed its contents, but I soon noticed that a large shell was occupying some 80% of its total capacity. It was bright red and, judging from the size, I immediately believed it to be a specimen of *Strombus pugilis* Linnaeus, 1758. I turned the pot around and surprise! I saw the opening of a shell thath did not resemble that of a *Strombus* at all; what was more, the living animal was clearly visible and it was certainly not a conch! It was a coronated cone shell! A monster cone of an amazing colour. I took it from the container and it was wonderful, a true gem at about sixty millimetres, of an orange colour so rich that it seemed almost red! In a single outing, Cyril had outdone several months of searches with only one specimen. Since he did not actually collect shells, he simply gave it to me a few weeks later.

Fortunately it had been kept in a refrigerator all along so he had not ruined it in any way. The following pictures were taken immediately after cleaning:



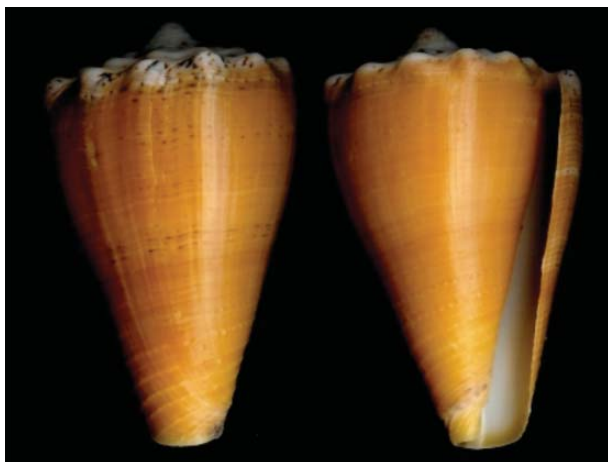
Its colour should be compared with that of other specimens of *C. regius citrinus*:



## Harry Potter & the Poisonous Orange Snails

Brian Hammond

And here is the same specimen today. Its length is of 57,2 mm:



It has certainly lost something of its original brilliancy but its orange colour is still quite distinct from what one usually finds on typical Caribbean specimens. Here are a couple other specimens of *C. regius citrinus* for comparison purposes:



In the famous *Harry Potter* series of books by J K Rowling there are references to Poisonous Orange Snails. In *The Prisoner of Azkaban* p. 58, they are described as “oozing slowly up the side of their glass tank” in the Magical Menagerie shop, Diagon Alley. What might these snails be? Well in his book *The Science of Harry Potter* Roger Highfield, Science Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, has suggested they might have been Cone shells. Roger goes on to suggest a number of possible candidates:

*Conus textile suzannae*, *C. regius citrinus*, *C. capitaneus*, *C. magus*, *C. consors* and *C. spurius*

Could Harry Potter’s snails have been *Conus textile suzannae* Van Rossum, 1990 (fig. 1)? Certainly this is one of the more poisonous species from the genus *Conidae*. Maybe they were the orange form of *Conus magus* Linné, 1758 (fig. 2). I think this shell would be the ideal candidate because after all *magus* is the Magician’s Cone. *Magus* is not only a poisonous orange snail it is also a curer of pain as it was from the venom of *Conus magus* that the pain killing drug PRIALT was synthesised.

Another possible candidate could be *Conus aulicus aurantia* Dautzenberg, 1937 (fig. 3) certainly a very poisonous species, the venom of which might be very useful in Professor Snape’s Potion classes, or in a potent spell for dealing with “He who must not be named”.

Roger’s suggestion of *Conus regius citrinus* Gmelin, 1791 (fig. 4) was not high on my list of candidates as it is rarely found in a true orange form, however reports on the internet show that a toxin from the venom of *regius* has been used in research on effective ways of treating chronic pain and may lead to future drugs being available. Another species used in a similar way and resulting in the drug code named ACV1, currently in clinical trials is *Conus victoriae* Reeve 1843 (fig. 5). An orange form of *victoriae* is known.

*Conus capitaneus cecillae* "Chenu" Crosse, 1858 (fig. 6) is undoubtedly an orange snail. However I find it difficult to see how this small cone could be very effective as an ingredient in a lethal spell but you never know perhaps it has magical properties Muggle scientists have yet to discover.