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# Damned if You Do...

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 Swimming With Sharks  
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Over the past couple of years, the redistribution of the **Magic** color pie has yielded many strange new affiliations. For instance, **Prodigal Sorcerer**, long a **Blue** card that actually saw play in a Top 8 deck by Japanese maverick Satoshi Nakamura, received a peerless upgrade in its transition into a **Red** card, the mighty **Vulshok Sorcerer** (the even more egregious same-color, and significant for tournament play, shift is **Psionic Blast** to **Char**, though the various **Ray of Command** updates also bear mentioning). The next-to-most broken boon - a senior common, like **Prodigal Sorcerer** since Alpha - has had its toenails clipped and shifted from **Black** to **Red** in various forms from **Desperate Ritual** to **Seething Song**. White has left behind its onetime defining suite of ridiculously undercosted removal spells - cards from **Swords to Plowshares** to **Balance** to **Divine Offering** - and instead carved out a niche as commander in chief of winged bears, currently spilling over its two-mana slot with **Leonin Skyhunter**, **Azorius First-Wing**, and **Mistral Charger**. Without a doubt, the wealthiest beneficiary of this trend of redistribution has been **Green**.



Long the color of "sharing," **Green** has dug in its heels and slowly but steadily wrapped its pinions, tail feathers, and assorted maws around the core elements of the classic **Blue** or **White** control decks. There is no more obvious implementation of **Green-as-Weissman** than the reprinting of **Savage Twister** in **Guildpact** as the best **Ravnica** Block analogue to **Wrath of God**... Our initial U/W "Weissman" update for the format actually splashed **Gruul Signets** and four copies of **Gruul Turf** just to support the format's most consistent sweeper! Other **Green** additions are more straightforward... **Disenchant** to **Naturalize** is the most obvious, but the trend is inescapable, even on the **Blue** front. **Krosan Tusker** is a very "Green" look at **Fact or Fiction** or **Inspiration**.... It lacks the pure power of **Fact or Fiction**, and it searches up a *specific* land rather than a *random* land-or-spell, but the card has up-sides as well. In that it is **Green**, **Krosan Tusker** as a cycling card advantage play is essentially uncounterable, and unlike the recent crop of playable **Blue** cards (viz. **Compulsive Research**), it works at instant speed. In the same set that first produced both **Krosan Tusker** and **Naturalize**, **Green** received a solid attempt at **Ophidian**, in **Hystrodon**.

*Didn't this ability used to be black?*

**Hystrodon** was a reasonable but imperfect attempt to **Blue-ify Green**. Obviously R&D wanted to showcase the **Onslaught** Block Morph mechanic, and via **Birds of Paradise** or **Llanowar Elves**, this card could be on the board in "down payment" mode as early as turn two. The idea of being able to deploy an "Ophidian" on turn 2 has been compelling enough in the past to play inspiration to a number of relevant decks. For example, William Jensen played a single **Ophidian** in his **Birds of Paradise / Quirion Ranger** deck that won the inaugural Masters Series in New York, and Sol Malka of "The Rock" fame put two players into the Top 8 of Northeast Regionals 2002 with a **Birds and Elves** deck featuring **Shadowmage Infiltrator** as its quick "Phid".

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RULES

RULES

William Jensen		
Trade-Survival		
	<b>Main Deck</b>	<b>Sideboard</b>
	60 cards	
6 Forest	4 Brainstorm	4 Back to Basics
5 Island	4 Counterspell	1 Bottle Gnomes
1 Savannah	4 Force of Will	1 Daring Apprentice
4 Tropical Island	2 Impulse	4 Emerald Charm
16 lands	4 Land Grant	1 Gilded Drake
	2 Mana Leak	1 Masticore
	4 Survival of the Fittest	1 Monk Realist
4 Birds of Paradise	24 other spells	1 Spike Feeder
1 Deranged Hermit		1 Uktabi Orangutan
1 Morphling		15 sideboard cards
1 Ophidian		
2 Quirion Ranger		
1 Spike Weaver		
1 Squee, Goblin Nabob		
4 Tradewind Rider		
1 Uktabi Orangutan		
4 Wall of Roots		

**Million Dollar Man**

designed by Sol Malka

**Main Deck**

60 cards

3 Darkwater Catacombs  
 7 Forest  
 2 Island  
 4 Llanowar Wastes  
 4 Swamp  
 4 Yavimaya Coast

24 lands

4 Birds of Paradise  
 4 Llanowar Elves  
 4 Shadowmage Infiltrator  
 4 Spiritmonger

16 creatures

4 Call of the Herd  
 4 Chainer's Edict  
 4 Duress  
 4 Fact or Fiction  
 4 Pernicious Deed

20 other spells

**Sideboard**

4 Compost  
 1 Haunting Echoes  
 4 Jungle Barrier  
 3 Lobotomy  
 3 Slay

15 sideboard cards

**Hystrodon** was an imperfect attempt to showcase the power of Birds-into-Ophidian because as much potential as playing the Morph might have, there were simply greater incentives to flipping something else, generally better, on the third turn. **Hystrodon** attempted to overcome these disincentives with a bigger body than **Ophidian** or then-analogue **Shadowmage Infiltrator** (traditionally 1/3) and adding a built-in evasion element, but the fact remained that *two* turns of mana commitment for a card - even if it was an Ophidian actually *attacking* and probably *connecting* on the third turn (rather than simply being played on that turn, as was the custom) was not enough of an inducement to playing the card as, say, **Exalted Angel** as one's Morph. **Exalted Angel** curved better, spending three-into-four rather than three-into-three and stranding a land, offered a superior body, and in some matchups, generated more card advantage with its four life than simply peeling another slice of cardboard off the top... **Hystrodon** may have been great in another spot, but it simply couldn't weather the contemporary competition in a dual land rich Standard. As such, other creatures made bigger contributions to Green decks - even "Beast" decks (viz. Gary Wise's Top 8 mid-range from Chicago Masters 2003) - and even dedicated Beasts tribal decks, where **Hystrodon** could ostensibly have contributed by playing complement to **Canopy Crawler**, redundant Morphs to **Exalted Angel**, or simply replaced **Exalted Angel** with better mana, eschewed it; **Hystrodon** made the cut not even in Block.

**PT Chicago Masters: Beasts**

Gary Wise

**Main Deck**

60 cards

4 Brushland  
 3 City of Brass  
 2 Contested Cliffs  
 6 Forest  
 1 Mountain  
 3 Plains  
 4 Wooded Foothills

23 lands

4 Anurid Brushhopper  
 4 Birds of Paradise  
 3 Exalted Angel  
 3 Glory  
 4 Llanowar Elves  
 4 Ravenous Baloth  
 4 Wild Mongrel

26 creatures

3 Beast Attack  
 4 Call of the Herd  
 4 Living Wish

11 other spells

**Sideboard**

1 Anger  
 2 Compost  
 1 Contested Cliffs  
 1 Genesis  
 1 Glory  
 1 Goblin Sharpshooter  
 1 Intrepid Hero  
 3 Naturalize  
 1 Nullmage Advocate  
 1 Silklash Spider  
 2 Worship

15 sideboard cards

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard	
4 Contested Cliffs	4 Shock	4 Broodhatch Nantuko	
6 Forest	4 other spells	4 Gempalm Incinerator	
3 Forgotten Cave		4 Naturalize	
5 Mountain		3 Wirewood Savage	
4 Tranquil Thicket			15 sideboard cards
4 Wood Foothills			
26 lands			
4 Avarax			
2 Barkhide Mauler			
4 Canopy Crawler			
4 Krosan Tusker			
4 Ravenous Baloth			
4 Tephraform			
4 Thoughtbound Primoc			
4 Wirewood Elf			
30 creatures			

The card I am previewing today, Ohran Viper, is another attempt to cleave out that particular chunk of the color pie and hand it to Green. Ohran Viper may be a smaller *Ophidian* than *Hystrodon*, but it possesses a great many advantages over its direct predecessor, and barring colored mana requirements, is far superior to the defining original in essentially every way.

First off, this card has a notoriously not difficult mana cost for a three-drop of this power level. Look up a few paragraphs and check out how Sol built his Million Dollar Man mana base with the unusual *Darkwater Catacombs*. The only reason you would want to do that is to ensure that you hit your *Shadowmage Infiltrator* on the second turn. If you have *Birds of Paradise*, generally, you still need another colored source if your first land were a Forest, and with *Llanowar Elves*, you not only have to have set up with a *Llanowar Wastes* or *Yavimaya Coast*, you need the opposite mana as your second turn drop, or *you're not hitting Finkel mana* at all. In recent months, designers have had the exact same issue with second turn *Dimir Cutpurses*, generally erring on *Elves of Deep Shadow* over the newly minted and savage *9th Edition* Kev Walker Llanowar style to help hit their Cutpurse or *Hypnotic Specter* mana. There is no such dilemma with Ohran Viper. Traditionally you play your first turn mana accelerator with Green. What do you need for the follow-up? Unless your initial play is in fact a minority *Elves of Deep Shadow*, the answer is "anything" (i.e. a second basic Forest is more than fine).

Forget about the fact that it will many times hit the board a turn faster for a moment; once it's in play, Ohran Viper is at least twice as good as an *Ophidian*. Rather than dealing 0 damage on a successful connection, Ohran Viper *actually gets to hit the other guy*. This might seem superficial given the amount of damage we are talking about, but please remember that this is a *Green* creature. What do you think the opponent is going to do on his turn? These are the early turns of the game, remember, and Ohran Viper is the kind of card that can immediately turn a game into a blowout if it starts connecting on the second turn... The best response would be to kill it immediately, but a close runner up is that the opponent will tap out for some sort of *Watchwolf* and hope to scare the Viper into not attacking. It is just such a "pull my pants down around my ankles" move that Ohran Viper's *Krosan Tusker*-rather-than-*actual-Inspiration* nature will rear its scaly head. Any and every self-respecting Green mage will at this point plop something on top of the Viper, making it "ridiculous" and swing anyway... Might I suggest a *Moldervine Cloak*? Remember what I said about *actually hitting* the other guy? This isn't a question of zero-or-one, but a question of zero-or-four for a *Green* creature in our hypothetical!

***With its added dimension as creature killer, Ohran Viper should be far more annoying than Ophidian ever was.***

Barring one-of exceptions like *Savage Twister*, the main barrier to Green-as-U/W Control color has been the inability to kill creatures. While it is certainly not the main reason you would play Ohran Viper, the whole *Thicket Basilisk* layer does give Green a step in that direction, and like *Krosan Tusker*, a decidedly *Green* look at the same. The dilemma of creature combat, that is, to trade a card or a card *and* spent mana in the face of a raging Ohran Viper, presents an opponent with the classic "damned if you do, damned if you don't" scenario. You can let it in and let the Viper draw, or you can send early game minions in front of the Viper only to die. *Hystrodon* was nominally bigger than *Ophidian*, but it really wasn't up to the task of "busting through" against serious defenders over many turns and against a variety of decks. A humble *Wall of Mulch* could hold poor *Hystrodon* at bay indefinitely (echoing the original *Ophidian's* late career frustrations with *Wall of Roots* and *Wall of Blossoms* in *Survival of the Fittest* decks)... Compare Ohran Viper in the same spots:

Ohran Viper *looks* smaller than *Hystrodon*, *and* lacks trample, but it can knock down much bigger Defenders (viz. the contemporary *Carven Caryatid*, bane of all beatdown) and swing again next turn. Better yet, it can keep anyone from blocking at all for fear of a trick. Ohran Viper can unhinge its jaw to swallow up bears, body at a time... or frighten its way past *Godo*, *Bandit Warlord* with a shrill, blood-curding, hiss. *Simic Sky Swallower*? Don't tussle with this little garden snake... He has fangs! Then there is the added problem of the Viper on defense (and

by "problem" I don't mean to intimate that it would be any sort of a *problem* for Ohran Viper's controller). Not only will this creature give you an advantage in the early game, it is liable to lock up the board against much better, or at least much more expensive, creatures in the middle turns. With its added dimension as creature killer, Ohran Viper should be far more annoying than **Ophidian** - once considered the most annoying creature in all of tournament **Magic** - ever was.

Those first couple of points are all obvious, of course... The hidden facets of this *Coldsnap* carbuncle are in that "card type" line, you know, the one you usually register as "creature," but gloss over otherwise. First off, Ohran Viper is a *Snow* creature, whatever that means... I'm not sure personally, having never seen a spoiler, but Scott Johns assures me that it is "generally an advantage, like Arcane," meaning that Ohran Viper is probably going to be some manner of "contributing juggernaut" with other Snow effects. The bit I *can* get my mind around is the more familiar word on the card type line: Snake.

Ah Snakes! Snakes were the most popular tribe played at last year's Block Pro Tour--Philadelphia... and slithered out of the metagame like St. Patrick was a-comin' by the time the summer PTQ season rolled around. Ever since, players have huddled together in secret cabals trying to resurrect the Lovecraftian abomination of onetime popularity, Snakes, bringing it back to Tier One status in Standard. Would **Gifts Ungiven** be good in a Snakes deck? You can get **Sakura-Tribe Elder**, **Seshiro the Anointed**, **Sosuke's Summons**, and basically *anything else* and net a five-for-one at least. What about **Coiling Oracle**, itself portended to be the second coming of the best card in Standard... Would this card, perhaps alongside similarly color-stamped "Snakes on a Plane" **Patagia Viper**? Would these two Snakes help resurrect the slumbering archetype? And **Coat of Arms**? Really, I've got a *million* ideas...

If Snakes has any hope of making a comeback in the post-*Coldsnap* summer season, I think that Ohran Viper will probably have something to do with it, along with a humble Sakura-Tribe Shaman... No, not the one you usually read about.



I have spent a year or so nay saying **Sakura-Tribe Scout**, how in *Kamigawa* Block, this 1/1 for one was a "bad **Llanowar Elves**," and how most decks were better off without it. However, in a dedicated Snakes strategy, the little Shaman that previously couldn't has a chance to be, if not the centerpiece, an important enabler to a strategy involving Green card advantage. Played on the first turn, this creature can be 80% of a **Llanowar Elves**, provided you have three lands in the first two turns, but a more significant threat in a long game. Generally speaking, you don't want to pluck a 1/1 for ♣ on turn 10 (unless you've been ravaged by **Magnivore's** early salvo, maybe), but perhaps if you are getting two additional Snakes for your trouble, the short term liability of a worse **Llanowar Elves** becomes acceptable. **Sakura-Tribe Scout** is better today than it ever was in *Kamigawa* Block because of **Simic Growth Chamber** and other *Ravnica* Block "Karoos," which both give its tap ability greater potency and ensure that the Snake Shaman has something to do as you incrementally empty your hand.

Make no mistake, Ghost Husk is probably still the premiere deck in Standard, and 1/1 Snakes have much to fear from the **Orzhov Pontiff**, but perhaps with a more robust long game and amazing new second turn play, the tribe that once was a "never was" can make a run at the top of the format come post-*Coldsnap* Standard. Even if Snakes is not the revitalized powerhouse-to-be, a singular Snake in Ohran Viper should have great significance as a threat, a card drawing engine, and in a pinch, an answer. Whether as a characteristically *Green* Swiss Army Knife played on the second turn thanks to **Birds of Paradise**, **Llanowar Elves**, **Sakura-Tribe Scout**, or even **Elves of Deep Shadow** or **Ophidian** itself returned thanks to **Breeding Pool** and **Yavimaya Coast**, this card should be a card to watch.

Next Week: Rebirth of the Villain 2K6... And the Hero too!

*Mike has been a leading voice in the game's strategy for as long as there has been a **Magic** Internet. He is the former editor of *The Magic Dojo* and a sometime Pro player. Michael J. Flores: Deckade, is a compilation of Mike's first ten years of strategy and theory (i.e. before he joined **magicthegathering.com**), and is available at <http://www.top8magic.com>.*



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