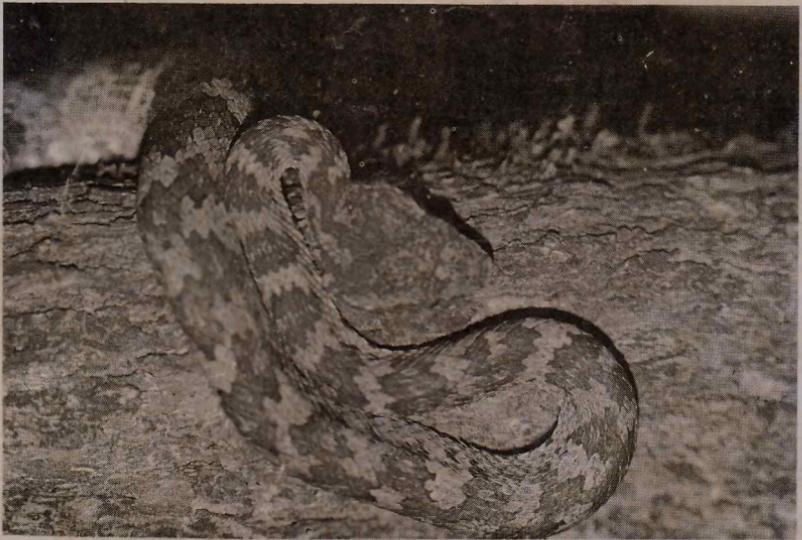


# Cobra

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COVER

Malabar Rock Pit viper (*Trimeresurus malabaricus*):

One of the commonest pit vipers found in the Western Ghats. This species inhabits cool shola forests resting close to water. The snake remains motionless for long periods taking full advantage of its camouflaging body colour. Pit vipers inflict a venomous bite although rarely fatal.

Photo: R.J. Ranjit Daniels.

# Cobra

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**GROWTH RATE OF INDIAN CHAMAELEON,  
CHAMAELEO ZEYLANICUS IN CAPTIVITY**

by

**R.AENGALS AND R. RAJARATHINAM**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Chamaeleon, *Chamaeleo zeylanicus* is perhaps, the queerest of all Indian reptiles, both in appearance and behaviour, particularly in movement and capture of food (Aengals, 1990). It is distributed from Punjab in the north to Srilanka in the south (Boulenger, 1890; Parshad, 1914; Smith, 1935; Derraniyagala, 1953). Earlier studies on the chamaeleon have been limited. Trench (1912) studied the behaviour in captivity. Biswas and Acharjyo (1977) made notes on the captive individuals at Nandankannan Biological Park, Orissa. Whitaker (1978) reported the reproductive behaviour in captivity. Singh *et al.*, (1978) concluded that the chamaeleon being solitary makes it difficult to study in wild and also difficult to keep for long periods in captivity without elaborate arrangements.

Study of growth rate is essential to understand the biology of an animal and provides cues to determine life span. Singh (1989) reported notes on availability, growth and biometrics of Indian chamaeleon in wild and captivity. However, such studies are scanty. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the growth rate of Indian chamaeleon, *Chamaeleo zeylanicus* at Madras Snake Park Trust in captivity for the period July 1990 to November 1991.

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## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Soon after the hatching, 14 hatchlings (9 females and 5 males) were taken for the study. The females were marked as F<sub>1</sub> to F<sub>9</sub> and males as M<sub>1</sub> to M<sub>5</sub>. The following information on each chamaeleon were recorded: Weight (w), Total length (TL), Caudal length (CL) and snout-vent length (SVL). The morphometric details were recorded at an interval of 60 days (Table 1). The animals were fed with grasshoppers, cockroaches and insects *ad libitum*.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The increase in the body weight clearly indicated a fast growth rate both in males and females (Fig.1). Males had a higher growth rate than females. The females and male hatchlings weighed 1.5 grams in the beginning but attained  $7.0 \pm 0.260$  and  $7.9 \pm 0.572$  grams after 120 days, respectively. Singh (1989) reported that a hatchling of 3.3 cm reached a SVL of 4.0 cm and Bustard (1965) reported that a specimen of 4.8 cm reached 5.3 cm in just 18 days. However, in the present study, the change was from 3.75, 3.36 to 5.41 and 4.23 cm for females and males respectively after 60 days. It might be due to the restriction in food choice (Singh, 1989). In the present study, the maximum SVL was 13.75 and 13.2 cm in female and male chamaeleons respectively. Singh (1989) reported 15 to 16.4 as an uncommon phenomenon.

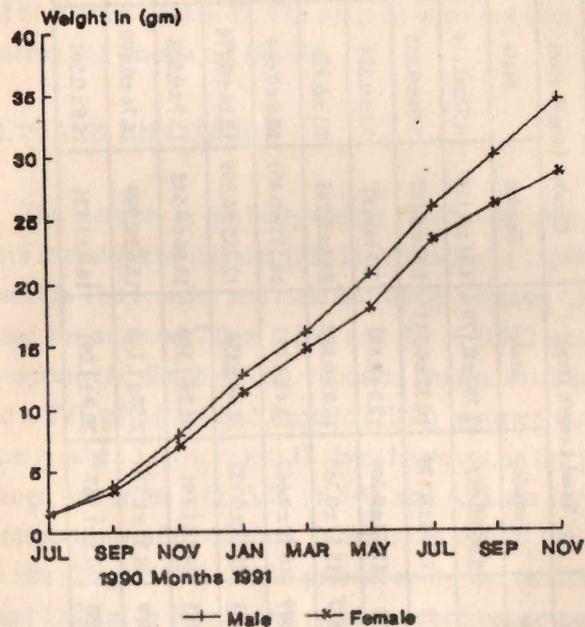
At the beginning of the present study, the mother chamaeleons laid the eggs and died within 1 to 9 days. Singh *et al.*, (1984) mentioned that female chamaeleons die within 1-42 days after egg laying. This is a natural phenomenon.

TABLE 1 : MORPHOMETRIC DETAILS OF CHAMAELEO ZEYLANICUS

Year & Month	Body Weight (g)		Total Length (cm)		Caudal Length (cm)		Snout Vent length (cm)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
1990 July	1.5 ± 0	1.5 ± 0	8.06 ± 0.052	7.780 ± 0.173	4.31 ± 0.114	4.52 ± 0.114	3.755 ± 0.77	3.36 ± 0.053
Sep.	3.277 ± 0.114	3.7 ± 0.178	9.966 ± 0.178	10.32 ± 0.343	5.55 ± 0.107	5.96 ± 0.355	5.41 ± 0.097	4.23 ± 0.086
1991 Nov.	7.0 ± 0.260	7.9 ± 0.572	12.72 ± 0.209	12.8 ± 0.481	2.55 ± 0.157	7.5 ± 0.374	5.411 ± 0.097	5.3 ± 0.109
January	11.166 ± 0.628	12.7 ± 0.867	15.55 ± 0.363	15.8 ± 0.687	8.88 ± 0.245	9.1 ± 0.433	6.667 ± 0.175	6.7 ± 0.268
March	14.667 ± 0.711	16.1 ± 0.669	18.52 ± 0.667	18.4 ± 1.023	10.577 ± 0.451	10.4 ± 0.684	7.944 ± 0.267	8.0 ± 0.374
May	18.055 ± 0.579	20.7 ± 0.481	21.28 ± 0.732	21.44 ± 3.58	12.255 ± 0.399	12.16 ± 0.774	9.167 ± 0.368	9.3 ± 0.638
July*	23.3 ± 1.425	25.8 ± 0.715	24.5 ± 1.191	24.2 ± 1.559	13.96 ± 0.548	13.7 ± 0.878	10.24 ± 0.676	10.5 ± 0.734
Sep**	26.0 ± 0	30.0 ± 1.019	28.35 ± 1.520	2.58 ± 1.188	15.6 ± 0.989	14.76 ± 0.670	12.75 ± 0.530	11.9 ± 0.817
Nov**	28.5 ± 1.06	34.4 ± 1.080	30.5 ± 1.767	28.8 ± 1.091	16.9 ± 1.131	15.8 ± 0.501	13.75 ± 0.501	13.2 ± 0.558

n = 9 females  
 \*n = 5 females  
 \*\*n = 2 females  
 n = 5 all males

Fig.1 Growth Rate of  
Indian Chamaeleon



Six females (F<sub>1</sub> to F<sub>6</sub>) died after 300 days, F<sub>7</sub> at 354 days and F<sub>8</sub>, F<sub>9</sub> after 479, 483 days. However, males (M<sub>2</sub> to M<sub>5</sub>) survived more than 480 days and M<sub>1</sub> upto 600 days. The life span of *Chamaeleo zeylanicus* may rarely enter into the third year. Chamaeleons grow quickly and many reach sexual maturity before the end of the first year. No one knows how long chamaeleons live in the wild. In terrarium they very rarely live longer than four or five years (Shifter, 1975).

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## HERPETOLOGY IN INDIA

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During the past 100 years, a number of papers and books have been published about the reptiles and amphibians of India. These have also been reviewed independently by a number of both Indian and foreign herpetologists periodically giving us a 'state-of-the-art' of this branch of science in India. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for all those interested in the study of Indian reptiles and amphibians to be once again reminded of where we stand in this vast field.

Although, much of the work done in the past was taxonomic, nomenclatural and systematic rearrangements of Indian reptiles and amphibians are still far from complete. While this is not unique to Indian herpetology, what is disturbing is that at a time when we need more researchers working on this aspect, we generally find ourselves short of the required expertise and commitment. Consequently, taxonomy and systematics of Indian reptiles and amphibians lag much behind that of other vertebrates.

Much less understood are the life history and ecology of our herpetofauna. We often have no answers to simple questions such as 'what does a given species of snake or lizard feed on?' For many species of amphibians and reptiles we still do not know what their eggs and young look like. The geographic range and habitat requirement has not

yet been worked out in detail for any species of reptile and amphibian in India including species of the common and widespread house geckos, skinks and garden lizards.

Studies on the population biology of reptiles and amphibians in India are scarce (rather non-existent). We know very little about the population status and dynamics of any of our species; not even well documented trends in populations. Behavioural and physiological study of reptiles and amphibians have been more popular in India thanks to the many biology laboratories in the country. We do know something about thermoregulation and the role of temperature in determining the sexes in reptiles. Amphibians have been put to a number of tests including in pollution monitoring and vocal communication. Such studies are however more recent and sporadic.

In summary, we need to admit that we have made very little progress in the science of herpetology in India. We have unfortunately not been able to proceed beyond the traditional laboratory studies of *Calotes versicolor* and *Rana hexadactyla*. Further, a number of species of reptiles and amphibians collected by students of zoology all over the country are found neglected amongst school, college and university collections till they finally get discarded as 'junk'.

Why is herpetology a neglected science in India? Although I do not have a ready answer to this, a brief analysis of the circumstances under which the handful of Indian herpetologists - both professional and amateur, work might highlight the limitations.

To begin with, a number of people who have been interested in reptiles and amphibians have not been able to make much progress in

the study of these animals due to the unavailability of field guides. While in the past there was not any restriction on collecting these animals and taking them over to an expert for identification, collecting specimens is no longer a simple thing to do. The restrictions imposed by the Wildlife Protection Act (1972) and the overall paucity of animals in their natural habitats have made it difficult even for professional herpetologists to collect and study most reptiles and amphibians except some of the very common species.

While we do have a couple of field guides generally for Indian reptiles and more specifically for turtles, snakes and lizards, they are of limited scope. For instance, only about 20% of all species of Indian snakes have ever been found in illustrated guides. Worse is the fact that we do not even have such facilities for amphibians. Not a single museum in India has anything close to 50% of all species of reptiles and amphibians found in the country in a properly labelled, retrievable state.

Another major shortcoming is that projects relating to the study of reptiles and amphibians in the field do not seem acceptable to most of our funding agencies. Either such proposals are rejected as 'uninteresting documentation without any scientific hypotheses' or inadequately funded. What is often not realised by the academically influenced funding agencies is that in herpetology, what is still needed is basic documentation. What do we know about our house geckos except the frequent newspaper reports of food poisoning due to them? If this is the state of our knowledge of the commonest of our herpetofauna what do we have to say about the more than 600 other species in the country?

It is time that we did something about the ailing herpetology in India. The following suggestions are hoped to encourage all readers of this issue to act appropriately.

1. A massive programme to produce and publish illustrated field guides should be immediately launched. The Indian government can certainly fund such projects.
2. More academic training in the science of herpetology should be offered to all interested students. Universities and institutions offering wildlife biology or ecology courses should consciously incorporate herpetology into their syllabi and also encourage more students to do their dissertations in this discipline.
3. All Indian museums in possession of specimens of reptiles and amphibians should undertake to sort, label and maintain their collection in a 'user friendly' way.
4. Government and nongovernment funding agencies should support long term studies of the population dynamics of at least the endangered reptiles and amphibians. Detailed study of our sea turtles are still dependent on foreign aid. Suggestions regarding the sustainable harvest of captive bred crocodiles can only be considered after it can be shown that we have built up adequate 'capital' populations to start living off the 'interest'. Since presently we have no evidence/data to support this, it is time that population dynamic studies of these reptiles both in captivity and wild are funded adequately.
5. Taxonomic expertise in herpetology, as in other forms of biodiversity, is slowly perishing in India. This needs to be looked into early.

## A DIFFERENT RESEARCH

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Snake and Snail are very closely related. Before my Zoologist readers howl in protest, let me clarify. I am on the subject of etymology, the study of the origin of words. Both the words 'snake' and 'snail' can be traced back to the same pre-historic Germanic base snachan meaning 'to creep'.

The word 'sneak' also shares the same ancestry. When you put on a pair of sneakers, you may not exactly crawl or creep, but, etymologically, you are close to snake and snail.

The Sanskrit word for snake 'naag' also goes back to the same Old High Germanic origin.

It is this habit of creeping that gave birth to 'serpent' also. The word comes via Old French from Latin serpere meaning 'crawl' or 'creep'. The Sanskrit 'sarpa' for snake shares the same origin.

The Latin 'serpere' is closely akin to Greek 'herpein' meaning 'creep'. And, that was how herpetology, the study of reptiles, came to be named.

The disease herpes is so called not because it has anything to do with serpents but because the skin condition 'creeps' about the body.

The Latin 'serpere' also spawned 'reptile'.

There, you now have a mixed bag: reptiles, snakes, serpents, snails, herpes with a few herpetologists thrown in for good measure.

The cobra is a mutilated form. The majestic creature should really be addressed respectfully by its full name: cobra de capello, which is Portugese for 'snake with hood'.

The Portugese word 'cobra' goes back to the Latin coluber meaning snake. The word colubrid now denotes one of the families of snakes.

A viper is a viper because it is viviparous, meaning 'alive - appear', a creature that gives birth to live young.

Krait is pure Hindi. As good Indians, let us rejoice in that.

As a domiciled TAMILIAN, I would like to lay claim, on behalf of Tamil, to 'anaconda' though the snake itself is not found anywhere nearby. But, authorities are very confusing on this. One theory traces the word to Sri Lanka to describe the python and the word itself is believed to be either Sinhalese or Tamil. It could very convincingly be argued that the word is derived from a Tamil base meaning 'elephant killer'. The word is also traced to the Sinhalese henekendeya (lightning + stem) probably referring to a species of whip snake, long, slender and quick of movement. The 17th Century British scientist John Ray in a List of

Indian Serpents used the word ananconda to describe a snake which crushed the limbs of buffaloes and yoke beasts.

Yet another theory traces the word to Surinam (Dutch Guiana).

The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes the ananconda as a 'very large and terrible snake (from Ceylon) which often devours the unfortunate traveller alive'. Homer nods.

In the early 19th century, the French Zoologist Francois Marie Daudin, for some strange reason, conferred the name anaconda on a South American boa.

In any case, neither the python nor the whipsnake is any longer known as anaconda and now it is a South American boa that goes by the name.

The anaconda as also the python belong to the family boidae, members of which kill their prey by suffocating them in their coils. The anaconda is a boa which lives in water and boa itself means a watersnake. Perhaps, the Latin boa comes from the idea of cattle (boves) coming to drink at stream or pool.

Talking of python, the word has an interesting history. It comes to us from Greek mythology. Zeus (Jupiter in Roman mythology), the supreme god among the Olympians, married Hera (Juno in Roman mythology). Hera relentlessly pursued her husband's mistresses among whom was Leto (Latone to the Romans) who was pregnant by Zeus. Hera commissioned a gigantic serpent born of the mud left by the Great Deluge to harass Leto. Leto gave birth to Apollo who, four days after he

was born, slayed the monster and decreed that it should not be given a burial but left to rot. Pytho is Greek for 'rot'. Hence Python. For the killing of the monster, Apollo came to be known as Apollo Pythius. At the spot where the serpent was killed, Apollo established the oracle of Delphi.

According to another version, Pytho was the earlier name of Delphi and the myth of Apollo and Python was a symbolic recount of how the Greek god Apollo ousted an earlier goddess of the pre-Greek inhabitants. The priestess of the temple of Delphi was called the 'pythoness' and the famed games of Delphi held once in four years, were called the 'Pythian games'.

The story of the Olympian gods contributed one other word to reptiliana. When the marriage of Zeus with Hera was celebrated with great pomp, Chelone, a young woman, alone stayed away and decried the ceremony. Hermes, the half-brother of Apollo, punished her by changing her into a tortoise and condemned her to eternal silence. To add to her misery, she was always to carry her habitation with her. The reptilian order Chelonia includes turtles and tortoises. The tortoise became an ancient emblem for silence.

'Tortoise' takes off from the French tortue which also produced 'turtle'. The word denotes 'twisted'. The tortoise is supposed to have twisted feet.

The adder is a snake that has lost its head. The Old English naedre, a serpent, dates at least from the 10th century. In Middle English, it became nadder. This is the form in which the word occurs in Chaucer (1340-1400) "Lyke to the nadder in bosom sly untrewe" in The

Merchantes Tale, referring to the well-known warning against nourishing a snake in one's bosom. In the 14th century, a nadder transformed itself into an adder. Metanalysis is the term in linguistics to describe this tendency of the first letter of a word to drift away from the word and attach itself to the preceding indefinite article. It was by this process that a napron, meaning a small cloth, became an apron, a nauger, a kind of tool, became an auger, a noumpre became an umpire. A reverse fate overtook other words. An ekename became a nickname. An ewt, a salamander, became a newt.

A slightly different re-formation produced 'alligator'. When the Spanish came across the creature in their travels in the New World, they called it el lagarto de Indies, which simply meant 'the lizard of the Indies'. In English, el lagarto became alligator.

The crocodile, in the original Greek, was krocodilos meaning 'worm of the stones'. 'Of the stones' because of its habit of basking on stones in the river. But, worm? Some ancient wordsmith surely had a sense of humour.

The gharial is from the Hindi ghara (an earthen pot) referring to the hump on the tip of the male's snout.

'Hamadryad' which is another name for the king cobra puzzles me. In Greek mythology, the hamadryads are nymphs or spirits of nature who preside over trees with which they are said to live and die. In Greek, hama connotes 'together with' and 'drus' is the origin of 'tree'. But, why is the king cobra called a hamadryad? It is not even an arboreal snake.

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## AN UPDATED HANDLIST OF THE REPTILES OF INDIA

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The present paper, offered as base line reference tool, is an updated handlist of all the reptiles that have been reliably reported as part of the fauna of the Republic of India. Malcolm Smith's (1931, 1935, 1943) volumes in the *Fauna of British India* series are the standard digest of literature on Indian reptiles but many taxonomic changes have been made by recognised authorities in the recent years. These changes are included in the list. Also, all the taxa newly described and which have appeared in print since the publication of Malcolm Smith's works are included. Even so, I might have missed a few and therefore apologise for any such omission(s) that may occur. Additions, deletions, and other changes in the list reflect the updated literature on the subject. An additional feature of the handlist is the incorporation of references pertaining to the new taxa given under Select Bibliography at the end.

I hope that this handlist will help the students of Indian herpetology to pursue their studies of this interesting vertebrate fauna of our country. Additional information can be sent to the author for a further update.

## II. HANDLIST

## REPTILIA

## CROCODYLIA

## GAVIALIDAE

1. *Gavialis gangeticus* (Gmelin 1789)

## CROCODYLIDAE

2. *Crocodylus porosus* Schneider 1801  
3. *Crocodylus palustris* Lesson 1834

## TESTUDINES - TURTLES &amp; TORTOISES

## DERMOCHELYIDAE

4. *Dermochelys coriacea* (Vendelli 1761)

## CHELONIIDAE

5. *Eretmochelys imbricata* (Linnaeus 1766)  
6. *Chelonia mydas* (Linnaeus 1758)  
7. *Caretta caretta* (Linnaeus 1758)  
8. *Lepidochelys olivacea* (Eschscholtz 1829)

## EMYDIDAE

9. *Pyxidea mouhati* (Gray 1862)  
10. *Cyclemys dentata* (Gray 1855)

11. *Curora amboinensis lamaroma* rummler and Fritz, 1991  
12. *Geomyda silvatica* (Henderson 1912)  
13. *Melanochelys tricarinata* (Blyth 1856)  
14. *Melanochelys trijuga* (Schweigger 1814)  
15. *Geoclemys hamiltoni* (Gray 1831)  
16. *Morenia petersi* (Anderson 1879)  
17. *Hardella thurjii* (Gray 1831)  
18. *Kachuga tecta* (Gray 1863)  
19. *Kachuga tecta* (Gray 1831)  
20. *Kachuga tentoria* (Gray 1834)  
21. *Kachuga sylhetensis* (Jerdon 1870)  
22. *Kachuga dhongoka* (Gray 1834)  
23. *Kachuga kachuga* (Gray 1831)  
24. *Batagur baska* (Gray 1830)

## TESTUDINIDAE

25. *Geochelone elegans* (Schoepff 1792)  
26. *Indotestudo elongata* (Bkyth 1853)  
27. *Indotestudo forstenii* (Boulenger 1970)  
28. *Manoria emys* (Schlegel & Muller 1844)  
29. *Lissemys punctata* (Lacepede 1788)  
30. *Pelochelys bibroni* (Owen 1853)  
31. *Chitra indica* (Gray 1831)  
32. *Aspideretes gangeticus* (Cuvier 1825)  
33. *Aspideretes leithii* (Gray 1872)  
34. *Aspideretes hurum* (Gray 1831)

SAURIA-LIZARDS  
GEKKONIDAE

35. *Teratoscincus microlepis* Nikoloski 1899
36. *Stenodactylus orientalis* Blanford 1876
37. *Cyrtodactylus montium-salsorum* Annadale 1913
38. *Cyrtodactylus scaber* (Heyden 1827)
39. *Cyrtodactylus kachhensis kachhensis* Stoliczka 1872
40. *Cyrtodactylus fasciolatus* (Blyth 1860)
41. *Cyrtodactylus himalayanus* Duda & Sahi 1977
42. *Cyrtodactylus khasiensis* (Jerdon 1870)
43. *Cyrtodactylus gubernatoris* (annadale 1913)
44. *Cyrtodactylus nebulosus* (Beddome 1870)
45. *Cyrtodactylus collegalenis* (Beddome 1870)
46. *Cyrtodactylus stoliczki* (Steindachner 1869)
47. *Cyrtodactylus lawderanus* (Stoliczka 1871)
48. *Cyrtodactylus dekkansensis* (Guenther 1864)
49. *Cyrtodactylus albofasciatus* (Boulenger 1885)
50. *Cyrtodactylus jeyporensis* (Beddome 1877)
51. *Cyrtodactylus malcolmsmithi* Constable 1949
52. *Cnemaspis indica* (Gray 1846)
53. *Cnemaspis wynadensis* (Beddome 1870)
54. *Cnemaspis sisparensis* (Theobald 1876)
55. *Cnemaspis ornate* (Beddome 1870)
56. *Cnemaspis bedomei* (Theobald 1876)
57. *Cnemaspis mysoriensis* (Jardon 1853)
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