Cobra

Volume - 53 July - September 2003

CHENNAI SNAKE PARK TRUST

Quarterly Newsletter of the Chennai Snake Park Trust

Editor:

Dr. G. Thirumalai

Cover

Travancore wolf snake (*Lycodon travancoricus*) found in the low hills and plains of Indian peninsula. Nothing is known of its diet or natural history. This photograph was taken at Neyyar Sanctuary, Kerala.

Photo: **K.Ramachandran**
Rajapalayam.

"Naturalists are among the most hopeful of people. They require an equivalent of an autopsy report, cremation, and three witnesses before they write a species off, and even then they would hunt for it in séances if they thought there were any chance of at least a virtual image".

-Edward O. Wilson
in *Span* Sept./Oct. 2003

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REDISCOVERY OF *MICRIXALUS BOREALIS* ANNANDALE, 1912 (RANIDAE: ANURA : AMPHIBIA) FROM MEGHALAYA, INDIA

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and
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Shillong

Annandale (1912) described *Micrixalus borealis* for the first time from the collections of Abor Expedition based on 11 examples. After that the species remained only in literature (Chanda 1994, 2002; Dutta 1997; Radhakrishnan 1997) till the authors rediscovered it from Meghalaya. Chanda (1994) gave a description of the species after examining the presently available single type material deposited at the National Zoological Collection, Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata.

The present account is based on 8 examples of *Micrixalus borealis* Annandale rediscovered from Baghmara Reserve Forest, South Garo Hills and Narpuh Reserve Forest, Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya.

Habitat

Collector's note says that 1 example was collected from under the rock in a mountain trickle and 5 exs. were dug out from dry mud bank of river Prang, Narpuh Reserve Forest, Jaintia Hills.

Material examined

2 exs.: Regd. No. V/A/ERS/337, Baghmara Reserve Forest South Garo Hills, Meghalaya, Coll. S.J.S.Hattar & Party dt. 8.11.2002. 6 exs. Under Regd. Nos.V/A/ERS/445, 446,447 & 448 from Narpuh Reserve Forest, Jaintia Hills, Coll. R. Mathew & Party between 10.1.2003 to 12.1.2003.

We give here a description of the species based on our observation on the present material which show insignificant variations from Annandale's.

Distinguishing characters

Small frogs (snout to vent length 18 mm-25 mm) of rather stout build; (Plate 1) dorsum smooth, light grey to dark brown, flanks darker; powdered black all over, ventrally speckled with purple brown on throat and chest, lower abdomen somewhat plain, thigh and lower parts ventrally powdered with purplish brown; limbs with dark bars, one prominent white spot below the eye on upper jaw. Inter-orbital bar present, snout darker.

Head short, broader than long, snout obtusely pointed, convex at the tip; nostril lateral, equidistant from eye and snout, inter-narial space almost equal to inter-orbital space which is less than eye length; loreal slightly depressed; tympanum not distinct; upper jaw toothed; vomerine teeth absent; choanae situated far forward, partially covered by musculature (Fig. D); a prominent tooth at the apex of lower jaw; tongue bifid (Fig. C). Supratympanic glandular fold prominent.

Forelimbs moderate; rudiment of web in all the fingers, fingers with rounded discs, first finger slightly shorter than second, sub-articular tubercles not very prominent, palm padded (Fig.A).

Hindlimbs stout, tibio tarsal articulation reaching eye when hind limb is brought forward. Toes with rounded discs, fully webbed; distal phalange of 4th toe free; inner metatarsal tubercle elongate followed by a fold of skin on the tarsus, another fold on external margin of foot; outer metatarsal tubercle absent; sole padded. (Fig. B).

Remarks

After Annandale (1912), this is the first time any material of this species could be collected. Our observations on the white spot below eye and padded palm and sole were not reported by Annandale (1912) and Chanda (1994). Annandale (1912) observed, "web almost complete but not quite reaching or barely reaching the disc of the first and fifth toes" which was confirmed by Chanda (1994); we found the toes fully webbed except for the 4th toe which has its last phalange free.

Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful to Dr.J.R.B. Alfred, Director, Zoological Survey of India and to Shri. S.J.S. Hattar, Officer-in-charge, Eastern Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, Shillong for permission to study the material and for laboratory facilities. Thanks are also due to Smt. S. Mawlong for typing the manuscript.

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Radhakrishnan, C. 1997. Key to the identification of the species of *Micrixalus Boulenger* (Ranidae : Anura : Amphibia) from India. *Cobra* 28: 31-33.

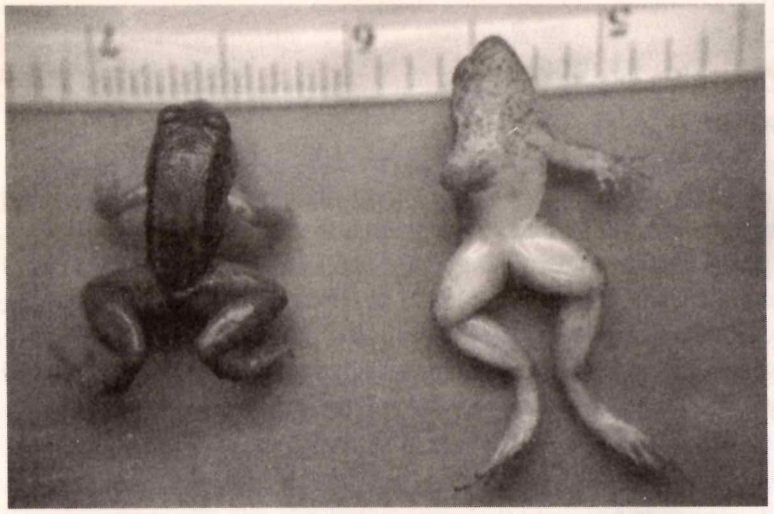

PLATE I : Dorsal and Ventral view of *Micrixalus borealis*

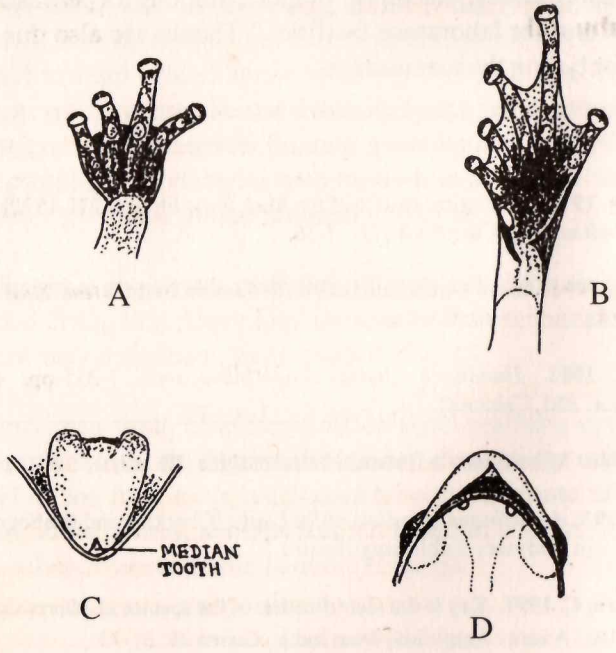

Fig. I. Diagrammatic representation of (A) Hand (Ventral), (B) Foot (Ventral, (C) Tongue and median tooth at apex of lower jaw (D) Upper jaw showing partially covered choanae, of *Micrixalus borealis*

RANGE EXTENSION OF *PTERORANA KHARE* KIYASETUO AND KHARE, 1986, (ANURA : RANIDAE) WITH NOTES ON SOME MORPHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS

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and
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Pterorana khare, the gliding frog, was originally described from Nagaland based on holotype and a paratype by Kiyasetuo and Khare in 1986.

One example of this species was collected by Shri. S.J.S. Hatter & Party from Dhaleswari river, Bairabi, Mizoram on 25.12.98, thereby extending its range of distribution to Mizoram. Chanda (1994) examined the types (2 females) and gave a detailed description.

The male specimen collected from Mizoram is being described here with some additional information on its morphology.

Distinguishing characters

Medium sized frog (snout-vent length 46 mm), dorsum coarsely granular, light brown, flanks and limbs darker; ventrally smooth (Plate I). a lateral expansion of skin from behind the tympanum to the posterior region including thighs, measuring a maximum width of 12 mm in the middle when stretched. Ventrally thorax and part of belly darker brown, remaining lighter; a distinct dorso-lateral glandular fold from behind the eye to the groin. Toes fully webbed.

Head broader than long, depressed, snout obtusely pointed, projecting beyond lower jaw, with row of tubercles on the margin of upper jaw; loreal region concave, nostril laterally placed, equidistant from eye and snout; internarial space broader than inter orbital, but shorter than eye length. Tympanum distinct, round, less than half the diameter of eye and placed at a distance about its own diameter from eye. Vomerine teeth narrow, oblique, closer to choanae than to each other (Fig. IB). tongue elongate, bifid (Fig. IA). Supra tympanic fold distinct, ending in a large gland above shoulder, partially overhanging the tympanum; another glandule below the tympanum. A dark band from corner of eye to shoulder along tympanic fold.

Forelimb short, rudiment of web between fingers, first finger longer than second, fingers with swollen oblong discs, subarticular tubercles well developed, prominent. First finger with a white dorso-lateral prominent nuptial pad composed of horny spinules covering from the base of first finger to the base of disc (resembling the rind of jackfruit) (Fig.I C&D).

Hind limb long, tibio-tarsal articulation reaching nostril when hind limb brought forward; heels overlap when folded at right angles; flap of skin extending upto femur; subarticular tubercles smaller than that of fingers, tips with swollen oblong discs; inner metatarsal tubercle oval, larger than the outer, which is round and small.

Remarks

Our specimen differs from earlier obsrevations in being lighter in shade, belly darker; head broader than long; tympanum distinct, less than half the diameter of eye; vomerine teeth narrow, oblique; fingers with rudiment of web and first finger with a white distinct dorso-laterl nuptial pad composed of prominent spinules resembling the rind of Jackfruit. Dutta (1997) reports it's distribution as Nagaland and Manipur. We are of the opinion that this species may occur in the hilly regions of all the North Eastern States of India.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Dr.J.R.B. Alfred, Director, Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata and to Shri.S.J.S.Hattar, Officer-in-Charge, Eastern Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, Shillong for permission to study the material and for laboratory facilities. Thanks are also due to Smt. S. Mawlong for typing the manuscript.

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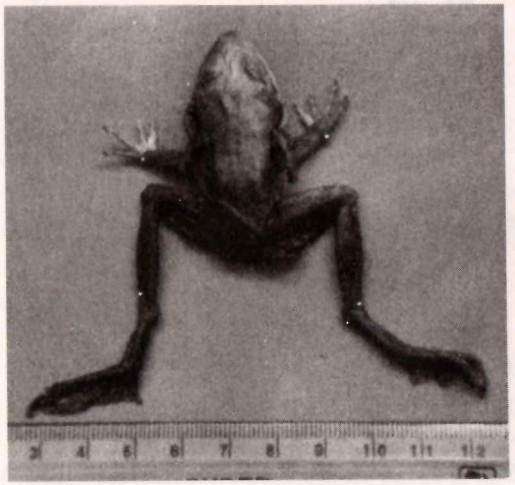

PLATE I a : Dorsal view of *Pterorana khare*

PLATE I b : Ventral view of *Pterorana khare*

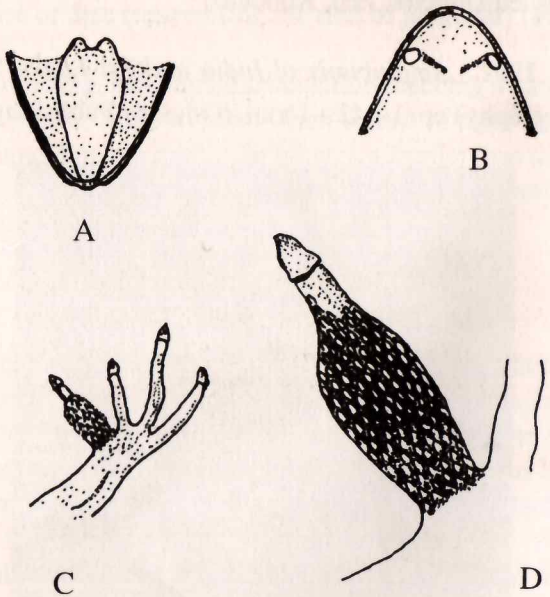

Fig. I. Diagrammatic representation of (A) Bifid tongue , (B) Vomerine teeth ; (C) Hand with nuptial pad (D) Nuptial pad enlarged ; of *Pterorana khare.*

ON *PHILAUTUS SHILLONGENSIS* PILLAI AND CHANDA, 1973 AN ENDEMIC BUSH FROG (ANURA: RHACOPHORIDAE) OF MEGHALAYA, INDIA, WITH NOTES ON ITS MORPHOLOGY AND HABITAT

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Zoological Survey of India
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Philautus shillongensis was originally described by Pillai and Chanda in 1973 based on holotype and 7 paratypes. Subsequently, Chanda (1994) reported 249 examples (151EE and 98GG) from different localities of Shillong. The present study is based on 21 examples (16GG and 5EE) collected near from its type locality in Risa Colony, Shillong between April to June, 2003. A thorough examination of this material revealed some variations from the earlier observation of this species. These variations along with other general characters are noted down here.

Material examined

1 example, V/A/ERS/449, Risa Colony, Shillong, Meghalaya, Coll. Roselind Mathew, dt. 29.4.03; 7 exs. : V/A/ERS/450. Risa Colony, Shillong, Meghalaya, Coll. Barry Mathew, dt. 14.5.03; 13 exs. V/A/ERS/451, Risa Colony, Shillong, Meghalaya, Coll. R. Mathew, dt. 23.6.03.

Distinguishing characters

Small frogs (SVL 13-22 mm), dorsum light grey to dark brown or almost black in live specimens. A dark band between the eyes. Irregular dark markings dorsally forming shape of 'H', prominent in light coloured specimens. Dark spots on flanks, dark broad bars on limbs. A black bar

from eye to shoulder, extending anteriorly to snout. Jaws with dark bars. A lateral fold from axilla to groin and a distinct supratympanic glandular fold. Anal region with a triangular dark spot. Dorsum finely granular with round and conical tubercles; ventrally coarsely granular speckled with brown. (Plate I)

Head slightly broader than long, snout pointed, canthus rostralis not very prominent, loreal region slightly depressed. Nostril dorso-lateral, equidistant from eye and snout. Inter-orbital space slightly broader or equal to eye length and broader than internarial space. Tympanum fairly distinct, oval, bordered by tympanic fold, ¼th to ⅓rd that of eye diameter and placed at a distance of ¼th tympanic diameter from eye. (Tympanum clearly visible when the skin is dry). Tongue broadly notched. Males with fully extended vocal sacs.

Forelimbs moderate; 1st finger shorter than 2nd, fingers with broad discs; subarticular tubercles prominent; rudiment of web between 3rd and 4th fingers.

Hind limb moderately long; discs on toes smaller than that of forelimb. Tibio-tarsal articulation reaches eye or nostril when hind limb brought forward. Toes ¼th webbed, web rudimentary or almost absent between 1st and 2nd toes. Length of tibia slightly less than ½ of SVL. Inner and outer metatarsal tubercles present.

Chanda (2000) reported that this species is active during January to March. We found them commonly available from March onwards till about the end of monsoon. Their call can be heard during this period. This is the most common frog in and around Shillong. A drizzle in the late evenings of monsoon is the ideal time to look for these frogs when they come out in good many numbers with males making the calls with fully extended balloon like vocal sacs. Pillai and Chanda (1973) could not observe any external characters to distinguish the sex. On the contrary, we found the males, in general are lighter in shade, smaller in size and with external vocal sacs.

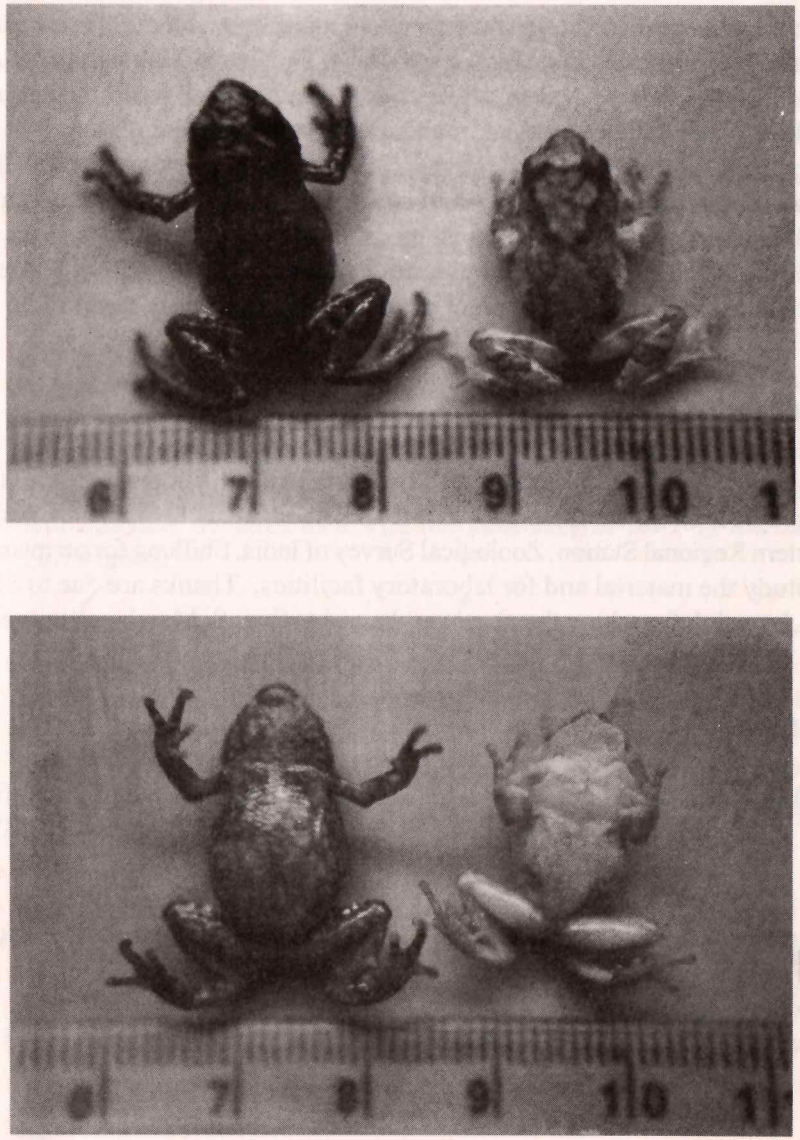

PLATE I : *Philautus shillongensis* ♀ *and* ♂ dorsal and ventral view

Some males had an orangish tinge in the hindlimbs during the breeding season. The females in general were darker and larger, sluggish in nature, sit on dorsal side of leaves, stalk of grass and as well as in bushes and hedges. They seemed to have 'marked territory' and were observed in the same spot for three consecutive years. Their call can be described as 'tik, 'tik-tik', 'tik-tik tik-tik tik-tik' and so on. When approached an isolated calling male would stop calling whereas in the night when many males are calling a torch focussed on them is not a hindrance to this activity. A pair caught together at 9.30 pm continued to be in the same position till 11.35 am the next day when they separated.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Dr.J.R.B. Alfred, Director, Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata and to Shri. S.J.S. Hattar, Officer-in-Charge, Eastern Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, Shillong for permission to study the material and for laboratory facilities. Thanks are due to Shri. J.R.Lyngdoh for taking the photographs and to Smt. S. Mawlong for typing the manuscript.

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NOTES ON HERPETOFAUNA OF TALCHHAPAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, RAJASTHAN, INDIA

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Talchhapar wildlife sanctuary, popularly called "Talchhapar black buck Sanctuary", is located between 27° 48' 38" N latitude and 74° 26' 88" E longitude in Sujangarh taluka of Churu district of Rajasthan, covering an area of 7.19 sq. km. In 1962 it was first established as a protected area and was later declared as a wild life sanctuary in 1981 by the Rajasthan Government.

This sanctuary comes under the Thar desert portion of Rajasthan and the entire area of the sanctuary is a flat saline depression of clayey soil with human settlements, agricultural fields and sand dunes outside its boundary. The climate is characterized by extremes of temperature which sometimes touches 50° C during day time in summer and falls upto -2° C during chilly winter night accompanied by frequent droughts. Annual rainfall is about 300 mm generally during the months of July - September.

The vegetation of the sanctuary includes ground cover of grasses with a few shrub and tree species. The grasses include *Cyperus rotundus* (Mothia), *Chloris virgiata* (Ghora moth), *Desmostachya bipinnata* (Dhab), *Cenchrus biflorus* (Bhurat), and *Cynodon dactylon* (Dhoob). Associated with these grasses, a shrub *Haloxylon salicornicum* (Lana) profusely grows in the sanctuary. The trees which flourish inside the sanctuary include *Prosopis chilensis* (Angreji bavanlio), *Acacia nilotica* (Desi babul), *Ziziphus nummularia* (Berr), *Salvadora persica* (Mithijal), and *Azardirachta indica* (Neem).

Herpetofauna

A total of 13 herpetofaunal species was found to occur during the study period (2002 & 2003) of which 2 species of amphibians and 6 species of reptiles were recorded within the sanctuary and its adjacent area within 1 km. range. Another 5 species of reptiles were recorded in the surrounding area within 5 km. range from the sanctuary area (Table-1).

From the ecological point of view the sanctuary is ideal habitat for the endangered, the spiny-tailed lizards (*Uromastix hardwicki*) as the frequency of occurrence was found to be very high in comparison with other reptilian species during the study period. The occurrence of good numbers of marbled toad (*Bufo stomaticus*) during the severe drought in 2003 near Chhapar village and also along road side drains of the sanctuary suggests that these habitats are preferred by this toad.

Acknowledgements

We are thankful to Dr.Q.H.Baqri, Additional Director and Principal Investigator, Desert Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, Jodhpur for providing necessary facilities and constant encouragement throughout the study. The financial assistance of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Govt. of India, New Delhi under the project is also acknowledged. We also thank Dr.R.C.Sharma, Deputy Director (Retd.), Desert Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, Jodhpur for his valuable guidance and suggestions during the preparation of this paper. Thanks are also due to Shri Brij Dan Singh Samor and other staff of the State Forest Department for their cooperation during field surveys. The valuable cooperation extended by Mr.Vijay K. Bangariya, Computer Assistant is also acknowledged.

Table - 1: List of Amphibians and Reptiles in Talchhapar sanctuary and its surrounding area

Family	Name of species	Common	Site of * observation	Time of activity
AMPHIBIANS Bufonidae	*Bufo stomaticus* Lutken, 1862	Marbled toad	S - 1	Mostly Night
Ranidae	*Euphlyctis cyanophlyctis* (Schneider, 1799)	Skittering frog	S - 1	Both day and night
REPTILES Gekkonidae	*Hemidactylus flaviviridies* Ruppell, 1835 *Stenodactylus orientalis* Blanford, 1876	Yellow - belliedhouse gecko Desert sand gecko	S - 1 S - 3	Night Night
Agamidae	*Calotes versicolor* (Daudin, 1802) *Uromastix hardwicki* Gray, 1827	Indian garden lizard Spiny-tailed lizard	S - 1 S - 1	Day Day
Lacertidae	*Acanthodactylus cantoris cantoris* Gunther, 1864	Indian fringe - toed sand lizard	S - 2	Day
Varanidae	*Varanus bengalensis* (Linnaeus, 1758) *Varanus griseus* (Daudin, 1803)	Common Indian monitor Desert monitor	S - 1 & 2 S - 3	Day Day
Boidae	*Eryx johni* (Russell, 1801)	Indian sand boa	S - 2	Night
Elapidae	*Naja naja oxiana* (Eichwald, 1831) *Bungarus caeruleus* (Schneider, 1801)	Black cobra Common Indian krait	S - 1 S - 1	Night Night
Viperidae	*Echis carinatus* (Scheneider, 1801)	Saw scaled viper	S - 3	Night

* S - 1: The sanctuary and its adjacent area within 1 km. range; S - 2: Sand dunes side by Talchhapar to Bidasar state highway approx. 4 km. From the sanctuary (27° 48' 30" N; 74° 23' 36" E); S - 3: Sand dunes near Bitiavas aprox. 5 km from the sanctuary (27° 50' 58"N; 74° 28' 07" E)

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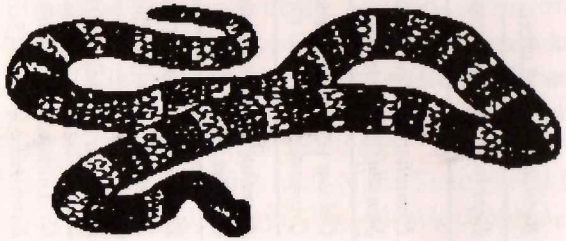

PRESENCE OF DUMERIL'S BLACK-HEADED SNAKE (*SIBYNOPHIS SUBPUNTATUS*) IN KUMBHALGARH WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, RAJASTHAN, INDIA

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On August 31, 2003, an "eco-tracking" programme was organised by the Wildlife Wing of the Forest Department of Rajasthan for students and others in the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary, which is at the confluence of three districts of southern Rajasthan viz., Pali, Rajsamand and Udaipur. I was leading the group. While travelling on Rana Kankar-Malgarh nature trail, a 150 mm long baby of Dumeril's Black-headed Snake (*Sibybhis subpunctatus*) was seen near *Tani-ki-Ghati* in *Kotra* Forest Block, at about 1500 hrs near the track. After twenty minutes travelling, one more such baby snake was seen in a moist and shady locality. The area where the snakes were seen is a hilly dense forest tract, having good growth of *Dendrocalamus strictus, Sterculia urens, Bridelia retusa, Anogeissus latifolia, Wrightia tinctoria, Capparis grandis, Sauromaticum venosum, Habenaria longicorniculata.* A criss-cross network of streams is also present which remains in flow during whole rainy season. A few of the stream are semi-perennial.

For the first time *S. subpunctatus* was reported in Rajasthan from the Kamalnath Reserve Forest in Udaipur district (Sharma, 1998). Kumbhalgarh WLS is nearly 150 km away North of Kamalnath. Habitats of both the localities are quite similar.

Before the present record, this species was reported from Southern India (Vyas, 1986; 1987)

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Sh. Rahul Bhatnagar, Dy. CWLW, Udaipur and Sh. Bhopal Sing Rathor, Wildlife Warden, Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary for facilities.

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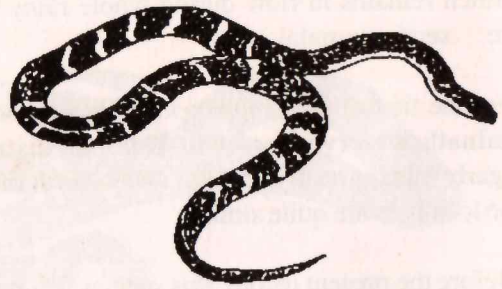

THE BRONZEBACK TREE-SNAKE *DENDRELAPHIS TRISTIS* COMING IN SEARCH OF ITS MATE (?)

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Villagers in India are wary of killing snakes, especially cobras, for religious reasons and also due to the belief that the mate of the killed snake would hunt down the culprit. Herpetologists explain the reported arrival of another snake at the site of the kill as due to the release of odours by the snake on being killed which attracts other snakes (Whitaker, 1978).

In this note, we report an instance of a snake coming to the site where another was captured a few hours earlier. The incident occurred in Sriharikota, Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh on 19th August 2002. At around 13.00 hr, we found a full grown bonzeback tree-snake *Dendrelaphis tristis* scrambling about a bookshelf located near the doorway to the garden of our quarters. After a bit of chasing about, it was caught unhurt and kept in a glass bottle with the lid punctured with holes. At around 17.00 hrs, we found another bronzebacked tree-snake moving about on the same shelf.

It seems improbable that this was just a coincidence. It appears that the second snake had come in search of the other (it mate?). How did it find the place where the first snake had been? Do snakes leave a trail of scents as they move or is the sense of smell very acute in snakes for them to be able to 'sniff out' other snakes? Or, had the latter followed the first up to the door earlier and had retreated on our approach only to come searching later on? Or, had the first snake released musk at the site on capture?

Reference

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ONE-EYED POND TERRAPIN *MELANOCHELYS TRIJUGA* (SCHWEIGGER) IN SRIHARIKOTA ISLAND, NELLORE DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA

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Mumbai - 400 023

We came across a one-eyed young of the pond terrapin *Melanochelys trijuga* (Schweigger) in Sriharikota Island, Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh in October 2002. There was no abnormality other than the missing eye on the left side of the face, suggesting that the absence of the eye was a birth defect. As if to compensate for the absence of an eye and improve the field of vision, the upper right mandible that had the eye was bent towards the left, thereby placing the lone eye almost at the centre of the head. The terrapin was kept with us for a week in an aquarium, after which it was released back into the wild.

Malformation at birth has been reported in different species of crocodiles (Kar 1979; Singh & Bustard 1982). Sing & Bustard (1982) reported eye problems in captive gharials *Gavialis gangeticus,* ranging from simple defects relating only to ciliary muscles to complete absence of one or, more commonly, both eyes. One of the gharials, with both eyes missing, survived for almost six years in captivity in almost natural surroundings along with its own hatch-mates. Malformations may be due to various factors. Kar (1979) mentioned weather-related factors as a possibility. Mutation could be another factor.

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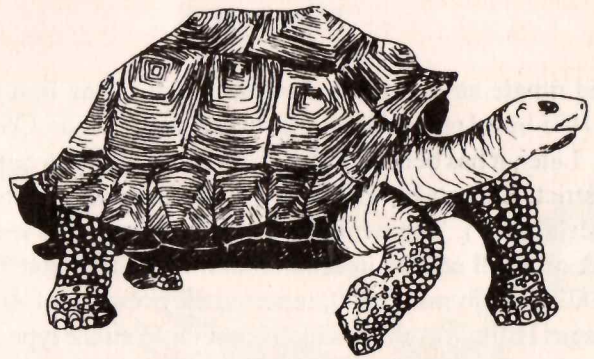

REPORT ON *ANSONIA ORNATA* GUNTHER 1875 FROM FORESTS OF KERALA

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The ornate stream toad, *Ansonia ornata,* was first described by Gunther in 1875 based on a collection from Brahmagiri Hills, Coorg (Kodagu), Karnataka. Later, it has been reported from Neria forest stream in Dakshina Kannda district, Karnataka, further north of Brahmagiris, in the Western Ghats (Daniels, 1997). The senior author of this article has seen the species on the bank of a hill stream in Kudremukh National Park, Karnataka, in October, 2002. Ravikumar (2000) reported the presence of *Ansonia ornata* in Suganthagiri Hills, Wayanad, which is not far from the type locality. This was the first report on the occurrence of this forest stream toad in Kerala. In June, 2003, during a survey in Aralam wildlife sanctuary, Kannur district, Kerala, we could find a single individual of this species in a stream in the evergreen forest at a lower altitude. This is the second report on the occurrence of this toad in the State. As per the present records, it can be considered as endemic to the evergreen forests north of Palghat (Palakkad) Gap and south of Shimoga Hills in the Western Ghats.

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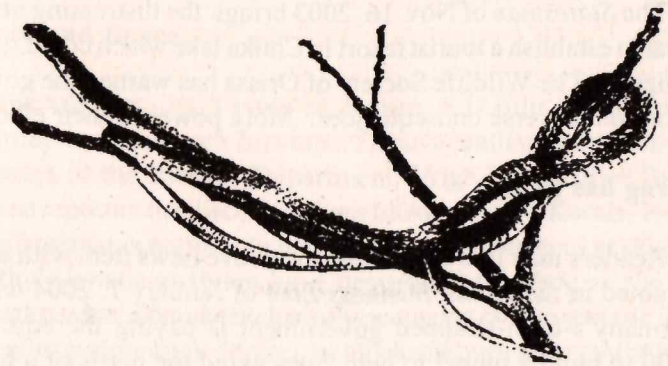


RANDOM HARVEST

Out on a limb?

The limbless *Barkudia insularis,* the Barkudia burrowing skink, was believed to have been extinct till it was rediscovered in the Barkuda island in the Chilka lake, Orissa, in the early 1900s. Although, subsequently, in the 1950s, it has been reported from other localities like the Andhra University campus, Waltair, and the Nandankannan Biological Park, Orissa, the type-locality in the Barkuda island is of special significance. Very little is known about the habits of this rare skink and much research needs to be done in the Barkuda island and elsewhere.

The *Statesman* of Nov. 16, 2003 brings the distressing news about a proposal to establish a tourist resort in Chilka lake which could spell doom for this lizard. The Wildlife Society of Orissa has warned the government of the possible adverse consequences. More power to their elbow!

Every frog has its day

Readers may like to contrast the above news item with an agency report quoted in the *Hindu Business Line* of January 7, 2004 which says that Germany's cash-strapped government is paying the equivalent of $ 285,200 to build a tunnel to help frogs avoid the perils of a busy road. According to Ruediger Zech, a local council spokesman in the Berlin district of Reinickendorf, the project will allow native species of frogs and other amphibians to reach a nearby lake for spawning. Concerned nature

protection volunteers have till now been ferrying the creatures in buckets across the road. The Foreign Ministry, headed by Green Party member Joschka Fischer, is funding the construction of the tunnel on the outskirts of Berlin. This is part of a package of environmental measures agreed upon when the Ministry took over a country house located in a nature protection area in the north of Berlin.

Rare caecilian

Varad Giri, research assistant, herpetology section of the Bombay Natural History Society has discovered a rare 20 cm. long caecilian in the forests of the Western Ghats near Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, India. It has been named *Gegeneophis danieli* after J.C.Daniel, the well-known naturalist. The finding has been published in *Zootaxa*. The abstract says: "A new species of Indian caeciliid caecilian, *Gegeneophis danieli* (Amphibia: Gymnophiona), is described from a single specimen from the Western Ghats of Southern Maharashtra. This distinctive species differs from all other Indian caeciliids in having more numerous secondary annuli that are not restricted to the posterior half of the body".

Across Time and Space

In the 16th Oct. 2003 issue of *Nature*, S.D.Biju of the Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, India, and Franky Bossuyt of the Biology Department, Vrige Universities Brussel, Belgium, have reported the discovery from Idukki district, Kerala, India, of a burrowing frog that is noticeably different from known taxa in all anuran families. Phylogenetic analyses have designated this frog as the sister taxon of Sooglossidae, a family exclusively occurring on two granitic islands of the Seychelles archipelago. Molecular clock analyses uncover the branch leading to both taxa as an ancient split in the crown-group Neobatrachia. The discovery discloses a lineage that may have been more diverse on Indo-Madagascar in the cretaceous period, but now only comprises four

species on the Seychelles and this sole survivor in India. Because of its very distinct morphology and an inferred origin that is earlier than several neobatrachian families, this frog has been recognised as a new family, Nasikabatrachidae. The frog has been named *Nasikabatrachus sahyadrensis* which means 'the (conspicuously) nosed frog from the hills of the Western Ghats'.

This 7 cm. long frog has been around, unbeknownst to scientists, for the last over sixty five million years from the time of the dinosaurs, and long after its more formidable contemporaries were wiped off the face of the earth.

The genetic resemblance with the exclusive family of frogs in the Seychelles supports the theory that millions of years ago, the ancestors of both families lived in Gondwana, a 'super continent' in which the earth's continents were glommed together. Eventually, Gondwana split into two land masses, one comprising Africa and S.America and the other Australia, Antartica and Indo-Madagascar.

The shrinking snake!

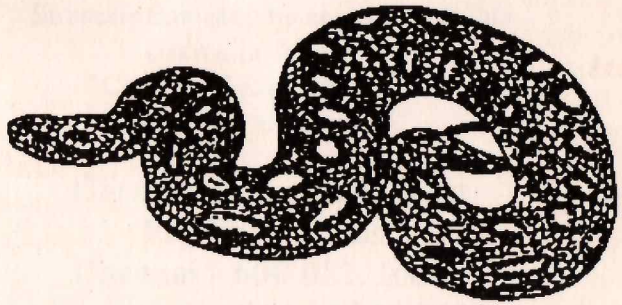
The Hindu of Dec. 30, 2003 quoted an Associated Press report about a reticulated python kept on display at a zoo in the Curugsewa village on the island of Java, measuring 49 ft. The report cautiously added: "If the dimensions are confirmed, it would be the largest snake ever kept in captivity".

The normal length of a reticulated python is 13 to 20 ft. According to *The Guinness Book of World Records,* the record so far is held by a reticulated python captured in 1912 in the Sulawesi island of Indonesia which measured 32 ft. J.C.Daniel (*The Book of Indian Reptiles and Amphibians*), however, gives "the (maximum) authentic recorded length" as 28 ft. This snake is in the Hagenbeck collection in Germany. In any case, the claim of 49 ft. taxed credibility.

And now, *The Hindu Business Line* of Jan. 9, 2004 quotes another report that a photographer working for Reuters visited the Curugsewa Zoo armed with a measuring tape and found that the snake was only 21 ft. long. "I have no idea why the snake has shrunk", said the snake's keeper (looking, no doubt, appropriately puzzled).

One wonders why this brilliant idea of securing a measuring tape did not occur to the first reporter before he flashed his sensational story across the globe.

- B.Vijayaraghavan.



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iv) To aid and assist research on reptiles and amphibians.

v) To provide facilities for the identification and classification of snakes and other reptiles and amphibians and, for this purpose, maintain a museum of study collections.

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