



## Forgotten records of *Chrysopelea taprobanica* Smith, 1943 (Squamata: Colubridae) from India

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The colubrid snake *Chrysopelea taprobanica* Smith, 1943 was described from a holotype from Kanthali (= Kantalai) and paratypes from Kurunegala, both localities in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) (Smith 1943). Since its description, literature pertaining to Sri Lankan snake fauna considered this taxon to be endemic to the island (Taylor 1950, Deraniyagala 1955, de Silva 1980, de Silva 1990, Somaweera 2004, Somaweera 2006, de Silva 2009, Pyron *et al.* 2013). In addition, earlier efforts on the Indian peninsula (e.g. Das 1994, 1997, Das 2003, Whitaker & Captain 2004, Aengals *et al.* 2012) and global data compilations (e.g. Wallach *et al.* 2014, Uetz & Hošek 2015) did not identify any record from mainland India until Guptha *et al.* (2015) recorded a specimen (voucher BLT 076 housed at Bio-Lab of Seshachalam Hills, Tirupathi, India) in the dry deciduous forest of Chamala, Seshachalam Biosphere Reserve in Andhra Pradesh, India in November 2013. Guptha *et al.* (2015) further mentioned an individual previously photographed in 2000 at Rishi Valley, Andhra Pradesh, but with no voucher specimen collected. Guptha's record, assumed to be the first confirmed record of *C. taprobanica* in India, is noteworthy as it results in a large range extension, from northern Sri Lanka to eastern India with an Euclidean distance of over 400 km, as well as a change of status, *i.e.*, species not endemic to Sri Lanka. However, at least three little-known previous records of this species from India evaded most literature and were overlooked by the researchers including ourselves.

In 1949, John D. Constable mentioned specimens of *C. taprobanica* from Madras in India (Constable 1949). Constable (1949) was subsequently cited by Mertens (1968) in a paper published in German, and listed 'India' under the distribution of the taxon. Possibly referring to Constable's record, Mahendra (1984) listed 'Indian mainland near Madras' under the distribution of *C. taprobanica* along with Ceylon.

Constable (1949) reported a single voucher (number MCZ 47881: Fig. 1A–B); the collector name R. H. Beddome, and the scientific collection: Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ), Harvard University, USA. There is no date of collection associated with, but based on the museum's collection books, the voucher was first catalogued in 1876 (see the MCZ 47881 remarks: 'reregistered from MCZ 3903', which was catalogued in 1876). The specimen is a male with 17 midbody scale-rows, 208 ventrals, 120 subcaudals, divided anal scale, 9 upper labials, 1 loreal, 1 preocular, 2 postoculars, 2+2 temporals, and total length of 785 (560 + 225) mm (Constable 1949). Although Constable (1949) only mentioned one voucher number, he indicated that more than one specimen is associated with that number (e.g. '*CT. Head*' and '*these examples show that this species, originally described as from Ceylon alone, also occurs on the Indian mainland*'). In fact, a fore body of another *C. taprobanica* collected by Col. Richard H. Beddome presumably along with MCZ 47881, has been now recatalogued (in '18/xii/1992') as specimen MCZ 177292 (Fig. 1C–D) at the Museum of Comparative Zoology.

Noteworthy, there are two additional specimens associated to the aforementioned voucher MCZ 3903. The first one retains this voucher number and is indeed a *Chrysopelea ornata* (Shaw, 1802) (confirmed by us through photographs of the specimen), the other specimen was sent to the Coleção Herpetológica do Butantan, São Paulo, Brazil (see the MCZ 3903 remarks: 'To Butantan 5/31/29'). The latter specimen received the voucher IBSP-4273 and was catalogued as *C. ornata*. However, the specimen has not been recovered after the fire that destroyed most of the Butantan collection in 2010 (Giuseppe Puerto pers. comm.), therefore the identity has not been verified.

A third specimen of *C. taprobanica* with only 'India' as the collection locality is deposited at the Naturhistorisches Museum Wien (NMW: Natural History Museum of Vienna) under the voucher number NMW 27287:34 (G. Vogel pers. comm.: Fig. 1E–F). No date of collection exists for this specimen. This male specimen (snout vent length 395 mm)

currently labeled as *C. ornata* is indeed a *C. taprobanica* based on color pattern and scalation. The specimen has 17 mid-body dorsal scales, 204 ventrals (with preventral) and an incomplete tail (G. Vogel pers. comm.).

Despite differences in scalation, *C. taprobanica* was considered only a colour variation of *C. ornata* before Smith's description in 1943 (see Hora & Jayaram 1949). We have verified the identity of 13 such specimens of *C. ornata* collected prior to 1943 from India (Appendix A). However, it is possible that additional specimens of *C. taprobanica* collected prior to 1943 are lodged in other museums and evaded our notice. Because our compiled information from literature and scientific collections refer only to very wide regions (*i.e.*, India, or Madras), it is not possible to define a precise record locality, and therefore, the map of *C. taprobanica* records available at Guptha *et al.* (2015) remains as the most up-to-date of its known distribution of records.

The Madras region where the MCZ specimens were collected and the Seshachalam hill range where Guptha *et al.* (2015) recently recorded *C. taprobanica* is part of the Eastern Ghats. Eastern Ghats was generally considered as a poor sister of Western Ghats in terms of explorations and study (Das 2002, Srinivasulu & Das 2008). Recent explorations in the Eastern Ghats led to rediscovery of endemic species and discovery of new species (e.g. Agarwal *et al.* 2012, Aengals & Ganesh 2013, Agarwal *et al.* 2013, Datta-Roy *et al.* 2013). The lag of detailed explorations in their likely range in Southern part of Eastern Ghats till recently could also be a probable cause for the lack of additional sightings of *C. taprobanica* from India.

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**APPENDIX A.** Specimens of *Chrysopelea ornata* collected prior to 1943 from India whose identity was verified during the current study

American Museum of Natural History (New York, USA)—AMNH 43379, AMNH 43380, AMNH 74847; California Academy of Sciences (California, USA)—CAS 12388, CAS 17256, CAS 17257; Museum of Comparative Zoology (Cambridge, USA)—MCZ 3115, MCZ R3903; Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto, Canada)—ROM 16256; National Museum of Natural History (Washington, DC, USA)—USNM 129704; Natural History Museum of Denmark (Copenhagen, Denmark)—ZMUC R63722, ZMUC R63723, ZMUC R63738.