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Recent records of the Red-necked Keelback from northeastern India



The Red-necked Keelback *Rhabdophis subminiatus* at Rani, Assam.
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The Red-necked Keelback *Rhabdophis subminiatus* (Schlegel, 1837) is a colubrid snake, distributed from Nepal in the west up to Borneo in the east. In the north, it is found in central China and in the south, up to Java, Indonesia (Wogan & Chan-Ard 2021).

The snake has colourful appearance such as a yellow band followed by red neck and rest of the body appears olive-green with

faint black & yellow markings. This snake could be distinguished from its look-alike species by scale counts. The species has eight supralabial scales; three to five scales touching the eye.

There are two subspecies known—*R. s. subminiatus* has a distinct oblique black bar below the eye, while *R. s. helleri* does not have a black line below the eye or it



is indistinct (Whitaker & Captain 2004). In this article, recent sightings of the species at three locations in northeastern India are documented.

Balpakram National Park, Meghalaya

This protected area is situated in Baghmara District of Meghalaya, where it shares the international border with Bangladesh. The area is part of Garo Hills and comprises of broad-leaved deciduous forest. On 2 June 2015, during the vulture survey, a transect was being carried out from Mahadeo (25.183 N, 90.916 E) to Sagunsaram in the morning. On the previous day, there was heavy rain and thunderstorm, and the weather was still humid but warm (about 30°C).

During the walk through the forested area, a snake crossed my path. Its flashing red-yellow-green colours attracted my attention and I was able to photograph the individual. The individual aggressively inflated its anterior body for a moment and then hurriedly vanished into the vegetation. Later on, referring to the 'Snakes of India: The Field Guide' by Whitaker & Captain 2004, I was able to identify the species as Red-necked Keelback *R. subminiatus*. Earlier, it was recorded from Nokrek Biosphere Reserve in Meghalaya (Mathew & Meetei 2013).

Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal

With the sighting of this species in Balpakram National Park, I eagerly referred my photographic archive. Interestingly enough, I could find the same species photographed as a road-kill at Rajabhatkhawa (26.617 N,

90.916 E, altitude 298 m) in Buxa Tiger Reserve on 12 January 2010. This national park covers part of the foothills of Himalaya and the forest is categorised as broad-leaved deciduous forest. Here, January is the peak of winter season with the temperature dipping to around 5 °C with foggy weather conditions. On that particular day, the snake was killed at night on a road passing through the forested area. From the photographs, the scale pattern was compared and species was confirmed to be the Red-necked Keelback *R. subminiatus*. This confirms the continuous distribution of the species that was missing between the states of Sikkim and Assam in earlier studies (Whitaker & Captain 2004).

Jorasil Reserve Forest, Rani, Assam

Jorasil Reserve Forest is on the outskirts of Guwahati city, in Kamrup District of Assam. My field station, the Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre, is just outside the reserve in Belguri Village (26.002N, 91.548 E). The snake is a common visitor to office premises and was photographed for the first time on 8 December 2018 emerging from a rat hole. During the last couple of years, it was seen regularly, throughout the year. This snake species is recorded from Assam (Whitaker & Captain 2004; Sengupta et al. 2019), Tripura (Majumder et al. 2012), and Nagaland (Sen & Mathew 2008).

This snake species is known for its interesting behaviour of 'bufophagy' (Mohammadi & Hill 2012). It is known for predating on other anurans as well, on example Balloon Frog *Uperodon globulosus* in Bangladesh (Shihan



& Kabir 2015) and *Kaloula medilineata* (Mohammadi & Hill 2012). I was able to witness the snake feeding on *Duttaphrynus melanostictus* and *Fejervarya* sp.

My records of the species in Buxa Tiger Reserve in West Bengal, Balpakram National Park in Meghalaya and Jorasal Reserve Forest in Assam added new distributional data of this medically important venomous snake.

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