

# King Cobra *Ophiophagus hannah*

## Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptiles

Order: Squamata

Family: Elapidae

Genus: *Ophiophagus*

Species: *O. hannah*

## Introduction

In the past King Cobra was considered as one species and it was thought to be widely distributed across southern and southeastern Asia. Shankar et al. (2021) studied the genetic makeup of the species and came to a conclusion that it was four different species of King Cobra. They referred to it as CCS1, CCS2, CCS3, and CCS4 where: CCS1 is the species that is found in the Western Ghats region and it is endemic to that region; CCS2 is widely distributed across eastern, northern, and northeastern part of India and Andamans; CCS3 is the Indo-China lineage and it is found in southern parts of China and some parts of northeastern India, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, and Malaysia; and CCS4 is found only in Luzon Island of Philippines.

So the species that I considered was the CCS1 lineage which is endemic to the Western Ghats of India.

## Habitat and ecology

According to S.R. Ganesh (pers. comm. 19 November 2023), herpetologist, he mentioned that the habitat range is from Agasthyamalai hill range in the south till Sindhudurg plateau in the north, which is a stretch of around 950 km.

It is found in moist deciduous, semi-evergreen, evergreen, and montane shola forest but highest density is in tropical evergreen forest. It takes five years for an individual to mature sexually and to be able to breed, the life span is about 15 years (S. R. Ganesh pers. comm. 19 January 2024).

The breeding season is from January to April, it lays 15–16 eggs in a nest prepared by using leaf litter. It mainly feeds on snakes and other reptiles and it also exhibits cannibalism (Bhattacharyya & Mitra 2005).

## Generation length

It can be guesstimated that the generation length might be 8–10 years based on personal communication with S.R. Ganesh.

## Population

There have been no specific studies focused on population. The only quantifiable data available on King Cobras is regarding capture of 106 individuals from the year 2005–2009 at Agumbe Rainforest Research Station, Karnataka (Shankar et al. 2013).

## Threats

The major threat is habitat loss, since Western Ghats has lost around 35.3% of its forest cover in the past 100 years (Reddy et al. 2016). The other threat is the human-snake encounters where in 80% of the instances people wanted to kill the snake. The relocation is also considered as a threat because distantly relocated snakes are under stress and usually die (Shankar et al. 2013).



Distribution of King Cobra.

## Assessment

It was difficult to assess the species due to lack of data on population, extent of occurrence and area of occupancy. But there are enough threats which has caused decline in the species population. Although population declines over three generations (24–30 years) is not established with data, people’s perception and researchers encounters with King Cobras indicate a perceptible decline due to various threats. Hence I categorize it as **Near Threatened (NT) A2cd**.

## Research needed

Since the species is endemic to the Western Ghats and not much studies have been carried out regarding population, area of occurrence, behaviour, and threats, further research is needed.

## References

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