

## REPORT OF PAINTED BRONZE-BACK TREE SNAKE *DENDRELAPHIS PICTUS* GMELIN, 1789 FROM ANAMALAIS, WESTERN GHATS, INDIA

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The Painted Bronze-back Tree Snake, *Dendrelaphis pictus* Gmelin, 1789, is one of the widely distributed snakes in South Asia. Within India, reliable records on the occurrence of this species is available only from the northeastern region, and the Andaman Island. This species has also been reported from Dudhwa National Park (Sankaran, 1989). There is no consensus on the occurrence of this species in Western Ghats. Smith (1943) mentioned about its presence in southern India, and described a colour form that might be restricted to this area. Whitaker (1978) gave the range of the species as throughout India, but Das (2001) did not include the Western Ghats as its distribution range. Whitaker & Captain (2004) report its distribution in the Western Ghats with a caution that no specimens from southern India were examined by them.

In December, 2006 we came across a live specimen of *Dendrelaphis* sp. in Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary, Western Ghats (Anamalais) of Tamil Nadu, with characters matching the colour form of Painted Bronze-back Tree Snake described by Smith (1943). We recorded all morphological characters and measured the snake using a measuring tape thrice to the nearest millimeter and report average snout-vent length and tail length. The sex of the snake was determined by probing with a thin smooth metal probe. The snake was released in the same location where it was initially found.

We assign this snake as *Dendrelaphis pictus* based on the following characters: snout rounded versus pointed in *D. tristis*; internasals smaller than pre-frontals; frontal longer than the combined length of internasals and prefrontals; greatest length of the parietal equal to the frontal; nine supralabials, of them, fourth, fifth and sixth in contact with the eye; sixth supralabial barely in contact with the anterior upper temporal; seventh supralabial in contact with both the anterior temporals; pair of anterior and posterior temporals; anterior upper temporals largest; nasal longer than loreal, wider anteriorly and pointed posteriorly; single preocular, reaching the upper surface of the head, but not touching the frontal; two postoculars, the upper one larger; ten infralabials, the first pair pointed, in contact with mental, separating the anterior genials partially; second to fifth infralabials in contact with the anterior genials, fifth and sixth infralabials in contact with the posterior genials; sixth infralabial longest; anterior genials shorter than the posterior ones; costals were in 15:15:11 rows (neck:mid-body:anterior to vent) with slightly enlarged vertebrae. Vertebrae with rounded posterior margins, and were smaller than the body scales in the outermost row. The snake had 177 ventrals, and 160 subcaudals, all with a lateral keel. The anal shield was divided. Hemipenis extended up to the 17<sup>th</sup> caudal plate (A probe inserted reached the 17<sup>th</sup> caudal plate).

Dorsally, the head was light brown. A black preocular stripe started from the nostril, passed through the loreal and the lower half

of the preocular and extended till the eye. A wide black postocular stripe covered the lower postocular and the temporals and extended up to the neck. The stripe broke into blotches on the neck at the 14<sup>th</sup> ventral. On the neck, the stripe extends in scale rows 4, 5, 6 and on lower half of row 7. This stripe is represented only by black tips of the scales on anterior body, which form faint cross bars. The anterior vertebrae and two adjacent scale rows on either side were bronze in colour. The upper lip and jaw white. Lateral portion of the neck below the black stripe was pale yellow, which was continuous with a buff coloured stripe along the first row of scales. This stripe was bordered on either side by black spots at irregular intervals (Image 1<sup>w</sup>). The colouration of the belly was creamish-yellow with buff colouration outside the keels. Anterior body scales were bordered with bright blue, which was present even at the edges of anterior ventrals. The tongue was bright red (Image 2<sup>w</sup>). The snout-vent length was 634mm; tail length was 389mm.

The presence of postocular stripe (absence in *D. grandoculis*) and difference in subcaudal counts (160 vs 117-124 in *D. grandoculis* and 108-145 in *D. tristis*), long hemipenis (only reaching 8<sup>th</sup> caudal plate in *D. tristis*), relatively large posterior maxillary teeth (smaller posterior maxillary teeth in *D. tristis*) and three supralabials in contact with the eye (two in *D. tristis*), separate this species from other known species of the genus *Dendrelaphis* (Smith, 1943) with known distribution in southern India. These characters, along with the distinct body colour and red coloured tongue (vs. blue in *D. tristis*), distinguish *D. pictus* from the Common Bronze-back Tree Snake *D. tristis* from southern India. This snake also differed from *D. pictus* from other parts of its range: 14 maxillary teeth on either side of the upper jaw, as opposed to 23-28 maxillary teeth on either side of the upper jaw reported from elsewhere (Smith, 1943). We feel that the count of maxillary teeth in the present case may be an underestimate owing to very small anterior teeth and this examination was carried out on a live animal. We may have omitted some of the small anterior maxillary teeth in our count. *D. tristis* typically found in southern India have maxillary teeth ranging from 17-22 (Smith, 1943).

We consulted renowned taxonomists while drafting this note. Based on these consultations we would like to inform readers that the identification of the species is not unequivocal. Therefore, we urge herpetologists and taxonomists to carefully reexamine this population of *Dendrelaphis* and assess its taxonomic status.

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