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Short Communication

Cochin Banded Sea Snake, *Hydrophis ornatus* (Gray, 1842): a new record for Chennai Coast, East Coast of India (Reptilia: Serpentes: Hydrophiidae)

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Abstract

Morphometric and meristic characters and other diagnostic features of the rare Cochin Banded Sea Snake, *Hydrophis ornatus* (Gray, 1842) a new record at Chennai Coast, South India has been described.

Keywords : Chennai Coast, Cochin Banded Sea Snake, *Hydrophis ornatus*, morphometrics, pholidosis

INTRODUCTION

Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), Marine Biological Station, Chennai, South India has been maintaining a marine aquarium stocked with ornamental fishes and marine invertebrates brought by local fishermen from the Chennai Coast. On 28th June 2007, 0600 hrs, 15 numbers of sea snakes belong to Five species were caught along with fishes in a fish trawl net at Nochikuppam of Chennai Coast (13° 06'N and 80° 18'E), 3 km from the offshore. After recording morphometric measurements, except two individuals all other snakes were released back to sea. As the retained individuals were identified as Cochin Banded Sea Snake (Fig. 1), a new record for Chennai Coast, they were kept in an aquarium tank. They were alive for 25 days and then the specimens were included in the registered collections of Marine Biological Station, ZSI, Chennai.

Description of the specimens

Material examined: 2 exs. SL5442, ZSI/MBS, Nochikuppam, Chennai, 28.06.07.

1 exe. SS1, ZSI/MBS, Nochikuppam, Chennai, 09.12.08

Measurements: Total body length for male 90 cm whereas snout-vent length for male 80 cm; head width for male 15 cm and head length for male 22.5 cm.

Pholidosis : Body scales 37 for both male and female (neck), 45 for male and 40 for female (body) ; ventral scales 252 for female; post-oculars 2 and pre-ocular 1 for both male and female; supralabials 7 for both male 4th touching eye but 2nd not touching pre-frontal) and for female (5th touching eye and 2nd touching pre-frontal); anterior temporals 2 for both male and female.

Other diagnostic characters

Generally stout – bodied snake with dorsally oriented nostrils. Scales are keeled. Tails are flat and oar-like.

For male snake

The body of the male snake is having a series of broad gray squarish cross-bands on the back separated by thin pale yellowish white cross-lines. Number of bands on body is 49; 260 small hexagonal ventral scales which are distinct from the adjacent scales. Number of maxillary teeth behind poison fangs are 10.

For female snake

The body of the female snake is having a series of black squarish cross-bands on the back separated by thin pale yellowish white cross-lines. Number of bands on body are 50, small but distinct hexagonal ventral scales (252). Number of maxillary teeth behind poison fangs are 10.

Distribution

The species is distributed from the Persian Gulf to Burma Coast in the Indian Ocean.

DISCUSSION

Sea snakes of Chennai Coast have been reported by M'Kenzinc (1820), Aiyar (1907), Wall (1918), Murthy (1977a, 1992), Kalaiarasan and Kanagasabai (1994) and Venkatraman *et al.* (2007). From the above studies it was inferred that only 10 species of sea snakes were reported from Chennai Coast for the last 100 years and the present species is a new addition. Only one type specimen is presently deposited at the National collections of Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata (ZSI 15238, Holotype) which was collected at Andaman and Nicobar islands during 1905 by Annandale (1905) and another material from Arrakan coast, Colombo, Sri Lanka reported by Ahmed (1975). Murthy (1977b) stated this species is distributed in Bay of Bengal of Indian Coast and concluded that it seems to be rare.

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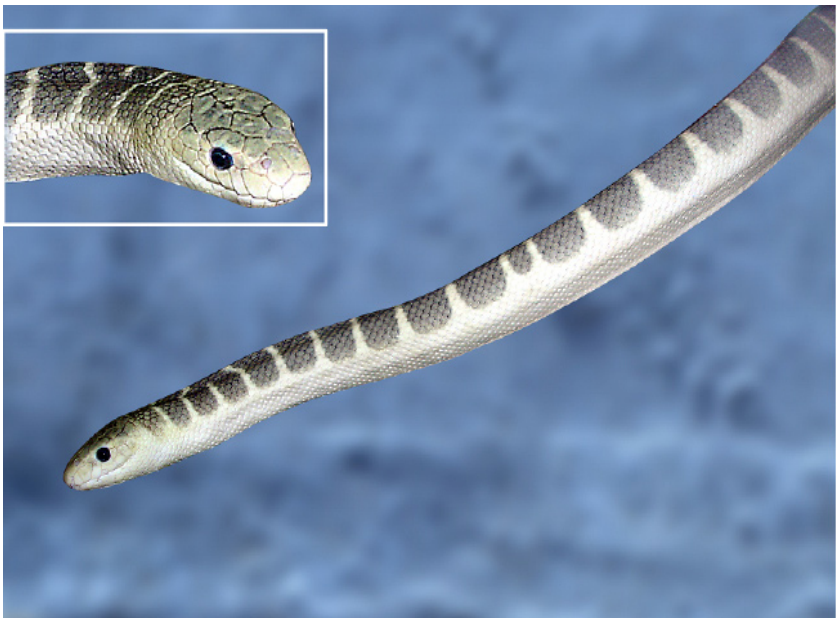

Figure 1. Coachin Banded Sea Snake, *Hydrophis ornatus* (Gray, 1942)

It was also reported to be caught in the fish trawl net at Goa Coast (West Coast) (Lobo Pers. Comm). It was also recorded in Cochin and China (FMNH 11568) and reported by Voris (1972).

The diagnostic characters of the present specimens resemble the descriptions of the species given by Smith (1943) and Whitaker and Captain (2004). According to Smith the body scales are 28-37 for male and 31-45 for female (neck) and 33-45 for male and 39-55 for female (midbody); ventral scales are 209-260 in males and 236-312 in females;1 pre-ocular and 2-3 post-oculars ;supralabials are 7-8 (3rd and 4th touching eye and 2nd touching pre-frontal) ;number of maxillary teeth behind poison fangs are 10-13.Thus the identification of the present specimen was confirmed as *Hydrophis ornatus*, a new record to East coast of India, based on the various morphometric and meristic characters and available literature (Smith, 1943; Whitaker and Captain, 2004).

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