

NOTES ON THE REPTILES OF BULGARIA

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There has been significant progress in investigations of the herpetofauna of Europe in recent times, and numbers of publications appear every year dealing with all aspects of the distribution, natural history, ecology and systematics of amphibians and reptiles. But some parts of Europe have not been studied in detail until now. Bulgaria is one of the countries most poorly known; the distribution of reptile species there has been investigated only superficially. The greatest paradox is that many localities where rare species are found are kept secret: Bulgaria has become the main country for collecting reptiles by East European terrarium enthusiasts, and none of them want to betray their own localities. These people collect many specimens of rare snakes every spring to keep for themselves or, more often now, for trade. Also, local people understand a good business and sometimes sell reptiles to foreigners. Horned vipers, *Vipera ammodytes*, are collected in great numbers in some parts of Bulgaria for medical purposes (antivenin production), and I know places where some years ago it was possible to catch hundreds of specimens, but now the population has decreased drastically and it is difficult to find several. Tortoises, *Testudo graeca*, and *T. hermanni*, are eaten in many parts of the country, though they are protected (the author had an opportunity to taste the meat). I do not expect that even the Red Data Book for Bulgarian reptiles which is now in preparation will change this situation.

Fortunately, there are still ideal areas for investigation and there is much to be done, starting with the basic preliminary of making an inventory of species. In 1979 a new snake, *Coluber rubriceps* (plate 1), collected by M. Bartosik from Poland was described (Bartosik and Beskov – the detailed article is in press). Generally speaking the specimens found previously in the vicinity of Ropotamo River mouth and described as *Coluber najadum dahlui* in fact belong to *C. rubriceps*, according to these authors. As *C. rubriceps* was noted in European Turkey (Baran 1976) its distribution may also extend to the north. Whether this taxonomic discovery is of any value we will see after examining specimens from other possible localities on the southern coast of the Black Sea. Bartosik, during the course of his investigation of this region last year, found *Malpolon monspessulanus insignitus* and *Ablepharus kitaibelii kitaibelii* which have not been recorded from Bulgaria until now. These results will also be published elsewhere and they should stimulate further studies in this area. As can be seen, other reptile species may extend their range to the north. This may also apply to the Leopard Snake, *Elaphe situla* (plate 2), extremely rare in south-eastern Bulgaria. Its distribution is very poorly known, too.

The surroundings of Harmanli are one of the richest parts of the country, herpetologically. This area is the one most frequently visited by amateurs who search especially for *Elaphe quatuorlineata sauromates* (plate 3). The list of other reptiles consists of *Ophisaurus apodus*, *Lacerta viridis meridionalis* (I saw one melanistic specimen), *Lacerta trilineata dobrogica*, *Podarcis taurica*, *Natrix tessellata*, *Natrix natrix* (the striped form formerly known as *N. n. persa*), *Coluber jugularis caspius*, *Malpolon m. monspessulanus*, *Elaphe longissima*, *Typhlops vermicularis*, *Eryx jaculus turcicus*, *Vipera ammodytes meridionalis*, *Testudo graeca*, *T. hermanni* and *Emys orbicularis*. During some spring visits to this region I found all the above mentioned lizards and two *Natrix* species to be the most abundant. Young specimens of them born the previous year are also very common, e.g. *Lacerta trilineata* (plate 4). The largest European Lizard, *Ophisaurus apodus*, often reaches, in this area, a length of one metre and a weight of about 450g, but I have only caught two juveniles (total length 381 and 358mm respectively and about 13g). It is possible to find young specimens of *Coluber jugularis caspius*, both *Natrix*, and *Vipera ammodytes*. Juveniles of Grass and Dice snakes feed mainly on the tadpoles of *Rana ridibunda*. The Caspian Whip Snake is the most aggressive, known even to spring up to a height of as much as 1.5m,

every time ready to bite (plate 5). The largest specimen caught in this region was 2.4m.

Some local people are also engaged in snake hunting, and what is interesting is that they have a lot of beliefs about reptiles, and authentic observations. A man known to me, for example, was twice the victim of a Horned Viper's bite but nothing happened to him though he did not receive any medical attention. It is said that sheep bitten even on the snout by vipers also do not die. This man saw places where Caspian Whip Snakes, Horned Vipers and Grass Snakes hibernated together. Also, according to him, *C. jugularis* feeds occasionally on young vipers. But the most controversial belief is that vipers return to overwinter to the places where they were born (if it was in a human's house and juveniles were born there, they would return to this house).

This short note cannot, of course, be complete, and my purpose is to point out only some problems dealing with Bulgarian herpetology. It is to be hoped that in the years to come successful studies of every kind will be made in this poorly known country.

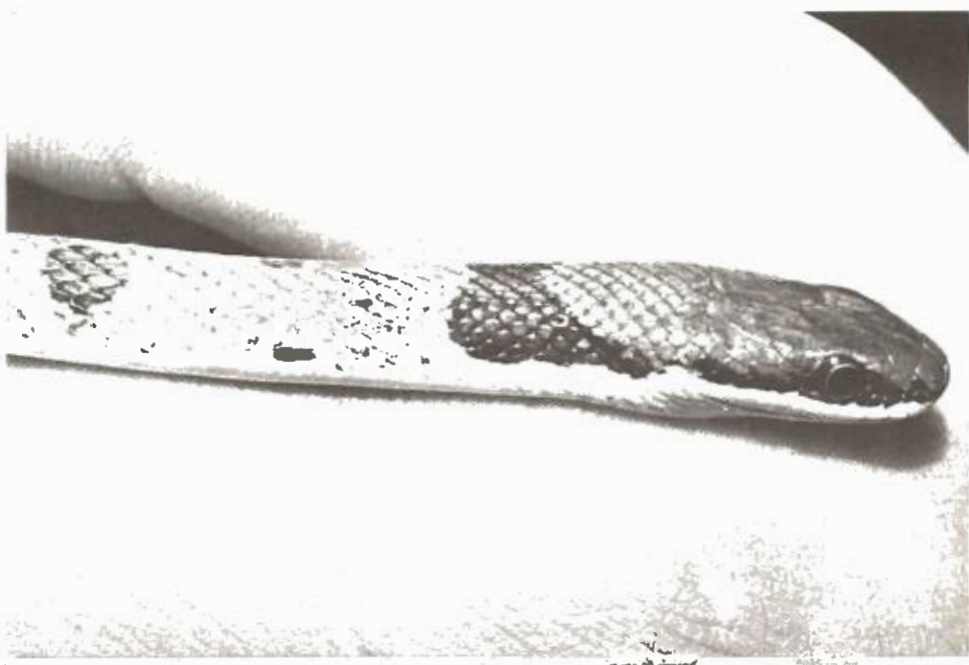


Plate 1. *Coluber rubriceps*



Plate 2. *Elaphe situla*

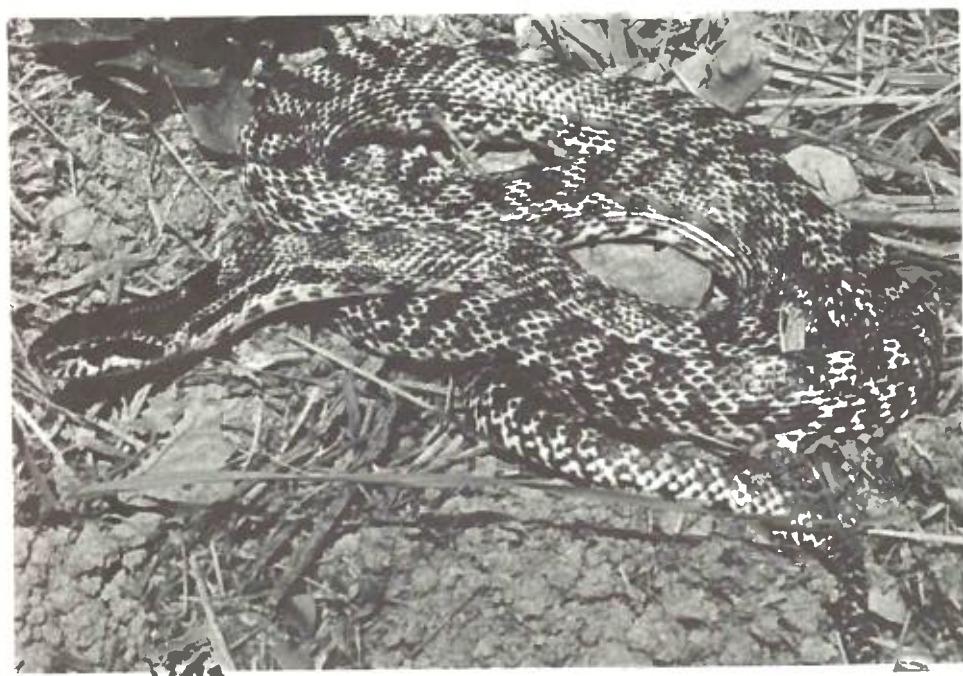


Plate 3. *Elaphe quatuorlineata sauromates*

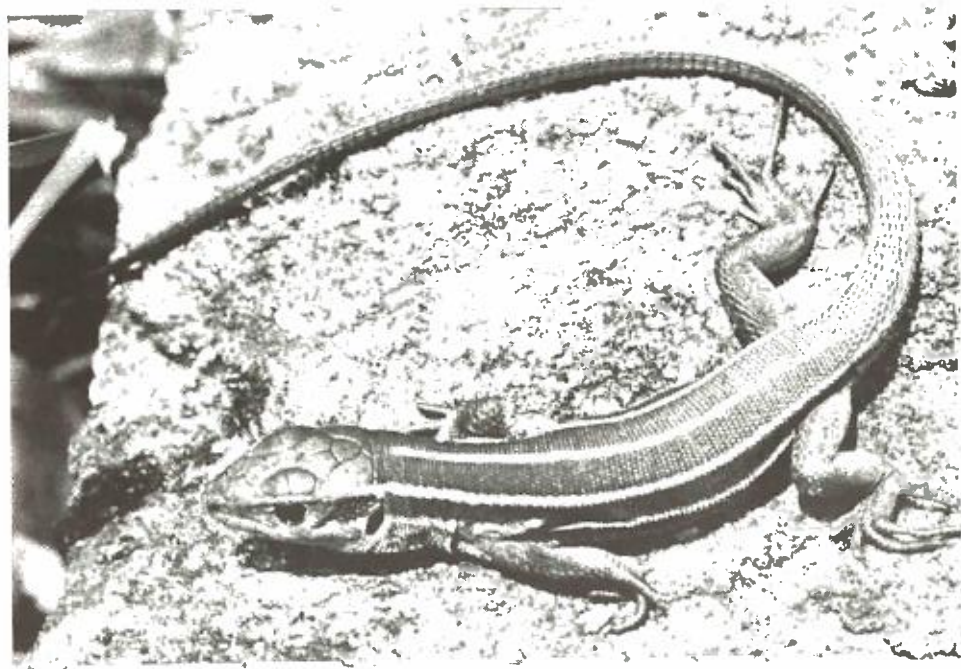


Plate 4. *Lacerta trilineata*

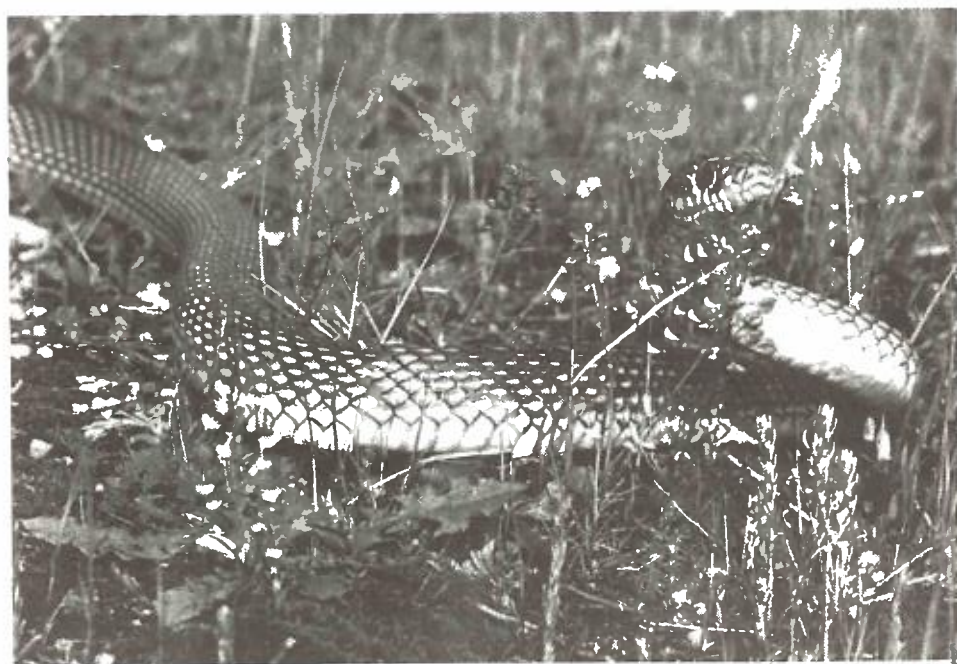


Plate 5. *Coluber jugularis caspius*