

An updated distribution of the Arabian cat snake *Telescopus dhara* in the United Arab Emirates

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The Arabian cat snake *Telescopus dhara* is a rear-fanged venomous member of the colubridae family. Adult Arabian cat snakes are typically reported to be between 60 and 70 cm long, with the largest individual cited in literature measuring 113.2 cm total length (Egan, 2007). The known distribution of this species includes the mountain ranges of Arabia, from the Gulf of Aqaba in the north down through the western and central mountains of Saudi Arabia; the range continues through Yemen and throughout rocky and mountainous areas of Oman and the UAE (Gasperetti, 1988; Gardner et al., 2009; Soorae et al., 2010). Usual body colour of the Arabian cat snake varies from shades of brown to orange, often with darker transverse markings on the dorsal surface. The ventral surface is cream-coloured and otherwise not pigmented (Gardner, 2013).

The first record of *T. dhara* from the UAE was published by Egan (2007). This record pertains to an orange-coloured specimen caught in Sharjah. Egan (2007) suggested this specimen was probably transported in date palms from northern Oman. In the following 10 year period there appears to be only a handful of subsequently published records (Gardner et al., 2009) and a handful of anecdotal reports from the UAE. Potential habitat of *T. dhara* exists throughout the Hajar mountain range and multiple records from both the more northerly Musandam Peninsula and Oman to the south lend further support to a potentially more continuous area of occupancy within the UAE.

This communication reports on two further records of *T. dhara* from Wadi Helo in south-eastern UAE. The first snake was observed by GT and GB on the night of 21 July 2017 at 22:12 hrs within Wadi Helo (25° 00'50" N, 56° 21'40" E). It was found on a tree stump in farmland at 383 masl when discovered and was of the 'orange' colour morph, which has previously been recorded in the UAE. The second individual was observed during a night time search in Wadi Helo on the north-eastern facing slope of the western edge of the valley (25° 01'10" N, 56° 12'10" E). The snake was seen at around 01:00 hrs on the morning of 3 October 2017. When discovered it was moving slowly across a loose rocky slope at 555 masl. This specimen of *T. dhara* (Fig. 1) was approximately 50 cm total length and of the known 'orange' colour morph. These findings support the suggestion by Gardner et al., (2009) that the majority of northern Hajar *T. dhara* may be of the orange colour morph. On both occasions, after taking photographs, these snakes were released where they were found.



Figure 1. Arabian cat snake from 3 October 2017, Wadi Helo



Figure 2. Habitat of *T. dhara* in Wadi Helo

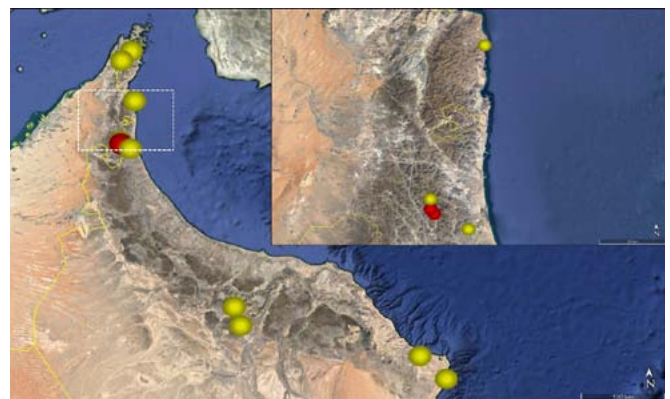


Figure 3. A map of the current published records for the Arabian cat snake in the Hajar Mountains of Oman and the UAE. Published records are indicated by yellow icons. Our new contributions from the UAE are indicated in red.

A specimen of *T. dhara* from Wadi Helo is shown in figure 1 and the typical habitat of this species is shown in figure 2. Figure 3 shows a map of the known records of Arabian cat snake from the Hajar Mountains of Oman and UAE, with an inset showing the known UAE records.

While not representing any significant range extension, the findings reported here do appear to be the only published records of *T. dhara* from the UAE within the last 8 years (Gardner, 2009) and prior to the year 2007 there were no records from the UAE (Egan, 2007). The two new records provided in this note add important data to the current known distribution and status of the Arabian cat snake within the UAE and suggest that there is a stable population in at least the south of the country and that Wadi Helo represents an important area for *T. dhara* in the UAE, with three of five records from the country being from this location. However, it is possible that there is a sampling bias at this site due to its more accessible nature when compared to other parts of the Hajar Mountains. The few records of the Arabian cat snake from the UAE suggest that the species may be uncommon and we agree with the suggestion of Gardner et al. (2009) that this species is deserving of listing on the UAE Red Data List of species of conservation concern.

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