

A SHORT NOTE ON THE HERPETOFAUNA OF LANGKAWI ISLAND, MALAYSIA

FRANK D. BOWLES

37, Albany Terrace, Dundee, DD3 6HS.

INTRODUCTION

A childhood ambition to visit the tropics was fulfilled last spring when my wife and myself managed to obtain a 'long-haul' package to Langkawi, a hilly, rain-forested island in a small archipelago lying off the north-west coast of the Malayan peninsula. Separated from the mainland near the Thailand border, Langkawi has until recently escaped the attention of developers. The government has however just declared the island to be a duty-free zone to attract tourism, and though much of the interior and northern coast is protected, the west coast, with its extensive sandy beaches, is being built up fast, and the interesting sand dune and scrub hinterland which divides the shore from the paddy-fields and rain forest is disappearing rapidly, jeopardising the herpetofauna that is found there.

We were based in accommodation at Pantai Cenang Bay in the extreme south-west of the island, and made expeditions to Kuah Town and its environs, the north coast, and the smaller islands of Dayang Buting and Singar Besar, a wildlife sanctuary. We were in Langkawi from April 1-15, 1996.

AMPHIBIA

We saw five species of frogs and toads; all situated between a narrow, sewage infested swamp that divided the coastal scrub from the rain forest, and the beach. We identified them later in the U.K., from descriptions, photos and sketches made in the field. One species of Pelobatidae we are still uncertain about.

Bufonidae

Bufo melanostictus. This species, which looks superficially very similar to *Bufo bufo* in appearance, though paler and with black vericosing of the flanks, was seen once, about 23.00 hours, trying to escape the dance-floor of a crowded outdoor restaurant situated by a small lake just above the beach.

Ranidae

Rana erythraea. A smallish typical frog with green back and chestnut brown flanks. Found in fairly large numbers on the edge of paddy fields and the rain forest, both in irrigation ditches and around sheets of sewage contaminated stagnant water.

Rana doricae. A small olive green frog with longitudinal darker bars and, in some specimens, a light vertebral stripe. At night they were very active around stagnant water, but during the day were to be found in quite large numbers under discarded hardboard and other similar refuse.

Microhylidae

Kaloula pulchra. Two specimens seen at night in the hotel grounds: one sitting on a flower-bed munching an insect, the other attempting to climb up some wire-netting. This is a strikingly marked toad about 7 centimetres long, with a brown back and white flanks, with a further irregular brown stripe retreating back behind each eye. Popular text-books in Malaysia describe it as "The Malaysian Narrow-Mouthed Toad."

Pelobatidae

Megophrys nasuta. "Asian Horned Toad". Two of what could have been this animal seen on foliage on edge of rain forest.

REPTILES

We were rather disappointed to find that it was unusual to see snakes outside the rainy season, which commenced in July. We did, however, observe a small, greyish-green colubrid of unknown species at the side of a forest path in the north of the island on 2 April about 12.40 hours.

We identified seven different species of lizard: three geckos, two agamids, a skink and a monitor.

Gekkonidae

Hemidactylus frenatus. A small, pinkish brown gecko, about 10 centimetres long, found in considerable numbers both inside and outside buildings. Twelve were observed together waiting for insects beneath the strip lighting of an illuminated hotel sign. They were regarded as pests by hoteliers, presumably because they excreted on wall surfaces.

Cyrtodactylus marmoratus. We found this 12 centimetres long gecko underneath pieces of bark and small bits of wood just above the shore line about 0800 hours on 4 April. Its ground colour was a creamish ochre and it was heavily spotted and blotched with dark brown. Another specimen was seen at the base of a fence post in the hotel garden the next morning.

Gekko gecko. A specimen of this huge, brilliantly coloured gecko was seen just inside the roof of a woodland shelter. It was over 30 centimetres long and was sea green in colour, covered with turquoise and bright orange spots. Its relatively large eyes were a tawny yellow. Although this animal has one of the loudest voices in the reptile kingdom, it remained completely silent during the several minutes that we watched it. It was seen about 15.30 hours in the nature reserve on Singa Besar Island on 12 April.

Agamidae

Leiolepis belliana or Butterfly Lizard. On April 3, we took a taxi to Kuah, the island's capital. In a formal garden surrounding the mosque we saw what we first thought were thrushes rushing about the lawns. Closer inspection revealed that the creatures were in fact agamid lizards, mostly males competing for territory. These lizards lived in holes dug in the sandy soil of the lawns. They were about 35 centimetres long, olive brown in colour, the males adorned with an orange and black 'flash' above the shoulders. They were very timid and exceedingly difficult to photograph.

Acanthosaura armata. We visited Kuah again on April 11, and walked along the wood-fringed coast beyond the harbour. About 13.00 hours we observed an exotic looking agamid with a serrated crest on the back of its head and neck. About 30 centimetres long, light golden-brown in colour with both white and darker markings attenuated limbs and strange "eyelash" designs round its eyes, it was the most unusual lizard that we saw in Langkawi. It was standing motionless on a stone, and made very little effort to make off.

Scincidae

Mabuya multifasciata. This very common skink was ubiquitous in Langkawi. About 25 centimetres long with small but quite well-formed limbs, this animal could be distinguished by its bright orange-red flanks which contrasted with its otherwise sober livery of bronze upper surfaces and light grey belly. It was most often observed basking at sunrise and sundown on banks, rubbish dumps and road edges.

Varanidae

Varanus salvator, Water Monitor. We first encountered this two metre long reptile late in the afternoon of April 5 on the edge of a paddy field, following a young girl herding a flock of ducks and ducklings. Seeing the animal silhouetted against the setting sun, we first thought it was a slender mammal of the mongoose variety. However the field glasses soon confirmed it was a large hungry lizard hoping to grab a duckling dinner. Seeing us standing in its path, it abandoned the idea and trotted sideways into the adjacent forest. Our second meeting with a monitor was more dramatic: the next morning about 08.00 hours we were looking for skinks and geckos amongst the bushes lying above the shore line, when we disturbed a basking adult which rushed out literally at our feet with the noise and vigour of a fox, giving us quite a fright. During the following days we saw several of these creatures, basking by lakesides and rivers, excavating food items such as eggs with their powerful clawed feet, swimming across estuaries. We watched a brightly marked youngster cut through the water at great speed, its body twisting from side to side like a snake, its head held erect. Although they were usually timid, one seen on Dayang Bunting Island was scratching up the earth for food at the edge of a path crowded with tourists.

Although we only saw one snake in the wild, a kind local Malay, hearing about our interest in reptiles, guided us to an acquaintance of his who had a collection of native snakes. These consisted of several rather shabby Reticulated Pythons (*Python reticulatus*), a few subdued cobras (*Naja naja*), a single King Cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*), and one seven foot long Mangrove Snake (*Boiga dendrophilia*), which he insisted on winding round our necks.

Although the Saltwater Crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) is now extinct around Langkawi's shores, there is a well maintained crocodile farm on the island where this animal can be seen in various stages of development. There is also quite a good python enclosure there.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. C.J. McCarthy, British Museum (Natural History) for his help in identifying the reptiles described above.

REFERENCES

- Capula, M. (1990.) *The Macdonald Encyclopaedia of Amphibians and Reptiles*. Macdonald Orbis, London.
- Grzimek, B. (1970.) *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopaedia, Vol. 5*. Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York, Cincinnati, Toronto, London, Melbourne.
- Mattison, C. (1992.) *Frogs & Toads of the World*. Blandford, London.
- Mattison, C. (1986.) Notes on Some Frogs Observed in West Malaysia. *British Herpetol. Soc. Bull.* 17, 28-30.



LANGKAWI ISLAND

- A Pantai Cenang
- B Kuah Town
- C Dayang Bunting Island
- D Singa Besar Island

0 5 Miles