
ARTICLES

**A NEW ADDITION TO EGYPT'S
HERPETOFAUNA: COLUBER
ALGIRUS (JAN, 1863)**

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Despite the long history of herpetological investigation in Egypt, new taxa are still being added to the country's herpetofauna regularly, reflecting on one hand the rarity of some of the species, and on the other the limited geographical scope of past work. Egypt's snake fauna is, hitherto, composed of 36 species. Most recently *Ramphotyphlops braminus* (Daudin, 1803) was added to this fauna (Baha El Din, 1996). In this note evidence is presented for the inclusion of *Coluber algirus* (Jan, 1863) to the snake fauna of Egypt. A single example of this species (SMB 10600 in private collection) was collected by the author south-west of Marsa Matruh, Egypt, at

31°19' N 27° 05' E, on 19 December 1999.

DESCRIPTION

Sub-adult female, SVL 65 cm, tail 15 cm. General colour brownish with about 90 alternating dark and light marks along the entire dorsal side, coalescing into a narrow dark line above the tail. Anterior dorsal side of head grey brown with a wide black band on nape (see Fig. 1). Venter cream coloured. There are regular dark blotches on the margin of, approximately, every third or fourth ventral. Supralabials 9/8 with fifth entering orbit, infralabials 9/9, ventrals 224, subcaudals 96, dorsal scale rows at mid-body 25, anal undivided.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The specimen is referred to *Coluber algirus*. The only other *Coluber* species known from the Marsa Matruh region with which this species could potentially be confused is *C. rogersi* (Anderson,



Fig. 1. *Coluber algirus* from south-west of Marsa Matruh, Egypt (SMB 10600). Photo by author.

1896). However, *C. rogersi* differs in having only 17-19 dorsal scale rows at mid-body. Colour and pattern also differ significantly. The general colour is greyish, with dorsal banding pattern restricted to the anterior two-thirds of the body length and lacking the black band on the nape.

Coluber algirus is distributed from Mauritania eastwards through Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Malta, where it is possibly introduced (Arnold & Burton, 1978; Schätti, 1986; Schleich et al., 1996). The present record extends the range of the species more than 300 km further east of its easternmost known distribution limits at Tobruq, Libya (Krammer & Schnurrenberger, 1963) and is the first from Egypt. Resetar (1981) and Schleich (1987) both recorded the species from Kouf National Park in northern Cyrenaica, Libya, not very far from Egyptian territory.

The specimen was found at noon amongst rubble of an old ruin situated atop of a limestone ridge. The same building had several *Tarentola mauritanica fascicularis* geckos on its walls, which would seem to be the snake's main prey item in this region. Indeed, the snake consumed one of these lizards in captivity. The species is probably rare, with a limited distribution extending in a narrow band along coastal ridges that fringe the western Mediterranean coast of Egypt, perhaps extending further east to Alexandria. Its sympatric congener *C. rogersi*,

which is an uncommon but widespread inhabitant of the region, seems to prefer more open and flat rock-strewn terrain. Six other snakes belonging to the genus *Coluber* are currently known from Egypt: *florulentus* Geoffroy, 1827, *jugularis* Linnaeus, 1758, *nummifer* Reuss, 1834, *rhodorhachis* (Jan, 1865), and *sinai* (Schmidt & Marx, 1956).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The specimen of *Coluber algirus* was obtained during fieldwork carried out for the Nature Conservation Sector of the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency. I would like to thank Dr. Francis Gilbert for reviewing a draft of this note. Special thanks are also due to my wife, Mindy, for her support and encouragement.

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FORUM

COMMENTS ON 'A NEW
ADDITION TO EGYPT'S
HERPETOFAUNA: *COLUBER*
ALGIRUS (JAN, 1863)' by S. BAHAH EL DIN
HERPETOLOGICAL BULLETIN
NO. 72, pp. 2-3.

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NOT since John Anderson published his beautifully illustrated monographic study in 1898 has a major work on Egypt's herpetofauna appeared other than that of Saleh (1997). Since Anderson's time, only a few amphibian and reptile taxa have been added to the Egyptian fauna, and Baha El Din is one of a few

contemporary Egyptian herpetologists whose contribution to the herpetofaunal knowledge of the region is widely recognised.

The two-page article in question includes an introduction, results and discussion, acknowledgements, and reference citations. The morphological description of the snake is concise, but fails to address some important characters, such as the shape of the snout and head scales; e.g. rostral, loreal, nasal, frontal, parietal, temporals....etc. Since the author has deposited his single specimen in his private collection, it would also have been helpful to provide a full morphological and morphometric account of the snake, especially when it serves as a new taxon to the country's fauna.

The author did not provide independent verification of the snake's identity. In his similarly short account, Baha El Din (1996) described a specimen of the worm snake, *Ramphotyphlops braminus*, also without

independent substantiation, considering it a new addition not only to the Egyptian but also the North African snake fauna. The omission of this detail does not necessarily mean that the identification is dubious, but it is usual practice for range extensions to be corroborated in this way.

The author fails to mention any Egyptian herpetological reference. He stated that there are 36 species of snakes in Egypt, and although this is correct, he could have cited the most recent book on the amphibian and reptiles of the country as a reference (see Saleh, 1997, p. 36.).

The author speculated that *Coluber algirus* could potentially be confused with *Coluber rogersi* in Marsa Matruh region. Nevertheless, he describes in the same paragraph how the two species differ significantly in terms of colour and pattern. This is a contradiction. Moreover, *C. algirus* does have a black band on the nape, while *C. rogersi* does not. It is not impossible for the informed reader to differentiate between the two species. The author cites Anderson, 1896 when in fact the correct one should be Anderson, 1898. However, neither of these works was listed in the literature citations.

The author states that 'six other snakes belonging to the genus *Coluber* are known from Egypt', yet he unintentionally lists only five. Saleh (1997) cited seven snakes from the genus *Coluber* including *C. elegantissimus*. However, only six species could be considered since he did not refer to a definite locality of the latter snake in Egypt. Again, the author did not mention the Egyptian reference (see Saleh, 1997, pp. 139-146). Despite this paper's inconsistencies, the inclusion of *C. algirus*, based on the information provided and the fairly good monochrome photograph, could still be a valid addition to the herpetofauna of Egypt.

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