

# On the occurrence of *Psammophis punctulatus* Bibron & Duméril 1854 in Egypt

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DURING field investigation of the herpetofauna of Gebel Elba in the extreme south east of Egypt in November 2000, the first author observed closely a distinctive snake of the genus *Psammophis*, which obviously differed from the three other congeners known from the country: *P. aegyptius* Marx, 1958, *P. schokari* (Forskål, 1775) and *P. sibilans* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Anderson, 1898; Flower, 1933; Marx 1968; Saleh, 1997; Baha El Din, 2001). Unfortunately that specimen escaped, preventing further detailed study. However, it was tentatively assigned by Baha El Din (2001) to *Psammophis punctulatus*, based on its distinctive colour and pattern, general morphology, and its known geographic distribution and ecology. In November 2004 the second author encountered a further specimen and obtained good diagnostic photographs (e.g. Fig. 1), which unquestionably confirm the initial designation made by Baha El Din (2001). This is the first confirmed report of the species from Egypt.

The two Egyptian examples were both between 900 and 1200 mm long, slender with a long tail. Eyes notably large. Dorsal side of head and neck plain light olive-grey. Two narrow black stripes extended on each side of the head from the snout through the eyes and merging on the neck, forming a single broad black median stripe that extends posteriorly to the tail tip. This median stripe is bordered on each side by a narrow yellowish stripe, followed by a broad grey band on each flank. Venter white with scattered black spots, throat and labials white.

Two subspecies of *P. punctulatus* are recognised. The nominate subspecies is found in Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia and

north-west Kenya (Parker 1949; Pitman 1974; Spawls *et al.*, 2002) and is the form found in Egypt. Specimens of *P. punctulatus* (FMNH 167907 & 190326) from Kassala, Sudan are identical in colouration to Egyptian animals (Fig. 2). Scortecci (1928) describes a similar specimen with a total length of 1260 mm, from Dangollo Mountain (approx. 15°N20'N 38°30'E), Eritrea. *Psammophis p. trivirgatus* (Peters, 1878) (sometimes regarded as a full species), which is found further south in Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, has a reddish head (Parker, 1949; Pitman, 1974; Spawls *et al.*, 2002).

The two Egyptian animals were found in Wadi Aidieb (22°12'N 36°22'E), a boulder strewn, lightly vegetated wadi in dry *Acacia* scrubland. Both animals were found in the afternoon, at an elevation between 200–500 metres. The first animal was encountered while it was pursuing a *Ptyodactylus ragazzii* across a large boulder.

In Egypt *Psammophis punctulatus* appears to be confined to Gebel Elba. It is unlikely that the species will be found any further north, due to the lack of suitable habitats. The species is probably localised and uncommon or rare, given the fact it has not been encountered previously, despite being a fairly large, active, diurnal snake.

Gebel Elba receives up to 400 mm of precipitation annually (compared with less than 50 mm in surrounding desert), mostly in the form of dense mists, hence its description as a 'mist oasis'. This relatively high precipitation has allowed many sub Saharan elements of flora and fauna, which do not occur further north, to exist in this enclave. Amongst the herpetofauna, there are several species of East African and south Arabian affinities, including *Bufo dodsoni* Boulenger,



**Figure 1** (above). *Psammophis punctulatus* in Wadi Aidieb, Gebel Elba, Egypt, November 2004. Photograph by Osama Ghazali.

**Figure 2** (below). Close up of FMNH 167907 (*P. punctulatus* from Kassala, Sudan, collected by Harry Hoogstraal and Ibrahim Helmy) for comparison. Photograph by Sherif Baha El Din.

1895; *Hemidactylus foudaii* Baha El Din, 2003; *H. sinaitus* Boulenger, 1885; *Latastia longicaudata* (Reuss, 1834); *Leptotyphlops nursii* (Anderson, 1896); *Ophisops elbaensis* Schmidt & Marx,

1957; *Pseudemias mucronata* (Blanford, 1870) and *Ptyodactylus ragazzii* (Schmidt & Marx, 1957; Baha El Din, 2001, 2003).

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