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A new species of *Chironius* Fitzinger, 1826 (Squamata: Colubridae) from the Pantepui region, northeastern South America

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Abstract

A new colubrid snake of the genus *Chironius* Fitzinger, 1826 is described from the Pantepui region, Guiana Shield, northern South America. The new species, *C. challenger* **sp. nov.**, is identified as a member of the genus *Chironius* by its low number of dorsal scale rows (< 12), and it differs markedly from all known congeners by the combination of 10 dorsal scale rows at midbody, absence of apical pits and paravertebral keels in females, more than 149 ventrals, less than 105 divided subcaudals, anal scale single, loreal as high as long or only slightly longer than high, adults and juveniles brownish with lighter crossbands, adults with dark mottling on venter, and 39–41 maxillary teeth. A key to the *Chironius* species of the Guiana Shield is provided.

Key words: Auyantepui, Guaiquinima Tepui, Guiana Shield, Guyana, Maringma Tepui, Mount Wokomung, Reptilia, Systematics, Taxonomy

Introduction

Diurnal colubrid snakes of the genus *Chironius* are conspicuous inhabitants of Central and South American savannas and rainforests. The genus has undergone two major revisions during the two last decades, both based on morphological characters (Dixon *et al.* 1993, Hollis 2006). Hollis' (2006) phylogenetic results estimated from morphological and hemipenial characters strongly support the monophyly of *Chironius*, and indicate close relationships with *Dendrophidion* and *Dendrophis*.

Chironius species are the only Neotropical snakes having 10 or 12 dorsal scale rows at midbody (Dixon *et al.* 1993). The 11 subspecies recognized by Dixon *et al.* (1993) were recently elevated to full species status by Hollis (2006), and the genus currently comprises 20 species, distributed from the Caribbean coast of Honduras to southern Uruguay (Hollis 2006).

The phytogeographic province of Pantepui (Mayr & Phelps 1967) forms part of the biologically and geographically distinct unit called the Guiana Shield, which is located in northeastern South America. Pantepui refers to the complex of mountains in the Guayana region of southern Venezuela, west-central Guyana, southern Suriname, and northern Brazil (Huber 1987, McDiarmid & Donnelly 2005). A recent expedition to Maringma Tepui, a sandstone flat-topped mountain located in the Pakaraima Mountains at the Guyana-Brazil border, led to the description of several new species of amphibians and reptiles (see Kok 2008, 2009a, b, MacCulloch *et al.* 2008). At 1500 m elevation, while hiking the tepui, a *Chironius* specimen was collected, which although superficially similar to *C. fuscus*, was sufficiently different to be considered as a possible new species. Examination of additional *Chironius* museum specimens from the Pantepui region confirmed this hypothesis and revealed that at least three museum specimens of the new taxon, also collected on tepui slopes or summits, have previously been confused with *C. fuscus*. The purpose of this paper is to describe this new species, which is apparently restricted to the highlands of the eastern and central Pantepui districts in Venezuela and Guyana.

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