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A long-lost relic from the Eastern Ghats: Morphology, distribution and habitat of *Sepsophis punctatus* Beddome, 1870 (Squamata: Scincidae)

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Abstract

Sepsophis punctatus Beddome 1870, the only species of a monotypic genus, was described based on a single specimen from the Eastern Ghats of India. We rediscovered the species based on specimens from Odisha and Andhra Pradesh state, India, after a gap of 137 years, including four specimens from close to the type locality. The holotype was studied in detail, and we present additional morphological characters of the species with details on natural history, habitat and diet. The morphological characters of the holotype along with two additional specimens collected by Beddome are compared with the specimens collected by us. We also briefly discuss the distribution of other members of the subfamily Scincinae and their evolutionary affinities.

Key words: *Sepsophis*, rediscovery, Peninsular India, Eastern Ghats, Scincidae

Introduction

The monotypic scincid genus *Sepsophis* is endemic to the Eastern Ghats, a broken chain of mountains running along the east coast of Peninsular India. *Sepsophis punctatus* was described by Beddome in 1870 based on a single specimen from “Darakondah on the Golcondah hills near Vizagapatnam” (Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh state, India), which was collected from approximately 914 metres (ca. 3,000 feet) above sea level (Figure 1). Two further specimens were collected by Beddome from “Gorge Hills, Godavari valley”, however, he did not publish his findings or measurements, and subsequent authors appear to have merely used the distributional data (Boulenger 1890; Smith 1935). Since its description, no additional specimens of *S. punctatus* were found until 2007, when one of the authors (PM) found a single specimen north of Mahanadi River in the Khandadhar Hills of Sundargarh District, Odisha state, India. Subsequently in 2009, two more specimens were recorded from Similipal Biosphere Reserve and Chandragiri forest, respectively. Although these records were published in a local newspaper, book and a popular article (<http://www.royalsociety.org.nz/2007/05/29/india-lizard/>, Dutta *et al.* 2009, Datta-Roy 2010), these were not followed by a formal publication. In 2011, four more specimens were found in the Visakhapatnam Hills of the Eastern Ghats, close to the type locality. We report the rediscovery of *S. punctatus*, 137 years after its original description, from additional localities across the Eastern Ghats of peninsular India. We also present additional morphological characteristics for *S. punctatus* from specimens collected close to its type locality.