



The taxonomic status of the Venezuelan snakes *Atractus matthewi* and *A. nororientalis* (Serpentes, Colubridae)

PHILIPPE J. R. KOK¹, GILSON A. RIVAS FUENMAYOR² and OLIVIER S. G. PAUWELS³

^{1,3}Department of Vertebrates, Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, 29 rue Vautier, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium; Email: Philippe.Kok@naturalsciences.be, osgpauwels@hotmail.com

²Museo de Historia Natural La Salle, Apartado Postal 1930, Caracas 1010-A, Venezuela; Email: anolis30@hotmail.com, gilson.rivas@fundacionlasalle.org.ve

About 20 species of the colubrid snake genus *Atractus* have been reported from Venezuela (Markezich & Barrio-Amorós 2004). Our attention was recently drawn to the simultaneous description of two new and very similar *Atractus* species from northeastern Venezuela (Markezich & Barrio-Amorós 2004, Sánchez *et al.* 2004). In this paper we show that these two species are actually conspecific and that *Atractus nororientalis* Sánchez, De Sousa, Esqueda & Manzanilla, 2004 is a junior synonym of *Atractus matthewi* Markezich & Barrio-Amorós, 2004.

The description of *Atractus matthewi* was published in English in the *Bulletin of the Maryland Herpetological Society*, while that of *Atractus nororientalis* was published in Spanish in *Saber*, Universidad de Oriente, Venezuela. Both species were described from the same area, with both articles mentioning that manuscripts were received in July 2004, accepted in July 2004 and published in September 2004. In their description of *Atractus nororientalis* Sánchez *et al.* even referred to paratypes of *A. matthewi* as “referred material” explaining that “*Los especímenes EBRG 3952, 3953 y 3954, capturados durante las actividades de campo por los autores y depositados en la colección de reptiles de EBRG, fueron tomados en calidad de préstamo por terceras personas durante la ejecución de este proyecto y no devueltos a su debido tiempo. Por ese motivo, no se pudo realizar la verificación de algunas de sus características taxonómicas. Esto adicionalmente, imposibilitó su inclusión como parte de la serie tipo de la especie. Sin embargo, se suministran algunos datos de estos ejemplares y se mencionan en el aparte de “Material referido”*. Which means: “The specimens EBRG 3952, 3953 and 3954, captured during field activities by the authors and deposited in the collection of reptiles of EBRG, were borrowed by third persons during the execution of this project and were not returned within the time allowed. For that reason, the verification of some of their taxonomical characteristics could not be carried out. Additionally, their inclusion as part of the type series was impossible. However, some data about these specimens are provided and they are mentioned as “Referred material” ” (free translation by us).

The following questions then arose: (1) are *Atractus matthewi* and *A. nororientalis* conspecific; (2) in this case which species should be considered a junior synonym since the manuscripts were apparently published simultaneously? *Atractus matthewi* was described on the basis of six specimens (2 adult males, 1 adult female, 1 juvenile female, and 2 juveniles of undetermined sex), while *A. nororientalis* was described on the basis of 2 specimens (1 adult male and 1 adult female). We have examined the holotype of *A. matthewi* (AMNH 29316) and compared it with good quality digital photographs of the holotype (EBRG 4453) and the paratype (EBRG 4454) of *A. nororientalis* [unfortunately the Museo de la Estación Biológica de Rancho Grande (EBRG) refused to lend type material (F. Bisbal, *in litt.* to PJRK, 8 January 2007) and also refused to let us reproduce the type pictures here]. We carefully compared both original descriptions as well (important morphological and colouration characters are shown in Table 1). These comparisons unambiguously revealed that *Atractus matthewi* and *A. nororientalis* are not distinguishable in any morphological nor colouration character. Authors reported the same intraspecific variations (*i.e.* in the temporal scalation, with the presence of an elongate or shortened upper temporal). Nevertheless, some slight differences were noted like the number of maxillary teeth (6-7 in *A. nororientalis* vs. 8-9 in *A. matthewi*), but Markezich & Barrio-Amorós (2004: 116) stated that the character could not be determined in two other specimens. Markezich & Barrio-Amorós (*pers. comm.*, Apr. 2007) took empty sockets (2-3 in most specimens) into account for their tooth counts; it is probable that Sánchez *et al.* (2004) counted only the teeth, ignoring empty sockets, which would explain the slight difference in the tooth counts between the two descriptions of the same species. Slight differences were also noted in the number of ventral scales (157-165 in *A. nororientalis* vs. 160-168 in *A. matthewi*); in the number of supralabials (7 in *A. nororientalis* vs. 6-7 in *A. matthewi*); and in the number of infrala-