



Rediscovery of the Sri Lankan ‘house gecko’ *Hemidactylus pieresii* Kelaart (Reptilia: Gekkonidae) with a redescription of *Hemidactylus depressus* Gray

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Abstract

Hemidactylus pieresii Kelaart, a species first described from Kandy, Sri Lanka, in 1852 but not recorded since, is redescribed from two recently-discovered populations, one at the type locality and another in the rainforests of the island’s south-western lowlands. It is shown to be similar to *H. depressus* (in the synonymy of which it has been since 1935), from which it is distinguished by the possession of 53–58 (vs. 35–41) paravertebral tubercles, 17–19 (vs. 13–16) longitudinal rows of middorsal tubercles, possessing relatively small (vs. large) and closely (vs. widely) spaced middorsal tubercles, 1–3 (vs. no) postcloacal spurs, chocolate-brown (vs. light brown) coloration in life, and nape with distinct black longitudinal stripes (vs. without black stripes). *Hemidactylus pieresii*, a member of the *H. brooki* group, is distinguished from all species of *Hemidactylus* in Sri Lanka and peninsular India by the combination of the following additional characters: maximum snout-vent length 79.2 mm; ventral scales across midbody, 32–39; dorsal scales heterogeneous; ventral scales smooth, with 3 serrae; precloacal-femoral pores 17–20 on each side, separated mesially by 1–3 poreless scales; subcaudals smooth, the median row enlarged; supralabials to angle of jaws, 11 or 12; subdigital lamellae on digit IV of pes, 10 or 11; general body colour chocolate-brown; nape with distinct black longitudinal stripes. The identity of *H. pieresii* is stabilized through the designation of a neotype. Unlike most other species of *Hemidactylus*, *H. pieresii* appears to be restricted to rainforests. *Hemidactylus depressus* is also redescribed from freshly collected material from Sri Lanka and its syntype BMNH RR1962.190 (65.6 mm SVL) is designated lectotype.

Key words: biodiversity, cryptic species, *Hemidactylus argentii*, taxonomy, Sri Lanka

Introduction

In the first general work on the natural history of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), Kelaart (1853) recorded five species of geckoes of the genus *Hemidactylus*, now often referred to as ‘house geckos’ because many species are synanthropic. He described a single new species, *H. pieresii*, which has, since Smith (1935), lain in the synonymy of *H. depressus* Gray. In addition to these, the genus in Sri Lanka is presently known from seven species: *H. frenatus* Schlegel, *H. hunae* Deraniyagala, *H. lankae* Deraniyagala, *H. leschenaultii* Duméril & Bibron, *H. platyurus* (Schneider), *H. parvimaculatus* Deraniyagala and *H. scabriceps* (Annandale). In the course of a survey of Sri Lankan Sauria (1998–2005) by the Wildlife Heritage Trust of Sri Lanka, several specimens of a gecko not referable to the seven species until then known from the island were collected from rainforests in the south-western lowlands and the Gannoruwa Forest near Kandy, which we infer from the common name given by Kelaart (1853), ‘The Kandyan Gecko’, to have been the type locality of *H. pieresii*. These specimens are consistent with the (albeit brief) description of *H. pieresii* provided by Kelaart (1853: 159–160) and present the first record of that species in the 160 years that have elapsed since its discovery (no types survive: see Pethiyagoda & Manamendra-Arachchi, 1997). In this paper we clarify the identity of *H. depressus* and *H. pieresii* by redescribing them; it appears that the latter species has remained cryptic for so long because it is restricted to rainforests, unlike the majority of its congeners, which occur mainly in anthropogenic habitats and secondary forest.