

## SHORT COMMUNICATION

### A NOTE ON SPECIMENS OF *GERARDA PREVOSTIANA* (COLUBRIDAE: SERPENTES) COLLECTED FROM SRI LANKA

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Gerard's water snake or Glossy Marsh snake, *Gerarda prevostiana* Eydoux & Gervais, 1837, is a mildly venomous, aquatic colubrid of the subfamily Homalopsinae, distributed in India (including Andaman and Nicobar Islands), Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines (de Silva, 1990; Murphy & Voris, 2002; Whitaker & Captain, 2004; ARCBC, 2006). It is known to inhabit the coastal marshes, mangroves and tidal rivers in the coastal areas.

*G. prevostiana* is considered to be one of the rarest colubrid snakes in Sri Lanka and a thorough review of literature and museum records revealed that the total number of confirmed records of *G. prevostiana* from Sri Lanka presently is five.

Probably the first record of a specimen of *G. prevostiana* (under the synonym *Gerarda bicolor*) from Sri Lanka, is by Ferguson (1877), who reported a specimen from the Asiatic Society Museum, which was said to be collected from Sri Lanka. But even Ferguson doubted the collection location, thus its occurrence in the country. The doubts came to rest with the capture of a specimen from the Kelani river (no specific locality) by H.F. Fernando in 1886, which was published by Haly in 1886. The specimen collected by Fernando is the first confirmed record of this snake from the island and was deposited at the Colombo National Museum. Wall (1921) referred to it as specimen No. 99, but our recent attempts to locate the specimen at the Colombo National Museum failed. Boulenger (1896) gave Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) as a part of the distribution range of *G. prevostiana*, without referring to any particular specimens. Ko Ko Gyi (1970, p. 95, figure 11 and p.177), a Burmese herpetologist refers to a specimen of this species from Sri Lanka (no specific locality) which is in the custody of the Field Museum of Natural

History (FMNH), USA (No. 121532) (North Central Province - Gyi, 1970; FMNH online data base, 2006). In 1985, K.H.G.M. de Silva & P.K. de Silva collected another specimen from the Kala Oya mangrove in Kalpitiya (de Silva & de Silva, 1986-87). The specimen collected by de Silva and de Silva was recently located in a large bottle along with six adult Dog-faced water snakes (*Cerberus rhynchops*) and three Climbing perches (*Anabas testudineus*), preserved in 70% formaldehyde at the Department of Zoology of University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka and was deposited in the Zoology Museum at the Department of Zoology of University of Peradeniya (ZPM/W14A/047). Subsequently, in 1997, Deni Porej of University of Belgrade Yugoslavia, collected a specimen of *G. prevostiana* from the bank of the Dandugan Oya at the Muthurajawela marsh, which is now deposited at the Colombo National Museum (No. 22C1). This record, however, was only published in 2001 (Porej, 2001). The last known specimen of this species from Sri Lanka was recorded by Dharma Sri Kandamby in 1999 during a biodiversity survey of the Doowa area in Negombo (Somaweera, 2005), which is currently in the personal collection of the collector (Kandamby, *pers. comm.*). Hence, after its first confirmed record in 1886, four other specimens are known to be discovered from Sri Lanka.

A short description of *G. prevostiana* collected by K.H.M. de Silva & P.K. de Silva (ZPM/W14A/047) is given below (Fig 1 & 2).

**General characters** - Accords with the description given by Wall (1921, pp. 262-263).

**Colouration (of preserved specimen)** - Dorsally glossy, dark chocolate brown with the head and the anterior part being darker; the last three costal rows, lips and throat are light chocolate brown with darker scale bases; ventrals grayish brown with faint whitish cross lines.

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**Figure 1: Dorsal and Ventral views of the specimen**



**Figure 2. Dorsal and Lateral views of the head**

**Scalation** - Body scales in 17: 17: 15 rows; costals smooth, without apical pits; ventrals wide, 153; pre-anal undivided; anal divided; subcaudals 33 (divided); inter-nasal 1; parietals normal; supralabials 7 (4<sup>th</sup> touching orbit); infralabials 7; pre-ocular 2; post-ocular 1; temporals 1+2.

**Measurements** - Head length 18.1 mm; snout-vent length 348mm; tail length 64mm.

Until 1980 no special studies appear to have been undertaken on the snake fauna of our coastal waters, mangroves and tidal rivers. This probably accounts for the low number of records of this species from Sri Lanka. Since 1985 several such studies have been undertaken resulting already in three further records of this species. Nevertheless, this species appears to somewhat rare in Sri Lanka.

The locality given for Ko Ko Gyi's specimen (FMNH 121532) as North Central Province appears to suggest that this snake occasionally travels upstream with the tide a good distance (here it is probably the Kala Oya).

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