

HERPETOLOGIST DEEPAK VEERAPPAN HAS A SNAKE NAMED AFTER HIM

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Sinuuous grace: Wood snakes are often found while digging soil. | Photo Credit: [Surya Narayanan](#)

In the first four months of 2021, the Western Ghats presented new butterflies, frogs, fruit flies, and even a freshwater crab. Joining the list is a tiny snake of just 20 cm length with iridescent scales - *Xylophis deepaki*, first stumbled upon in a coconut plantation in Kanyakumari, is now reported to be an endemic species of Tamil Nadu and has been sighted in a few locations in the southern part of the Western Ghats. The species is named in honour of Indian herpetologist Deepak Veerappan for his contribution in erecting a new subfamily Xylophiinae to accommodate wood snakes. The team suggests the common name Deepak's wood snake.

Wood snakes are harmless, sub-fossorial and often found while digging soil in farms and under the logs in the Western Ghat forests. They feed on earthworms and possibly other invertebrates. Interestingly, their close relatives are found in northeast India and Southeast Asia and are known to be arboreal.

"This new species is found in the drier regions and in lower altitudes around Agasthyamalai hills. The other *Xylophis* were reported from cold higher altitudes, of 1,700 m and above, in the Nilgiris and the Anaimalai. Its close relative, Captain's wood snake, is known from the western slopes of the Western Ghats in the Kerala," explains Surya Narayanan, from Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bengaluru, and first author of the paper recently published in *Vertebrate Zoology*.

The snake was previously confused with *X. captaini*, but detailed morphological studies showed that it had a broader off-white collar and more ventral scales. Further, DNA studies indicated that it was indeed a new species and was a close relative to *X. captaini*.

The new find increases the total number of currently recognised wood snakes to five species. The paper adds that very little information is available on the precise distributions of each species, their natural history, population status, feeding and reproductive ecology, and conservation status.

"These are burrowing snakes and we have planned to carry out more studies to understand its geographical distribution," adds Pratyush P. Mohapatra, Scientist at the Zoological Survey of India, who is based in Jabalpur. He adds that as the snake was found from rubber, banana, and coconut farms, it seems to be well adapted to moderate habitat changes, but more studies are needed to ascertain its status.

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Tianwen-1's goals include analysing and mapping the Martian surface and geology, looking for water ice and studying the climate and surface environment.

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