

A NEW SPECIES OF SNAKE FROM TAMIL NADU AND AN OLD NAMING CONFUSION FROM LONDON

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Platyceps josephi Credit: Surya Narayanan

An international team of researchers has discovered a new species of racer snake from Tuticorin in Tamil Nadu and also solved a naming confusion that existed for nearly two centuries.

The new species named *Platyceps josephi* (after late herpetologist Naveen Joseph), has distinct white bands on its body and irregular white spots on its head. Less than a metre in length, it is a non-venomous terrestrial snake, so far only known from Tamil Nadu. Its diet chiefly consists of geckos, lizards and small rodents.

“The species faces a number of threats across its distributional range, including habitat destruction, because the grasslands in southern Tamil Nadu are being actively converted into plantations, farmlands and urbanisation...The species’ ability to adapt and its reproductive success is not known,” [notes the paper](#) published in *Vertebrate Zoology*.

The team writes that *Platyceps josephi* should be considered a species in the Vulnerable category according to the IUCN criteria.

New species of vine snakes discovered

“While writing about this find, we noticed that another snake species named Banded racer had an unstable taxonomic history. The specimens were named based on drawings done in the 1700s by Patrick Russell - who is considered the Father of Indian Ophiology. So, we had to trace back and study several old sketches kept in the Zoological Library of the Natural History Museum, London and the Bodleian library, Oxford in order to understand how they got the naming wrong,” explains Surya Narayanan, one of the authors of the paper. He is a researcher at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bangalore.

Detailed investigation of unpublished manuscripts, paintings and even CT scanning old specimens showed that the Banded racer and Anamalai wolf snake were misidentified because of a single mistake that got carried forward.

“English zoologist George Kearsley Shaw first described the species in 1802. The confusion started when another herpetologist Albert Günther made a misidentification in 1858. Günther referred to another painting of Russell and wrongly attributed it to a different species. Subsequently, other authors referred to this work and the wrong name stuck and got carried for so many years” says Pratyush P. Mohapatra, scientist at the Jabalpur based Zoological Survey of India and one of the authors of the paper.

The team has now helped give the correct scientific names to both the snakes. The banded racer has now been named *Platyceps plinii* and the wolf snake as *Lycodon fasciolatus*.

“I initially thought it would be a simple comparison of specimens at the natural history museum and the new species from Tamil Nadu. However, from my previous studies I am aware that many things are not straightforward in taxonomy,” says first author Deepak Veerappan in an

email to *The Hindu*. He is a postdoctoral researcher at the Senckenberg Museum of Zoology, Dresden, Germany.

Herpetologist Deepak Veerappan has a snake named after him

“These old paintings and dry skin collection we checked are invaluable special collections maintained in controlled temperature and humidity. Studying them was almost like time travel,” adds Dr. Veerappan.

He notes that few other common snake species in India have complex taxonomic history because of poor descriptions and/or multiple descriptions of the same species collected in different parts of India (e.g. common bronze back tree snake- *Dendrelaphis tristis*).

“We have just scratched the surface, these investigations will lead to many more new species descriptions,” says Dr. Veerappan.

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