

NEW SPECIES OF SKINK FOUND FROM WESTERN GHATS

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Slinky find: Named *Subdoluseps nilgiriensis*, the reptile has a slender body of just about 7 cm and is sandy brown in colour.

In September 2019, a group of herpetologists gathered at Anaikatti hills in Coimbatore for the South Asian Reptile Red List Assessment organised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). When Achyuthan Srikanthan, one of the members, from the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, suggested an impromptu night visit to a nearby private farm, little did they know they would stumble upon a new species new: a new Asian gracile skink.

Named *Subdoluseps nilgiriensis*, after the Nilgiris, the reptile has a slender body of just about 7 cm and is sandy brown in colour. Based on genetic studies, the team writes the new species is closely related to *Subdoluseps pruthi* that is found in parts of the Eastern Ghats.

“The new species was found in a dry deciduous area, showing that even the dry zones of our country are home to unrealised skink diversity which needs to be further explored. There is an urgent need to change the notion that high biodiversity can be found only in the wet and evergreen forests,” says Aniruddha Datta Roy, corresponding author of the paper recently published in *Zootaxa*.

He adds that most of the studies in Tamil Nadu are carried out only in the protected areas and focus only on megafauna such as tigers, elephants and other such charismatic species “We also need to study the little-known animal groups inside our forests. They are fundamental and indispensable components of our biodiversity,” adds Prof. Roy from the National Institute of Science Education & Research (NISER), Bhubaneswar.

Most skinks are diurnal and are usually secretive in their habits. Because of their elusiveness, not much is known about their natural and evolutionary history. Most of the species are placed under the data-deficient category. “This species is only the third skink species discovered from mainland India in the last millennium. Such discoveries give us an understanding of how underestimated our reptile species diversity truly is,” adds Prof. Roy.

Though skinks are non-venomous, they resemble snakes because of the often-inconspicuous limbs and the way they move on land. Such resemblance has led to confusion often resulting in humans killing this lowly harmless creature. “We are yet to study the breeding and feeding habits of this new species. Other skinks are known to feed insects such as termites, crickets and small spiders, and we assume our new species has a similar diet,” adds Avrajjal Ghosh, one of the authors of the paper.

Subdoluseps nilgiriensis is currently considered a vulnerable species as there are potential threats from seasonal forest fires, housing constructions and brick kiln industries in the area. Rapid urbanisation, which has increased the road networks in the area, has also threatened the small geographical range of the species.

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