



BOAS OF THE WORLD

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Contents

Foreword by Daniel Natusch

Preface

Abbreviations

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOIDEA – R. Graham Reynolds

Chapter 2 THE EXTINCT SPECIES OF BOOIDEA – Corentin Bochaton

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

Chapter 3 A GUIDE TO THE SPECIES ACCOUNTS

Chapter 4 FAMILY BOIDAE Gray 1825

4.1 Genus *Boa* Linnaeus 1758

Boa constrictor – Robert W. Henderson

Boa imperator – Marco Su.rez-Atilano

and Ella V.zquez-Dom.nguez

Boa nebulosa – Robert W. Henderson and Jeanelle Brisbane

Boa orophias – Robert W. Henderson, Jennifer C. Daltry, and Pius Haynes

Boa sigma – Marco Su.rez-Atilano and Ella V.zquez-Dom.nguez

4.2 Genus *Chilabothrus* Dum.ril and Bibron 1844

Chilabothrus ampelophis – Miguel A. Landestoy T. and Robert W. Henderson

Chilabothrus angulifer – Tom.s M. Rodr.guez-Cabrera

Chilabothrus argentum – R. Graham Reynolds

Chilabothrus chrysogaster – R. Graham Reynolds

Chilabothrus exsul – R. Graham Reynolds

Chilabothrus fordii – Robert W. Henderson and Miguel A. Landestoy T.

Chilabothrus gracilis – Robert W. Henderson and Miguel A. Landestoy T.

Chilabothrus granti – Dustin C. Smith

Chilabothrus inornatus – Eneilis S. Mulero-Oliveras, Fabi.n A. Feliciano-Rivera, and Alberto R. Puente-

Rol.n

Chilabothrus monensis – Alberto R. Puente-Rol.n

Chilabothrus schwartzi – R. Graham Reynolds

Chilabothrus striatus – R. Graham Reynolds

Chilabothrus strigilatus – R. Graham Reynolds

Chilabothrus subflavus – Brent C. Newman and Scott E. Henke

4.3 Genus *Corallus*

Daudin 1803

Corallus annulatus – Robert W. Henderson, Todd R. Lewis, Paul B. C. Grant, and Rowland K. Griffin

Corallus batesii – Robert W. Henderson

Corallus blombergi – Jorge H. Valencia, Valentina Posse, Katty Garz.n-Tello, and H. Mauricio Ortega-

Andrade

Corallus caninus – Robert W. Henderson and Vincent Pr.mel

Corallus cookii – Robert W. Henderson

Corallus cropanii – Bruno Rocha da Silva, Daniela G. P. Toledo, and Otavio A. V. Marques

Corallus grenadensis – Robert W. Henderson, Richard A. Sajdak, Robert Powell, and Billie C. Harrison

Corallus hortulana – L.gia Pizzatto and Robert W. Henderson

Corallus ruschenbergerii – C.sar L. Barrio-Amor.s and Robert W. Henderson

4.4 Genus *Epicrates* Wagler 1830

Epicrates alvarezii – Albedi Andrade-Junior, Josu. A. R. Azevedo, and Paulo Passos

Epicrates assisi – Albedi Andrade-Junior, Josu. A. R. Azevedo, and Paulo Passos

Epicrates cenchria – Albedi Andrade-Junior, Josu. A. R. Azevedo, and Paulo Passos

Epicrates crassus – Albedi Andrade-Junior, Josu. A. R. Azevedo, and Paulo Passos

Epicrates maurus – Albedi Andrade-Junior, Josu. A. R. Azevedo, and Paulo Passos

4.5 Genus *Eunectes* Wagler 1830

Eunectes beniensis – Paola De la Quintana, Luis F. Pacheco, and Jesús A. Rivas

Eunectes deschauenseei – Bruno F. Camera, Christine Strssmann, and Ana L. cia C. Prudente

Eunectes murinus – Jesús A. Rivas, María D. C. Muñoz, and Gordon M. Burghardt

Eunectes notaeus – Bruno F. Camera and Christine Strssmann

Chapter 5 FAMILY CALABARIIDAE Gray 1858

Calabaria reinhardtii – Luca Luiselli and Robert W. Henderson

Chapter 6 FAMILY CANDOIIDAE Pyron et al. 2014

Candoia aspera – Mark O'Shea

Candoia bibroni – R. Graham Reynolds

Candoia carinata – Mark O'Shea

Candoia paulsoni – Mark O'Shea

Candoia superciliosa – R. Graham Reynolds

Chapter 7 FAMILY CHARINIDAE Gray 1849

Charina bottae – Brian J. Halstead

Charina umbratica – Brian J. Halstead

Lichanura roseofusca – Jeffrey M. Lemm

Lichanura trivirgata – Jeffrey M. Lemm

Chapter 8 FAMILY UNGALIOPHIIDAE Wilcox et al. 2002

Exiliboa placata – Robert W. Henderson

Ungaliophis continentalis – Robert W. Henderson

Ungaliophis panamensis – Rowland K. Griffin, Todd R. Lewis, Paul B. C. Grant, and Alex Figueroa

Chapter 9 FAMILY ERYCIDAE Bonaparte 1831

Eryx borrii – Tomáš Mazuch

Eryx colubrinus – Stephen Spawls

Eryx conicus – Indraneil Das

Eryx elegans – Eskandar Rastegar Pouyani, Nasrullah Rastegar Pouyani, Naeimeh Eskandarzadeh, and Mahdi Rajabizadeh

Eryx jaculus – Francesco P. Faraone

Eryx jayakari – Johannes Els and Salvador Carranza

Eryx johnii – Indraneil Das

Eryx miliaris – Nasrullah Rastegar Pouyani, Naeimeh Eskandarzadeh, Eskandar Rastegar Pouyani, Mahdi Rajabizadeh, and R. Graham Reynolds

Eryx muelleri – Luca Luiselli and Gabriel H. Segniagbeto

Eryx sistansensis – Naeimeh Eskandarzadeh, Nasrullah Rastegar Pouyani, Eskandar Rastegar Pouyani, and Mahdi Rajabizadeh

Eryx somalicus – R. Graham Reynolds

Eryx whitakeri – Indraneil Das

Chapter 10 FAMILY SANZINIIDAE Romer 1956

Acrantophis dumerili – Mark D. Scherz, Achille P. Raselimanana, Angelica Crottini, and Frank Glaw

Acrantophis madagascariensis – Mark D. Scherz, Achille P. Raselimanana, Angelica Crottini, and Frank Glaw

Sanzinia madagascariensis – Mark D. Scherz, Achille P. Raselimanana, Angelica Crottini, and Frank Glaw

Sanzinia volontany – Mark D. Scherz, Achille P. Raselimanana, Angelica Crottini, and Frank Glaw

Chapter 11 THREATS FACING THE WORLD'S BOAS

Robert W. Henderson and R. Graham Reynolds

***ERYX JOHNNII* Russell 1801**

—Red Sandboa

INDRANEIL DAS

Taxonomy

Originally described as *Boa Johnii* (retaining original orthography, with title cased species name, as was the convention of the time) by Russell (1801), the species was allocated to the genus by Boulenger (1890). The subspecies *persicus* Nikolsky (1905), ZIP 10343 (holotype) was described as being from “Aguljaschker in Arabistano” in “Persia austro-occidentali (Arabistan)” (in Khuzestan, 31.4360°N, 49.0413°E, Khuzestan-Lorestan Province, southwestern Iran). Its systematic and nomenclatural status remain uncertain (Anderson et al. 2021). Synonymies are in Smith (1943), Stimson (1969), Kluge (1993), and Reynolds and Henderson (2018). Kumar et al. (1995) reported isoenzyme differences between the species and the occasionally sympatric congener, *E. conicus*.

Type Specimens and Genomic Resources

The type locality is “Tranquebar” (Tarangambadi, 11.0166°N; 79.8833°E, Mayavaram Taluk, Tanjore District, Tamil Nadu, southeastern India). Smith (1943) did not designate a lectotype, contrary to Wallach et al. (2014), and Russell’s (1801; Fig. 9.28); two syntypes are unlocated (McDiarmid et al. 1999). Wall (1910) and Ingoldby and Procter (1923) treated it as a synonym of *E. jaculus* or a subspecies of that species, respectively.

The karyotype is $2n = 34$ (Singh et al. 1968, from northern India; Kour et al. 2019, from Nagrota, Jammu, within the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, India).

Etymology

The species name honors Reverend Christoph Samuel John (1747–1813), a Danish missionary who sent specimens from Tranquebar to Germany (see Stewart 1982; Bauer 1998). Vernacular names, as spoken in the areas within its range (following Das 1998; Schle-



Figure 9.28. Iconographs of *Boa johnii* (*Eryx johnii*). *Left*: Plate xvi, and *Right*: Plate xvii, both from Russell 1801. Public domain.



Figure 9.29. Adult *Eryx johnii*. Chandigarh, India. Photograph by Indraneil Das.



Figure 9.30. Juvenile *Eryx johnii*, close-up view. Gujarat, India. Photograph by Pete Oxford / Minden Pictures.

ich and Kästle 2002) include Gujarati Chakalan; Hindi Andhali Chakalan, Do-mu Samp; Kannada Italiqi Havu; Malayalam Iruthalamoori; Marathi Do-tondyā; Nepali Khario Mate Sap, Lal Dhusar, Duitauke Sarpa, Laxmi Sanp, Jhataha; Oriya Do-mundia Bora; Tamil Iruthalai Manniyan, Mannulli; Telugu Nalla Poda Pamu; Urdu Du-muhi. Several of these (e.g., names in Hindi, Marathi, some of the Nepali, Oriya), literally translate as “two-headed snake,” in reference to the blunt tail.

Description

At 1.3 m (see below), *Eryx johnii* may be the largest member of the genus. This relatively large, stout, and cylindrical snake is characterized by smooth dorsal scales; a head that is indistinct from the neck; a broad, depressed snout; a chin showing a mental groove; slit-like nostrils; reduced eyes; vertically elliptical pupils; small scales on forehead, only slightly larger than the dorsal scales and slightly keeled; a wide, ridged rostral; a single subcaudal; a spur present on each side of the vent; and a short, blunt tail, sometimes as broad as the head (Fig. 9.29). The number of dorsal scales at mid-body is 51–67; ventrals 190–215; subcaudals 20–40; ocular ring 10–11; supralabials 9–12; scales between supraoculars 6–9; cloacal scale entire and reduced.

Sood (1941) reported on osteological studies that described a reduction of caudal vertebrae and the length of anteroposterior axes, bifurcation of neural spines, and the presence of two pairs of foramina in the posterior caudal area of the vertebra. The largest size/mass attained is 1.3 m and 1.14 kg (Chari 1950). Vyas (2012) reported a female with an SVL of 124.5 and tail length of 5.0 mm.

Dorsal color is variable during ontogeny and across individuals. Adults are gray, brownish-red, or dark brown, uniformly colored or with indistinct black spots, especially toward and on tail; their belly is paler. The iris is dark, spotted with gold; the tongue is yellow, black apically. Juveniles are typically brick red (Fig. 9.30) and show a series of dark spots or with 11–18 dark crossbars on their bodies. Partial albinism in the species has been reported by Vyas et al. (2012).

Adult females are larger (up to 1300 mm; Chari 1950) than males (up to 890 mm) in total length, the latter with distinct cloacal spurs (Bhatti and Wadhwani 1974). Hemipenes are unforked, with the sulcus

bifurcating far from the top; distinct flounces are present, with the folds arranged in an oblique series and distally fused to form large cup-like structures.

Distribution

The range of *Eryx johnii* range extends from Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to Nepal and northern, western, and peninsular India. Regional distribution and authorities follow: *Iran*: Khuzestan-Lorestan Province, southwestern Iran (Latifi 1991); *Afghanistan*: Mundi, Hissar (Murray 1892; Wagner et al. 2016). *Pakistan*: Sindh and Punjab Provinces (Mertens 1969). *Nepal*: Bara and Banke Districts (Shah 1999); Royal Chitwan National Park (Pandey 2012); Bardiya National Park (Lohani et al. 2022); and Shuklaphanta National Park (Rawat et al. 2020). *India*: Generally, northern and central India, occupying arid and semiarid landscapes. State range in India includes *Jammu*: Sharma and Sharma (1976); *Rajasthan*: Sinha and Sharma (2008); *Bihar*: Dasgupta and Raha (2004); *Gujarat*: Vyas (2001); *Delhi*: Barhadia and Ghosh (2021); *Uttar Pradesh*: Boruah (2021); *Madhya Pradesh*: Manhas et al. (2017); *Chhattisgarh*: Rai (2020); *Maharashtra*: Jadhav et al. (2018); *Karnataka*: Kalki et al. (2021); *Andhra Pradesh*: Surender et al. (2012); *Tamil Nadu*: Whitaker (1978); and *West Bengal*: Chanda and Thakare (2023).

Although Russell (1801) reported the species as “not uncommon” in Bengal, the species is mostly unknown from the state of West Bengal (except from the extreme western part; see Chanda and Thakare 2023) and has not been recorded from Bangladesh. It is known from other parts of eastern India that were part of the Bengal Presidency during Patrick Russell’s period of activity.

Habitat

Eryx johnii inhabits arid landscapes, including edges of deserts, and coastal scrub as well as dry deciduous forests, and is associated with sandy and other loose soil. It is also known from more wet agricultural areas, such as those in Rajasthan in northwestern India (Sinha and Sharma 2008), Tamil Nadu in southeastern India (Das unpubl.), and the Cholistan Desert of Punjab, Pakistan (Hussain et al. 2024) in landscapes that include rocky features (Ali et al. 2017a). Where a variety of habitats exist within a landscape, as in the Cholistan Desert, interdunal sites showed the highest density (Hussain



Map 58. Range of *Eryx johnii* in gray. Note that some national borders are disputed.

et al. 2024). Microhabitats used include rodent burrows (Whitaker and Captain 2004; Khan 2006). The elevational range is from sea level to about 600 m asl.

Foraging and Diet

In terms of activity, the species can be described as crepuscular as well as nocturnal. Its diet includes small mammals such as shrews, rats, and squirrels (Minton 1966; Sharma and Vazirani 1977), reptiles such as the spiny-tailed lizard, *Saara hardwickii* (Pardeshi et al. 2008), and other snakes (Whitaker and Captain 2004), as well as frogs (Sharma and Vazirani 1977) and birds (Schleich and Kästle 2002). Antipredatory responses in the sometimes syntopic leopard gecko, *Eublepharis macularius*, as demonstrated in lab experiments by Landová et al. (2016) suggest predation by *Eryx johnii*. Khan and Tasnim (1992) described the defense response in the toad *Duttaphrynus stomaticus* in the presence of *E. johnii*, suggesting the toad’s inclusion in the snake’s diet. Prey is subdued via constriction and typically swallowed headfirst. In captivity, hatchlings are known to accept insects (Marimuthu and Asokan 2014).

Activity

Daytime is spent inactive, burrowed in soft substratum (Zimmermann 1986) or in rodent holes, where they hibernate over the winter months in Pakistan. They emerge by March and are active until late September (Khan 2006). Their gait on land can be described as slow, with little lateral undulations. They resort to side-winding when alarmed (Minton 1966) and are adept at digging into soft substratum (Daniel 1983).

Predators and Defensive Behavior

Greene (1973) studied tail injuries in captive *E. johnii* employing tail displays, discovering significantly more damage to the tails of the species compared to congeners. It has been suggested that the modifications of caudal vertebrae (see Description) may be adaptive for this purpose (Frýdlová et al. 2023). Minton (1966) reported on an *E. johnii* that was attacked by an undetermined species of fox or jackal in Pakistan.

Among endoparasites, Singh (1954; see also Mirza and Narayan 1935) reported the threadworm, *Strongyloides mirzai* (Strongylidae) from Aligarh, northern India, while Rataj et al. (2011) noted the presence of the protozoan *Tetratrichomonas* sp. (Trichomonadidae) from captive snakes in Europe. Additional endoparasites recorded for the species by Schleich and Kastle (2002) include the haemoprotozoan *Haemogregarina* sp. and the flagellates *Monocercomonas* sp. and *Trichomitus batrachorum*. Ectoparasite associates of the species include the ticks *Amblyomma gervaisi* and *A. helvolum* from West Bengal, eastern India (Ghosh et al. 2021).

Reproduction and Longevity

Snider and Bowler (1992) mentioned an individual that lived 24 years in captivity. Histological studies by Singh and Kar (1988) demonstrate seasonal variation related to local environmental conditions, particularly temperature. Minton (1966) observed mating in April and young ones in August and September, coinciding with the passage of the southwest monsoons in Pakistan. In captive conditions, courtship and mating have been observed in May and June (Stemmler 1969) and mating in March and April (Schweizer 1966); the differences are perhaps due to different geographical origins of the respective individuals. Zimmermann (1986) mentioned that neither sex feeds during the breeding

period, describing courtship with males crawling over females along both directions. An approximately 4-month gestation period is mentioned. The reproductive habits of *E. johnii* can be generalized as ovoviviparous, with clutches comprising six to sixteen young weighing ca. 15–22 g and measuring 15–28 cm (Schweizer 1966; Marimuthu and Asokan 2014).

Conservation

Little has been published on population densities, and one study described the distribution of *E. johnii* as “rare and patchy” at a locality in Tamil Nadu, southern India (Ramesh et al. 2013). In the Cholistan Desert of Pakistan, the relative abundance by sex and size class was 0.5 males, 0.33 females, and 0.16 juveniles (Hussain et al. 2024). The species is among the favorites of itinerant “snake charmers” owing to its large size, usually bright colors, and habit of not biting its human handlers. Often, to emphasize its alleged “two-headed” feature, the tail is mutilated for show, with the corresponding “tale” that each head is active for six months (Sapkota et al. 2022). Another belief in southern India is that a bite or “lick” from the snake causes leprosy (Daniel 1983). Ali et al. (2017b) mentioned the usage of its skin and fat by Hakeems (practitioners of traditional medicine) for the purported cure of joint pains and wounds, in addition to insect stings and dog bites, in rural Punjab, Pakistan. The use of snake fat has also been documented in the greater Cholistan Desert of the same state (Khan et al. 2011). Similar beliefs have been reported from adjacent regions of Gujarat in western India (Parmar and Kaiser 2022).

Apart from its demand for indigenous medicine, *E. johnii* is also collected for the pet trade and for supply to zoos. Kalki et al. (2021) wrote of a belief in Karnataka of *E. johnii* bringing luck, with its value often dependent on the weight of the specimen, and with sellers injecting snakes with toxic substances such as mercury to fetch higher prices. International demand for the species is reportedly high. In the early 2010s, individuals could fetch US\$5,000 (Vyas 2012).

As one of the world’s fastest-growing major economies, India is seeing increasing environmental stress resulting from infrastructure development, which is known to impact herpetofauna. Surender et al. (2012) reported that *Eryx johnii* suffered the greatest mortality among snakes along a major highway in Andhra

Pradesh. Vyas (2012) added habitat loss and the use of pesticides in agricultural fields to the list of threats facing the species.

The species is protected under Schedule IV of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 and is listed as Near Threatened in the IUCN Red List (Anderson et al. 2021). It is also listed under Appendix II of CITES.

ERYX MILIARIS Pallas 1773

—Dwarf Sandboa

ERYX MILIARIS MILIARIS Pallas 1773

—Desert Sandboa

ERYX MILIARIS VITTATUS Chernov 1959

—Tajik Sandboa

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ESKANDAR RASTEGAR-POUYANI,
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Taxonomy

Eryx miliaris may be the species with the most controversial and least resolved taxonomy of any boa species or species complex. For over a century researchers have disagreed on the taxonomic status of the sandboas ranging from Iran to China and southern Mongolia, erecting no fewer than four species and seven subspecies to organize these widespread boas (summarized in Uetz et al. 2024). Here we take a conservative approach, identifying that much more work needs to be done to characterize species and subspecies boundaries in central Asian boas. In the interest of stability and following recent work by Eskandarzadeh et al. (2020a), we recognize one species and two subspecies with the understanding that this could well change with a more focused study of this widespread boa.

Eryx miliaris miliaris

Eryx miliaris was described in a large volume by the naturalist Peter Simon Pallas (1773), wherein he described his travels through “the various provinces of” the Russian Empire in 1771, at the time of the reign of (and by invitation from) Catherine the Great just before the Pugachev Rebellion of 1773–1775. His descriptions

include people and their customs as well as various animals and plants, including the description of this boa, what he called a cylindrical snake (“scytales”), naming it *Anguis miliaris*. However, the manuscript does not state where exactly the specimen was collected—Pallas traveled from St. Petersburg all the way to Lake Baikal. The manuscript in which he describes the species appears to be based on his travels from January to October of 1771, which would have coincided with his voyage from the Ural Mountains near Chelyabinsk east to Tomsk near the Tom River, passing through nearly 1500 km of the Baraba steppe. Yet Pallas (1814, 54) stated that he did not find a single species of snake “in Siberia” (“In Sibiria autem ne unicam quidem Anguis speciem inveni licuit”), suggesting that the snake was collected closer to the Urals. Pallas also described another boa, *Anguis helluo*, from the “Caspian desert” (Pallas 1814), which has been subsumed into *E. miliaris*. Nikolsky (1910) described five additional specimens from various locations, two of which (#6546 and #6547) were collected by Nikolaus M. Przewalski in the 1870s (probably) and deposited at the “Mus. Zool. Petrop.” (Zoological Museum of St. Petersburg, Russia).

Two subspecies have been recognized within *E. miliaris* sensu stricto: *E. m. miliaris* and *E. m. nogaorum*. The latter was proposed by Nikolsky (1910) for specimens from the north Caucasus region east of the Caspian Sea. Eskandarzadeh et al. (2020a) revealed that these subspecies of *E. miliaris* are undifferentiated morphologically and genetically from the nominate form; hence, they are no longer recognized, and we do not recognize them here.

Eryx tataricus nomen dubium

A considerable challenge has historically been imposed for the taxon *Eryx tataricus*, which has at times been described as a separate species from *E. miliaris* with as many as three of its own subspecies: *E. t. tataricus*, *E. t. speciosus*, and *E. t. vittatus*. Here we consider all three taxa conspecific with *E. miliaris*, with *E. tataricus* as a junior synonym. The taxonomic status and distribution range of these three taxa are variable in the literature, but we briefly summarize them here. The molecular and morphological similarities of *E. miliaris* and *E. tataricus* have been documented in various studies (e.g., Sorensen 1988; Tokar 1989, 1990; Harrison 2003; Eskandarzadeh et al. 2013; Pyron et al. 2013; Rastegar-

Predators and Defensive Behavior

When threatened, the species hides its head under the coils of its body or attempts to flatten the body into the substrate; it may also strike out to bite (Das 1991b).

Reproduction

Lobo and Sreepada (2015b) reported breeding between May and June, clutch size range 4–17, neonates measuring 100–110 mm and weighing ca. 18 g.

Conservation

The threat to the species is being overharvested for the pet trade and for traditional medicine. It is protected under Schedule IV of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 and classified as Near Threatened in the IUCN Red List (Srinivasulu et al. 2021b). It is also listed under Appendix II of CITES.

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Figure 9.49. The forehead of the holotype (ZSI 24810) of *Eryx whitakeri* shows faint ornamentation on some cephalic scales. Photograph by Indraneil Das.

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