



BOAS OF THE WORLD

EDITED BY R. GRAHAM REYNOLDS & ROBERT W. HENDERSON

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Robert W. Henderson and R. Graham Reynolds

ERYX CONICUS Schneider 1801

—Rough-Tailed Sandboa

INDRANEIL DAS

Taxonomy

This familiar South Asian snake was initially described as *Boa Conica* (retaining the original orthography, with title cased species name, as was the convention of the

time) by Schneider (1801). The name was based on ZMB 1470 (a syntype, still extant; Bauer 1998), originally from the natural history collection of Marcus Elieser Bloch (1723–1799; see Lesser 1999), one from Museo Barbyensi (now lost; Bauer and Lavilla 2022), as well as the description and plate in Russell (1796). ZMB 1470 was sent from Reverend Christoph Samuel John (1747–1813), a Danish missionary who sent specimens from Tranquebar to Bloch in Germany, and while the published locality is “India orientali[s]” (equivalent to India at the time of Patrick Russell’s stay in the region; see Das 2015) in Schneider (1801, 268), the jar label reads “Tronquebar” (Tranquebar, today Tharangambadi, ~11.0167°N; 79.8833°E, Mayavaram Taluk, Tanjore District, Tamil Nadu State, Southeast India), and the type locality was emended in print by Stimson (1969). This restriction does not consider Schneider’s (1801) other sources, including Russell’s (1796, 5, plate IV; “Padain Cootoo,” “Manooli Pampoo,” and “Mondi Poda”; identified as “No. IV. Boa”), specimens being examined from “Madras” (today Chennai, 13.0833°N; 80.2833°E, a city in Tamil Nadu, Southeast India (Fig. 9.9). In the past, Madras Presidency included much of southern India, south of 16°N). Further, Russell (1796) wrote that the vernacular names (from Telugu) originated from “Vizagapatam” (Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, Southeast India) and made observations on the effects of its bite on a chicken “Ganjam” (19.4666°N; 85.0833°E, Ganjam District, Odisha, Eastern India).

In a subsequent work Schneider (1821) illustrated what he thought was a better image (Fig. 9.10) than that in Russell (1796). Plate IV of Russell (1796) showed the undersurface of the tail and lower midbody (on the left) and a dorsal view of the entire body of an individual (to the right) and was captioned “Padain Cootoo” (Fig. 9.9).

Deraniyagala (1936) reported the discovery of the species from Sri Lanka nearly 15 years before he formally described it as a distinct subspecies, *Eryx brevis* Deraniyagala (1951), CMS R.S. 40A (holotype), from “Chavakachcheri, Jaffna” (09.6500°N; 80.1500°E, Northern Province, Sri Lanka). Also examined during the time of original description was other material from “Marichchukadé” (Marichchukadde, 08.5833°N; 79.9333°E, Northern Province), “Trincomalee” (08.5666°N; 81.2333°E, Eastern Province), and “Mannar” (08.9833°N; 79.9000°E, Northern

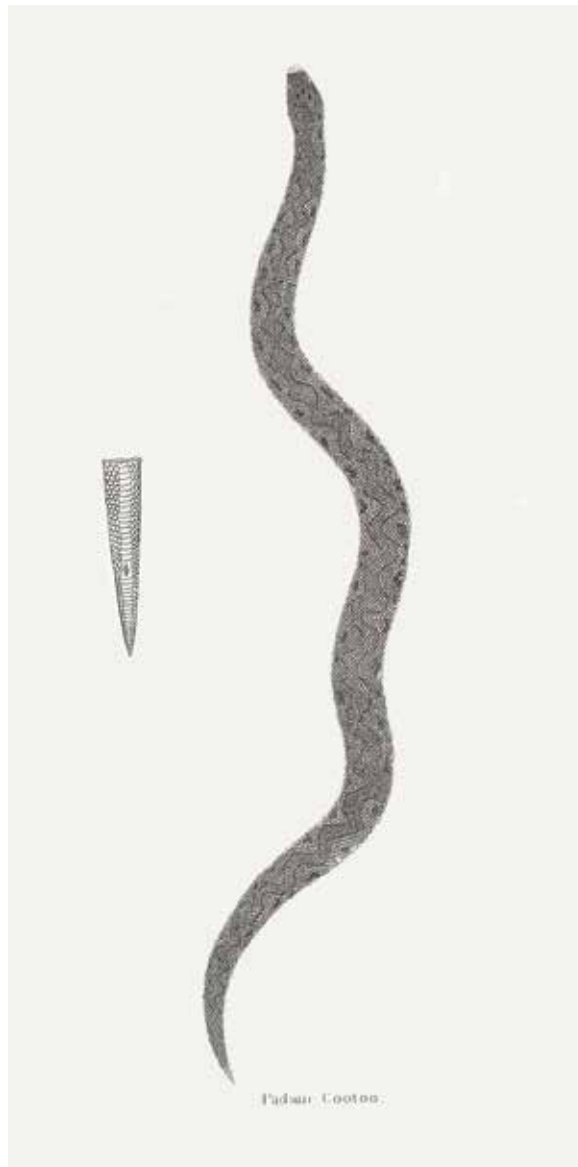


Figure 9.9. Reproduction of the first known depiction of *Eryx conicus* (plate IV from Russell 1796), identified by its Telugu vernacular name (Padian Cootoo). Public domain.

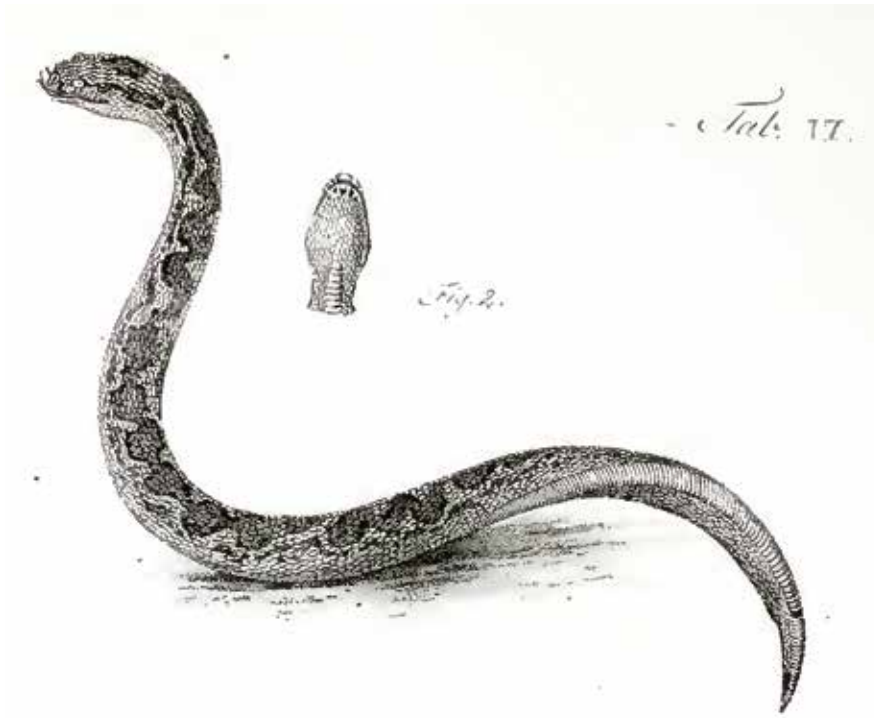


Figure 9.10. Reproduction of the part of the plate from Schneider (1821) showing a syntype of *Eryx conicus* that he claimed was more correct than Russel's. Public domain.

Province), all in Sri Lanka, but these were not formally made part of the type series. Tokar (1995) considered *brevis* Deraniyagala 1951 invalid, although Kluge (1993) and Welch (1988) had treated the taxon as distinct. It is supposedly distinct from the typical subspecies in size (average total length of 315.3 mm, but the holotype was 610 mm; de Silva 1980).

Gongylophis Wagler 1830, to which Boulenger (1890) allocated the species, included three members of the genus *Eryx* (including *colubrinus* [Linnaeus 1758], *conicus* [Schneider 1801], and *muelleri* Boulenger 1892; see Tokar 1995; McDiarmid et al. 1999), although it is worth noting that Boulenger (1893) himself, three years later, reallocated it to *Eryx*. Phylogenies of the family Erycidae (sensu Pyron et al. 2013, 2014) show support for monophyly of the South Asian members of *Eryx* (see also Reynolds et al. 2014; Shi et al. 2023) and are supported by studies of comparative osteology by Szyndlar and Schleich (1994). Synonymies are in Smith (1943), Stimson (1969), Kluge (1993: incorrectly in the feminine form, *Eryx conica*), Wallach et al. (2014), and Reynolds and Henderson (2018). Kumar et al. (1995) reported isoenzyme differences be-

tween *E. conicus* and the occasionally sympatric congener, *E. johnii*, recovered as a sister to the present taxon (see Shi et al. 2023).

Type Specimens and Genomic Resources

See the Taxonomy section for a description of the types. A mere eighteen mtDNA and nuclear DNA sequences are available on GenBank for *Eryx conicus*. Like other members of the genus, this species has fewer chromosomes than most boas, with $2n = 34$ (sixteen macro- and eighteen microchromosomes; Singh 1972; Parkash and Kour 2005: from Jammu, northern India; Parkash and Kour 2005; Charvát et al. 2022: unknown locality).

Etymology

Conicus is Latin for conical, an allusion to the conical, tapering tail tip. Vernacular names, as spoken in the areas within its range (following Wall 1911; Das 1998), include Bengali: Bali Bora, Thuthuk; Gujarati: Bhoomphodi, Gadhiya samp; Hindi: Do-muha, Thuthur Samp; Kannada: Ittally Havu; Malayalam: Manolage Pambu; Marathi: Durkiya Ghonas; Oriya: Boda

Sapa; Punjabi: Do-muhi Sapp; Sinhalese: Vali Pimbura; Tamil: Mann Pudayan, Mannulli Pambu; Telugu: Erra Poda Pamu; Urdu: Do-muhi Samp.

Description

These midsized, robust, and cylindrical snakes (Figs. 9.11–9.13) are characterized by distinctly keeled dorsal scales that are progressively sharper posteriorly and on the tail; a head that is slightly distinct from the neck; a broad, rounded snout; rostral lacking a transverse ridge; chin lacking a mental groove; slit-like nostrils; reduced eyes; vertically elliptical pupils; scales on forehead are small, only slightly larger than the dorsal scales, and strongly keeled; subcaudals primarily single, with some divided; spur present on each side of the vent; tail is short, narrow and tapering to a point, scales on the dorsal surface of tail bearing distinct keels. The number of dorsal scales at midbody is 40–55; ventrals 162–196; subcaudals 16–24; ocular ring 10–15; supralabials 12–14; scales between supraoculars 6–9; and cloacal scale tripartite comprising a large median one and two reduced ones laterally. Detailed squamation counts are in Sharma (1982).

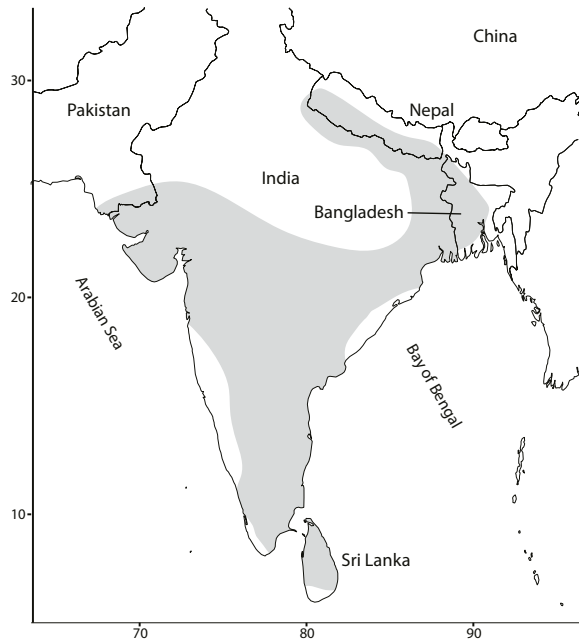
Osteological studies have been reported by Rage (1972), Szyndlar and Schleich (1994), and Szyndlar and Georgalis (2023), who noted an elongated skull; short maxillopalatine arch (maxilla, palatine, ectopterygoid, and pterygoid); supratemporal-quadratum and quadratum-articular joints posteriorly located; maxillopalatal arch and the mandible not reduced, and a low neural arch.

The adult dorsum is brownish-gray to reddish-brown with a series of large, irregular dark brown or reddish-brown blotches, sometimes fused or forming a zigzag pattern. Juveniles show greater contrast. Iris is gold speckled. Albinism in the species has been reported by Bhutkar and Mahabal (2014), Jadhav and Mahabal (2012), Thakur and Trivedi (2018), Deshmukh et al. (2020a), and Mukherjee and Mohan (2021). Other anomalies reported include bicephaly, or two-headed offspring (Desai 1984; Jahan and Ovais 1979; Wallach 2007; Sathian and Palot 2018), and anophthalmia, or eyelessness at birth (Patel et al. 2022; Shah et al. 2022).

Adult females are larger (up to 94 cm) than males (up to 48 cm) in total length. Cloacal spurs are curved and claw-like in males and reduced to small, posterior-

Figure 9.11. *Eryx conicus* from southeast Sri Lanka near Yala. Photograph by Anslem de Silva.





Map 54. Range of *Eryx conicus* (gray).

directed structures in females. Hemipenes are unforked; sulcus bifurcates apically; distinct flounces, folds arranged in oblique series, and distally fused to form large, cup-like structures.

Distribution

The range of the species includes Pakistan, Nepal, peninsular India, and Bangladesh. Country-specific records include Pakistan: Southern Sindh and southern Punjab Provinces (Mertens 1969; Khan 2002); Nepal: Eastern and western parts of Nepal, Parsa, and Mugu Districts (Shah 1999); Hirapurphanta and Parkhedi school compound, Majhgaun (Rawat et al. 2020); Bardiya National Park (Schleich and Kästle 2002; Shah and Tiwari 2004; Pandey 2012; Bhattarai et al. 2017, 2018); Sainamaina, Rupandehi District (Devkota et al. 2019); Bangladesh: Dhaka and Rajshahi Divisions (Montaqium et al. 1980; Hasan et al. 2014; Ahmad et al. 2015); Sri Lanka: Northern, North Western, Eastern, and Southern Provinces (Deraniya-



Figure 9.12. *Top:* *Eryx conicus* from the Thar Desert of Rajasthan, India. Photograph by Pete Oxford / Minden Pictures. *Bottom:* Adult *Eryx conicus* from Vadanemmeli, India. Photograph by Indraneil Das.





Figure 9.13. *Top: Eryx conicus* from India. Photograph by Michael Fogden and Patricia Fogden / Minden Pictures. *Bottom: Juvenile Eryx conicus* from Gujarat, India. Photograph by Pete Oxford / Minden Pictures.

gala 1955; de Silva 1990); India: Peninsular and northern India, east to West Bengal (Acharji and Mukherjee 1966; Hallermann et al. 2001). State records for India include Andhra Pradesh: Srinivasulu and Das (2008); Bihar: Husain and Prohit (2019); Chhattisgarh: Rai (2020); Delhi: Barhadia and Ghosh (2021); Goa: Sharma (1976); Gujarat: Vyas (2001); Jammu: Kour et al. (2019); Jharkhand: Dasgupta and Raha (2004); Karnataka: Lewis et al. (2010); Kerala: Wall (1905); Madhya Pradesh: Trench (1917); Maharashtra: Wall (1911; Fig. 9.15); Odisha: Dutta et al. (2019); Pondicherry: Wall (1911); Punjab: Sharma (2007); Rajasthan: Sharma and Vazirani (1977); Tamil Nadu: Das (1991a); Telangana: Visvanathan et al. (2022); Uttarkhand: Ranjan et al. (2021); Uttar Pradesh: Das et al. (2012); and West Bengal: Acharji and Mukherjee (1966).

Habitat

Eryx conicus are typically associated with arid and semiarid regions with loose and typically sandy or silty soil (Minton 1966), rodent burrows (Schleich and Kästle 2002) and in termitaria (as in northern Sri Lanka; Deraniyagala 1960) but are also known from areas of high rainfall in the foothills of the Western Ghats of southern India (Daniel 1983) and the Terai of Nepal (Schleich and Kästle 2002), from sea level to 670 m (Betul, Madhya Pradesh, central India: Trench 1917) and 2,680 m (Jhyari, Lake Rara in the Nepal Himalayas; Schleich and Kästle 2002, 2012). The species is occasionally encountered on earthen embankments of rice paddies and in southern India, where it occupies short burrows in sloping terrain (Whitaker 1978) or is found buried in crevices or holes at least 45 cm from the surface (Adiyodi 1960). The species in northern and eastern Sri Lanka is associated with coastal sand dunes (de Silva 1980), rubbish and coconut husk piles (Fig. 9.14), and scrub jungles (de Silva 2009). Chowdhury et al. (2018) reported arboreality in the species, ascending ca. 5 m above ground, presumed in search of small vertebrate prey.

Activity, Foraging, and Diet

Activity in *Eryx conicus* can be described as crepuscular and nocturnal, with light/dark cycles showing greater influence under captive conditions (Griffiths 1984). However, foraging by day is also common (Whitaker and Captain 2004). Caudal luring has been reported by Fogel (2011), and foraging tactics have been generalized as both sit-and-wait and widely foraging (Rodríguez-Robles et al. 1999), prey typically ingested headfirst. Van der Velden (2010) mentioned that a gravid female constricted its rodent prey using its neck rather than midbody. The diet of the species includes large beetles (Das 1991a) as well as small vertebrates, such as the soft-furred rat, *Rattus meltada* (Peris 1973); Asian house shrew, *Suncus murinus* (Vyas 2007); bandicoot rat, *Bandicota indica* (Patel et al. 2024); South Indian palm squirrel, *Funambulus palmarum* (Wall 1905; Patel et al. 2024); and North Indian palm squirrel, *F. pennantii* (Fraser 1936). Bird prey includes Jungle Bush Quail, *Perdica asiatica* (Daniel 1983); Asian Koel, *Eudynamis scolopaceus* (Kumbhar et al. 2013); Ashy Prinia, *Prinia socialis* (Jadhav et al. 2022); Common Myna, *Acridotheres tristis*, Jun-

gle Babbler, *Turdoides striata* (Patel et al. 2024); Hoopoe, *Upupa epops* (Levett-Yeats 1914; Upadhyay et al. 2023); Greater Coucal, *Centropus sinensis* (Patel et al. 2024); and Little Brown Dove, *Streptopelia senegalensis* (Prakash 1988). Herpetofaunal prey include the garden lizard, *Calotes versicolor* (Powell 1914; Patel et al. 2024); fan-throated lizard, *Sitana ponticeriana* (Kumbhar et al. 2013, likely to be *Sitana spinaecephalus*, V. Deepak, pers. comm. 2024); Indian monitor lizard, *Varanus bengalensis* (Bhardwaj 2007); unspecified species of toads (Adiyodi 1960); and the Indian bullfrog, *Hoplobatrachus tigerinus* (Wall 1905). D'Abreu (1915) and van der Velden (2010) mentioned cannibalism in captivity.

Predators and Defensive Behavior

No data on predation are available. Threat postures described by Adiyodi (1960) comprise the flattening of the body into a plano-convex curve, exposing the pale lateral spots and concealing the head under the coils of the body (see also Dwibedy 2017). Reaction to threats includes coiling and quick upward bites (Whitaker 1978). Frýdlová et al. (2023) described dermal armor in the adults and one subadult of the species comprising osteoderms on the body and tail. Osteoderms were densest and bulkiest on the dorsal and lateral part of the tail and on the ventral part; of all species in the study, this species showed the most developed dermal armor that was correlated with the reduced volume of caudal vertebral processes. Deshmukh et al. (2020b) reported death-feigning behavior in the species. A mimicry of the Russell's viper, *Daboia russelii*, has been assumed for adults (Dwibedy 2017), while the young ones resemble the saw-scaled viper, *Echis carinata* (Whitaker 1978; Whitaker and Captain 2004).

Because there were no tail injuries in the *Eryx conicus* that Greene (1973) studied, he suspected that the tail is not used in defensive displays, unlike in *E. johnii*.

Endoparasites for the species include the anaerobic protozoan *Hypotrichomonas acosta* (Trichomonadidae), reported by Tuska-Szalay et al. (2022); the haemoprotozoan *Haemogregarina cantliei* (Haemogregarinidae), reported by Manson (1907); and the apicomplexan coccidian *Eimeria boae* (Eimeriidae), reported by Sambon and Seligmann (1907). Salmonella of the Arizona strain (comprising gram-negative enteric bacteria) has been recovered from *Eryx conicus*



Figure 9.14. Searching for *Eryx conicus* in coconut husk piles near Panama, southeast Sri Lanka, where they can be locally common. Photographs by Anslem de Silva.

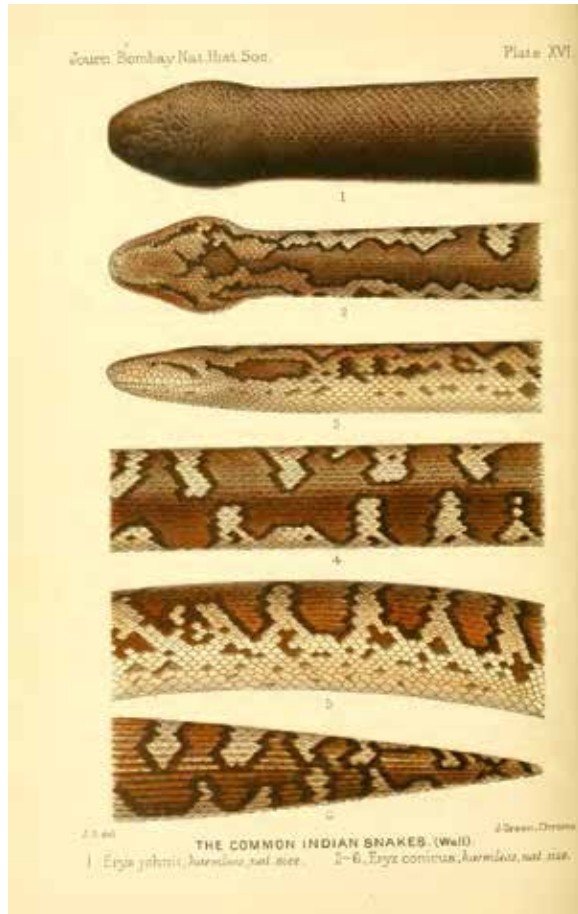


Figure 9.15. Reproduction of a plate depicting *Eryx johnii* (1) and *E. conicus* (2–6) from Wall (1911). Public domain.

(Kaura et al. 1971), and Akhila et al. (2018) reported infection by the coccidian *Cryptosporidium* (Cryptosporidiidae) in captive snakes. Ectoparasites include the ticks *Amblyomma gervaisi* and *A. helvolum* (Ixodidae) (Ghosh et al. 2021).

Reproduction and Longevity

Snider and Bowler (1992) mentioned an individual who lived 28 years in captivity. Reproduction has been noted during June, July, and August in southeastern India as well as northern Sri Lanka (Wall 1911; Deraniyagala 1960), coinciding with the passage of the southwest monsoons, and in June and December, during the dry and cold periods, respectively, in southwestern and western India (Wall 1911; Gharpurey 1914; Mirza et al. 2007). Sorensen (1988) and Swaak (1988, 1989) mentioned the birth of young from captives of unknown provenance from May to August and November. *Eryx conicus* is ovoviviparous, with clutches of three to twenty-three young. The extensive range of reproductive output is curious and may be the effect of geography, with smaller clutches in southern localities, or of female size. Mirza et al. (2007) reported a neonate size range of 220–243 mm.

Conservation

Threats to the species include habitat loss and capture for its purported demand from Western nations for cancer research (Alexandar 2010) as well as harvest for the pet trade and traditional medicine (Srinivasulu et al. 2021a). It is also on the list of snakes recorded as road kills (Bhandarkar and Paliwal 2021), which, with the ongoing increase of infrastructure development in India, may be a significant threat. Dwibedy (2017) mentioned the killing of *Eryx conicus* in eastern India's Odisha state due to its resemblance to the venomous Russell's viper, *Daboia russelii*. The species is protected under Schedule IV of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 and listed as Near Threatened in the IUCN Red List (Srinivasulu et al. 2021a). It is also listed under Appendix II of CITES.

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.

Eskandar Rastegar-Pouyani, Nasrullah Rastegar-Pouyani, Naeimeh Eskandarzadeh, Mahdi Rajabizadeh

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