

# **A new egg-eating snake from the southern Arabian Peninsula (Squamata: Serpentes: Colubridae:Colubrinae:Boigini).**

**RAYMOND T. HOSER**

**488 Park Road, Park Orchards, Victoria, 3134, Australia.**

**Phone: +61 3 9812 3322 Fax: 9812 3355 E-mail: snakeman@snakeman.com.au**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper formally describes and names a new species of egg-eating snake from the Southern Arabian Peninsula. Until now the taxon had been treated as a regional variant of the Rhombic Egg-eating Snake *Dasypeltis scabra* (Linnaeus, 1758).

**Keywords:** Taxonomy; *Dasypeltis*; *scabra*; Rhombic Egg-eating Snake; new species; *saeizadi*; Saudi Arabia; Yemen.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The egg eating snakes, genus *Dasypeltis* Wagler, 1830 are a well-known group of snakes essentially confined to the African bioregion. In recent years there have been a number of taxonomic revisions involving species groups within the genus, the result being four new species named in 2006 and another in 2012. Prior to that, the most recently named widely recognized species in the genus was *Dasypeltis atra* Sternfeld, 1912.

While doing an audit of species groups of snakes found across major geographical barriers to dispersal, it became apparent that the snakes assigned to the species *Dasypeltis scabra* (Linnaeus, 1758) from the south-western part of the Arabian Peninsula, were in fact a different species to the African taxon *D. scabra*, even though it was clearly closely related and similar in form and habit.

The decision to formally name the new taxon as done according to the Zoological Code (Ride *et al.* 1999) in this paper was delayed until I was able to get relevant information from a number of Saudi Arabian specimens, which took some months longer than originally anticipated to confirm the validity of the new species.

Due to the general abundance and wide distribution of snakes in the genus *Dasypeltis*, this being 11 recognized species as of 2013 found across most parts of continental Africa, there are countless literature references to the relevant species. However in terms of

meaningful papers involving the taxonomy of the genus or the Saudi Arabian specimens in particular, the literature is relatively sparse and offered little if any significant guidance in terms of the diagnosis or identification of the species taxon described within.

Notwithstanding this, key publications relating to the various *Dasypeltis* species including the most relevant similar species, *D. scabra* and *D. abyssina* (Duméril, Bibron and Duméril, 1854), include the following: Auerbach (1987), Barnett (2001), Barnett and Emms (2005), Bates and Little (2013), Bauer and Branch (2003), Bethencourt (1897), Bianconi (1859), Blanford (1870), Bocage (1866), Boettger (1893), Bogert (1940), Böhme *et al.* (2011), Boulenger (1907), Boycott (1992), Branch (1993), Broadley (1958, 1959, 1962, 1998), Broadley and Bates (2009), Broadley and Cotterill (2004), Broadley and Howell (1991), Broadley *et al.* (2003), Chifundera (1990), Chippaux (1999, 2001), Chirio and Lebreton (2007), Cogger (1966), Duméril *et al.* (1854), Egan (2008), Fischer (1884), Gans (1957, 1959, 1960), Geniez and Guillod (2003), Geniez *et al.* (2004), Gravlund *et al.* (1998), Gray (1858), Gruber and Hellmann (1984), Hallowell (1844, 1857), Hughes (1997), Jacobsen (1988), Jackson (2008), Jackson *et al.* (2007), Jacobsen *et al.* (2010), Jan (1863), Kirchof *et al.* (2011), Kulmus (1985), Lanza (1990), Largen and Spawls (2010), LeBreton (1999), Linnaeus (1758), Lopez *et al.* (1993), Loveridge (1936a, 1936b, 1938, 1956), Malonza *et al.*

(2011), Mattison (1995, 2007), Menzies (1966), Mertens (1938, 1954), Mocquard (1887), Müller (1885), Padial (2006), Pauwels and Vande weghe (2008), Peters (1864, 1868, 1878), Pitman (1974), Pyron, Burbrink and Weins (2013), Rasmussen (1981), Razzetti and Msuya (2002), Rödel and Mahsberg (2000), Rödel *et al.* (1999), Scheurer (2007), Schillert (2004), Schleich *et al.* (1996), Schmidt (1923), Schmidt and Kunz (2005), Segniagbeto *et al.* (2011), Sinsin and Bergmans (1999), Smith (1828, 1849), Sochurek (1979), Spawls *et al.* (2004), Sternfeld (1910, 1912), Trape (2005), Trape and Mané (2000, 2004, 2006a, 2006b), Trape and Roux-Esteve (1995), Trape *et al.* (2012), Uthmüller (1934), Venchi and Sindaco (2006), Werner (1899), Witberg (2011, 2012) and sources cited therein.

#### **DASYPELTIS SAEIZADI SP. NOV.**

**Holotype:** A specimen at the British Museum of Natural History (now known as the Natural History Museum), London, UK, specimen number BMNH - 1987.1018, caught in Saudi Arabia.

The British Museum of Natural History (now known as the Natural History Museum), London, UK, is a government-owned facility that allows researchers access to their collection for research purposes.

**Diagnosis:** *Dasypeltis saeizadi sp. nov.* in Saudi Arabia has been variously assigned to the species *Dasypeltis scabra* (Linnaeus, 1758) and more recently *D. abyssina* (Duméril, Bibron and Duméril, 1854); however it is readily separated from both by the dorsal colouration.

*D. scabra* is coloured as follows: Bluish-grey or grey or brown and with a series of dark rhomboid patches or squares along the back, with small patches of white, or occasionally pinkish or yellow-white between the patches along the mid-dorsal line. A series of dark transverse bands runs along either flank. There are prominent v-shaped markings on the nape of the neck, the points of which may reach the top of the head. The ventral surface may be white, cream or pink. It may or may not have slightly darker stippling. The species is characterised by barring on the edges of the upper labials, the thickest of which runs into the eye.

*D. abyssina* is coloured as follows: Usually a plain brownish colour dorsally, with indistinct markings on the head and body and a complete absence of barring on the upper labials, or if present, it is effectively indistinct.

*Dasypeltis saeizadi sp. nov.* is more similar to *D. scabra* in dorsal colouration, but lacks the distinctive whitish patches interspersing the dorsal midline blotches or squares. In turn these blotches or squares tend somewhat towards being pointed at the anterior end of the body in *Dasypeltis saeizadi sp. nov.*. In contrast to the other two species *Dasypeltis saeizadi sp. nov.* has a darkening on the upper temples. Like *D. abyssina* there is a complete absence of barring on the upper labials in *Dasypeltis saeizadi sp. nov.*, or if present, it is effectively indistinct.

**Distribution:** Known only from the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, this being south-western Saudi Arabia and western Yemen, being the generally hilly area, geographically located closest to the Red Sea and the horn of Africa and bound to the north by deserts.

**Etymology:** Named in honour of Fereshteh M. Saeizad in recognition of his excellent work involving the systematics of beetles.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflicts of interest in terms of this paper or conclusions within.

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