Dendrelaphis pictus - Painted Bronzeback

Dendrelaphis pictus, Gmelin, 1789 Painted Bronzeback

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English name: Painted Bronzeback
Scientific name: Dendrelaphis pictus

This non-venomous colubrid is one of the most commonly encountered snakes in Southeast Asia. It is present in ranging habitats such as cultivated areas, garden and parks, shrubs and forests (Lim and Lee, 1989; Stuebing and Inger, 1999; Chan-Ard et al., 2001).

This small and slender snake is easily identified through its bronze dorsal colouration and a blunt snout. It has a diagnostic black eye-stripe beginning on the snout, passing through the eye and continuing down each flank. There is a cream lateral stripe beneath the black stripe along the length of the body. Its dorsal region has a cream or yellowish colouration (Ecology Asia). It can grow up to 120 cm with tail being one-third (Edward, 1874).

Black eye-stripe from snout across the eye running down its body (Photo by: Colleen)

Diagnosis

Characterization of Dendrelapis has been done by Rooijen and Vogel (2008) as well as Nicholson Edward (1874).

1. 15 dorsal scale rows at midbody
2. one loreal scale
3. 6-7 temporal scales
4. supralabials 4,5 and 6 touch the eye (4th with posterior corner)
5. a short first sublabial that touches infra labials 6 and 7
6. vertebral scales strongly enlarged, larger than the scales of the first dorsal row
7. 183-189 ventrals
8. 126-133 subcaudals
9. a divided anal shield
10. a relatively compact build, snout-vent length/ head-length 23.5-28.5
11. a black postocular stipe that starts on the loreal, covers the whole temporal region and extends onto the neck where it is broken up oblique black bars
12. the presence of black narrow stripe in the posterior half of body, covering the lower half of the third dorsal row
13. the absence of a light ventrolateral stripe
Biology

This diurnal species is predominantly arboreal. It can also be found on the edge of small clearings or in other habitat transitions for basking.

Prey and Being Preyed

It actively hunt on lizards and amphibians primarily (Rooijen and Vogel, 2008).
Some cases of high "self-estimation":

A sub-adult *Dendrelaphis pictus* has been spotted in attempting to swallow a large tadpole prey in Singapore Zoo. The snake was resting on a waterlily (*Victoria amazonica*) with a tadpole which was identified as common greenback, *Hylarana erythraea* (Leong et al., 2009). The sub-adult was estimated to be 50 cm with a head width of 5-6 mm. The tadpole has noticeable skin tear and compression which matches the outline of snake's upper jaw.
Picture on the left shows Dendrelaphis pictus has been spotted on habitat transition, grass patch of Nanyang Technology University, Singapore. The frog is likely to be a Field frog, Fejervarya limnocharis.

Due to its small body size, it also provide food for larger snakes and birds for prey.
Painted bronzeback with its prey Field frog spotted in NTU (Photo by Sheng Xiaomeng)

Being preyed by Crested Serpent-Eagle (Photo taken in Borneo by: Nigel Voaden)

Behaviour
This active snake has restless habit and quick movement. It is usually shy and will flee quickly when disrupted. In time of threat, when it is cornered with no where to flee, it will inflate its body and flatten the neck laterally to reveal turquoish colour, wide gape and bright red tongue.

*Bluff striking (Photo by: Francis Cosquieri, permission pending)*

*Dendrelaphis pictus* is an inoffensive creature (Video taken in Thailand by: Vern L.)

*Dendrelaphis pictus* found under mattress (Video taken in India by Faazea)

Reproduction
Oviparous. Has been reported to lay 3-8 eggs in hollow tree stem. Period of gestation is believed to be 4 to 6 months and eggs hatch 4 to 6 weeks after laying. Development begins before they are voided (Daniel, 2002). Neonates hatch to be miniature of adult snake are usually 8-12 cm long.

Neonates of *Dendrelaphis pictus* (Photo by: Francis Cosquieri, permission pending)
Distribution

*Dendrelaphis pictus* ranges from India, Myanmar, Southern China, Thailand, Peninsular of Malaysia, larger islands of Indonesia, Philippine Island and Singapore. It is widely observed in all habitats in Singapore and thus considered the most commonly encountered snake here.

View [Untitled] in a larger map

Sexual Diamorphism

Sexual dimorphism in morphology or body size is common among reptiles (Camilleri and Shine, 1990). More than 60% of taxa of snakes are sexually dimorphic in adult body size with female larger than males (Shine, 1978).

In *Dendrelaphis*, females grow larger than males. Studies have done on head measurements and shown that females have relatively larger heads (Camilleri and Shine, 1990). This trait has been identified in many other species (Greene et al., 1997). Dietary divergence might be the important selective force for the evolution of head-size and shape dimorphism. Males have been reported to have larger eyes than females (Greene et al., 1997).

Close Relatives

*Dendrelaphis* has more than 40 described species and some of them are closely alike.
*D. pictus*
Painted Bronzeback

- Black eye-stripe
- Posterior maxillary teeth bring longer than the rest

Painted Bronzeback (Photo by Colleen)

*D. tristis*
Common Indian Bronzeback

- Posterior maxillary teeth being shorter than the rest
- Closest in morphology to painted bronzeback

Common Indian Bronzeback (Photo by Dinesh Valke permission pending)
### D. cyanochloris
**Blue Bronzeback**

- Closely related in morphology to Elegant Bronzeback
- Black eye-stripe which starts immediately in front of the eye and extends onto the neck only
- Eyes slightly smaller

*Blue Bronzeback Photo by Norhayati Ahmad permission pending*

### D. haasi
**Haas' Bronzeback**

- Body is much more slender
- Head colour is orange
- Lacks black stripe behind the eye and down the neck
- Occurs near streams

*Photo by Nick Baker*
**D. kopsteini**
Kopstein's Bronzeback

- Brick-red back of the neck, best seen when expanded

**D. formosus**
Elegant Bronzeback

- Back is brown and highly keeled with intermittent green dashes along the sides
- Black eye-stripe present
- Three narrow, black lines present posteriorly

Photo by Nick Baker

Photo by Anne Devan-Song permission pending
**D. caudolineatus**
Striped Bronzeback

- Lacks the black eye-stripe
- Lower cheeks and lips are pale yellow
- Vertebral scales are not enlarged but are narrow

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**Taxonomy**

*Dendrelaphis pictus* belongs to Colubridae which. There are three subspecies for this group: *Dendrelaphis pictus* pictus, Gmelin 1788, *D. p. inornatus*, Boulenger 1897 and *D. p. intermedius*, Mertens 1927b (How et al., 1996).

The systematics of this genus have remained ambiguous and incomplete (Rooijen and Vogel, 2008). Many new species has been isolated for this group from different regions and their morphological descriptions has been updated along the way.
Pet trade

This beautiful creature is very adaptable to wide range of habitat thus making it a popular subject for pet trade. Their abundance in Southeast Asia has also made them vulnerable to poachers. They can be easily found on online shops and many of the times they are sold out!!

Due to the unavailability of natural food resources, many of the keepers have to switch the diet of their snakes from frogs an lizards to rodent and worms. Snakes which do not prefer their new diet have to be force-feed which may be dangerous and easily cause injuries on snakes.

References

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