

On the distribution of *Platyceps saharicus* (Reptilia: Colubridae) in the Sahara

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Abstract. The Sahara racer *Platyceps saharicus* is a poorly known species in the central Sahara context. The discovery of two new specimens, one in the Ennedi region (NE of Chad) and the other in the Immidir massif (southern Algeria), extends slightly its known distribution, especially the second one as it represents the westernmost known record.

Key words. Reptilia, Colubridae, *Platyceps saharicus*, distribution, Algeria, Chad, Sahara.

The Sahara racer *Platyceps saharicus* is a poorly known colubrid snake of the *Platyceps rhodorachis* complex that was described recently by SCHÄTTI & MCCARTHY (2004). In the central Sahara, it is possible to mistake *P. saharicus* for *Hemorrhhois algirus* (JAN, 1863) but the latter is less slender, with 23 or 25 rows of scales at mid-body vs. 19, fewer ventral plates (205-240) and paired subcaudals (83-117) (TRAPE & MANÉ 2006). Also it exhibits three longitudinal dark stripes or rows of dark spots on the tail (uniform in *P. saharicus*) and some specimens present a black head pattern never encountered in *P. saharicus*. In addition, these two desert colubrids seem to have allopatric distributions, with *H. algirus* occurring in arid and Saharan areas from Western Sahara, Morocco and Mauritania, to northern Algeria, Tunisia, northern Libya and northwestern Egypt (SCHLEICH et al. 1996, GENIEZ et al. 2004, TRAPE & MANÉ 2006, BAHA EL DIN 2006). The record of this species in southern Algeria on the map of TRAPE & MANÉ (2006:108) may actually correspond to *P. saharicus*.

During two journeys, one of us (YG) observed and photographed two Sahara racers. The first one was seen in Algeria at a temporary water point (GPS coordinates 25° 31' N, 03° 48' E) of oued I-n-Enedja, one of the main water courses of the Immidir massif. The site is located app. 550 m above sea level and is a

typical riverbed in the region: deeply incised in the sandstone plateau with alternating sandy and rocky places. Because of abundant (for the region) rains a few weeks before, water holes were quite numerous, the vegetation cover was relatively dense and many



Fig. 1. *Platyceps saharicus*, wadi I-n-Enedja (Immidir, Algeria). Photo by Y. GAUTHIER.

plant species were recorded. This adult specimen (app. 150 cm total length as a rough estimate at the time of observation) was shortly observed during clear weather (temperature app. 15 °C in the shade) on 29 October 2002, around noon. It was crawling in the rocks, just above the water hole (Fig. 1). The identification is based on the picture only. However, the following characters are strong indicators for a correct specific assignment: very slender habitus, head slender, black oblique spot under the eyes, end of the dorsum becoming progressively uniform coloured, low number of row of dorsal scales, not exceeding 20 rows. These characters permit to exclude the other known or recorded snakes from this region (*Bitis arietans*, *Cerastes cerastes*, *C. vipera*, *Hemorrhhois algirus*, *Echis leucogaster*, *Leptotyphlops algeriensis*, *Lytorhynchus diadema*, *Macroprotodon cucullatus*, *Psammophis schokari*, *Scutophis moilensis*, *Spalerosophis diadema* and *Telescopus dhara*). So far, this constitutes the westernmost record for *P. saharicus*.

A second specimen (also app. 150 cm total length as a rough estimate) was found on 1 December 2005 in the Ennedi region (NE of Chad). The animal was trapped in a water hole from which it could not escape due to the nearly vertical walls. This water hole, located in the kori (local name for “river”) Erdébéché (app. 1000 m above sea level), at around 10 m upstream of a 250 m deep pit, the gouffre de Koboué (GPS coordinates: 17° 25' N, 22° 04' E). Below the pit, the river bed was covered with vegetation. Upstream, the river had cut the plateau for app. 1 km so that, in a rocky environment, there was almost no vegetation. Like the first specimen, identification was performed with pictures only, and by comparing them with preserved specimens as well as already published pictures of *P. saharicus* (e.g. SCHÄTTI & MCCA-



Fig. 2. Distribution map of *Platyceps saharicus* (according to SCHLEICH et al. 1996, SCHÄTTI & MCCARTHY 2004, BAH A EL DIN 2006, P.-A. CROCHET pers. comm.). Asterisks correspond to the new records.

RTHY 2004, BAH A EL DIN 2006). By the time it was photographed (noon), air temperature was around 20 °C, at clear sky. This record seems to be the southernmost for the species in the central Sahara, apart from more southern records in Somalia.

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