

Short Communication

THE FIRST RECORD OF THE KING COBRA *OPHIOPHAGUS HANNAH* (CANTOR, 1836) (REPTILIA: ELAPIDAE) FROM CHHATTISGARH, CENTRAL INDIA

INTRODUCTION

The King Cobra, *Ophiophagus hannah* (Cantor) is rare, but, widespread throughout South and Southeast Asia. It is reported from Bali, Bangladesh, Borneo, Cambodia, China, India, Java, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Sulawesi, Sumatra and Thailand (Iskandar and Colijn, 2002). In India, it has a patchy distribution covering the Western Ghats, Shiwalik and Terai regions of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, North-east India and the Andaman Islands (Das, 2002; Whittaker and Captain, 2004) (Fig. 1). The species is known to inhabit a wide altitude range as well, from 150

m to 1530 m in Nepal (Selich and Kestle, 2002) and from the coasts of Orissa and West Bengal up to a height of 1840 m in Sikkim (Bashir *et al.*, 2010) and 2181 m in Mussoori Hills in India (Waltner, 1975). Due to its patchy distribution, the snake shows considerable geographic variation in colouration, size and scalation suggesting the genus as a complex of several species (Vogel, 2006).

Ophiophagus hannah is known to inhabit thick vegetation of evergreen and semi-evergreen forests or estuarine mangrove swamps with heavy rainfall (Whittaker and Captain, 2004). It prefers humid jungles particularly with thick undergrowths, cool swamps and bamboo patches (David and Vogel,

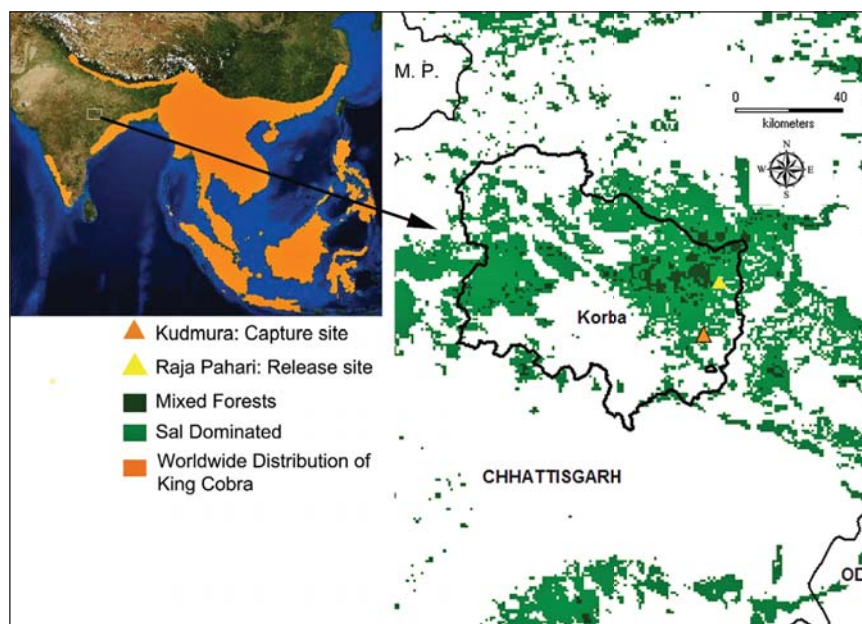


Fig. 1. Map showing sites of observation and release of the King Cobra in the present study. Inset showing the worldwide distribution of King Cobra (Inset map source: IUCN, 2013).

1996; Selich and Kestle, 2002; Das *et al.*, 2008). The present communication reports the occurrence of King Cobra for the first time from the dry habitats of Chhattisgarh state of Central India. The snake was found at the forest range office campus (22°25'13.9"N and 83°06'27.6"E) of Kudmura range, Korba Forest Division on 22nd February 2014 (Fig. 1). It was an adult female snake measuring to a length of nearly 3.6 m. The snake was captured and released to a site named Raja Pahari nearly 20 kms from the Kudmura village (Fig. 2A, 2B). Raja Pahari was selected as the release site primarily due to its dense and less disturbed forest patch and secondarily because of verbal interactions with villagers who mentioned that similar kind of snakes were seen on several occasions at that site.



A

Chhattisgarh is a tribal dominated state with extensive forested areas of nearly 44% of the total area of the state. Kudmura range of Korba district, Chhattisgarh, harbours Tropical Dry Deciduous Forest characterised by Sal (*Shorea robusta*), Saja (*Terminalia tomentosa*), Mahua (*Madhuca indica*), Tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), etc. which is interspersed by Bamboo (*Dendrocalamus strictus*) patches. King Cobra hitherto being reported from wet and humid habitats, the present sighting may indicate the emergence of its potential habitat in the dry Central Highland province of Deccan Peninsula biogeographic zone,



B

Fig. 2. The King Cobra recorded in the present study from Chhattisgarh. The King Cobra snake released at Raja Pahari (A & B).

The herpetofauna of Chhattisgarh is poorly documented. The number of previous literatures is hand countable including Ingle (2003), Chandra and Gajbe (2005), Chakraborty *et al.*, (2008) and Chandra *et al.* (2013). In 2005, Chandra and Gajbe provided the only consolidated checklist of 45 species of reptiles under 29 genera of 11 families from Chhattisgarh. King Cobra is considered extremely rare and is listed under CITES Appendix II and IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2013.2 as Vulnerable. Its unusual sighting gives justification for immediate protection of the forests of that region. Besides, an intensive herpetofaunal survey of Chhattisgarh is highly recommended before substantial portion of the fauna become extinct from the area without even being documented.

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