



Connecting the Dots: New Distribution Records of the Rare Coral Red Kukri Snake, *Oligodon kheriensis* Acharjee and Ray 1936, in India

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Kukri snakes in the genus *Oligodon* are characterized by broad hind teeth shaped like a kukri (a large knife with a recurved blade), hence the name (Smith 1943). These snakes also have a large rostral extending onto the upper surface of the snout, elongated nostrils, a cylindrical body, and smooth scales (Smith 1943; Das et al. 2016). Eighty currently recognized species, 21 of them known to occur in India, are assigned to the genus (Uetz et al. 2020). The Coral Red Kukri Snake (*Oligodon kheriensis* Acharjee and Ray 1936) was described from North Kheri Division, Eastern Circle, Kheri-Lakhimpur of the United Provinces of colonial India, presently the state of Uttar Pradesh. This taxon was regarded as a synonym of Cantor's Kukri Snake (*Oligodon cyclurus*) by Smith (1943)

but was recognized as a valid species by Schleich and Kästle (2002) and Whitaker and Captain (2004). This was verified by David et al. (2011: 6), who distinguished *O. kheriensis* “from *O. cyclurus* by the following characters: (1) higher number of ventral scales, 196 vs. 159–178 in *O. cyclurus*; (2) uniform dorsum vs. reticulated or blotched (or blotched and striped) in *O. cyclurus*, and (3) the absence of the large, arrow-like cephalic and nape marking in *O. kheriensis*.”

The Coral Red Kukri Snake was thought to be very rare and known only from the holotype. However, in the last twenty years, the species has been reported from several localities in India (Uttarakhand: Haldwani; Uttar Pradesh: North Lakhimpur, Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary; West Bengal:

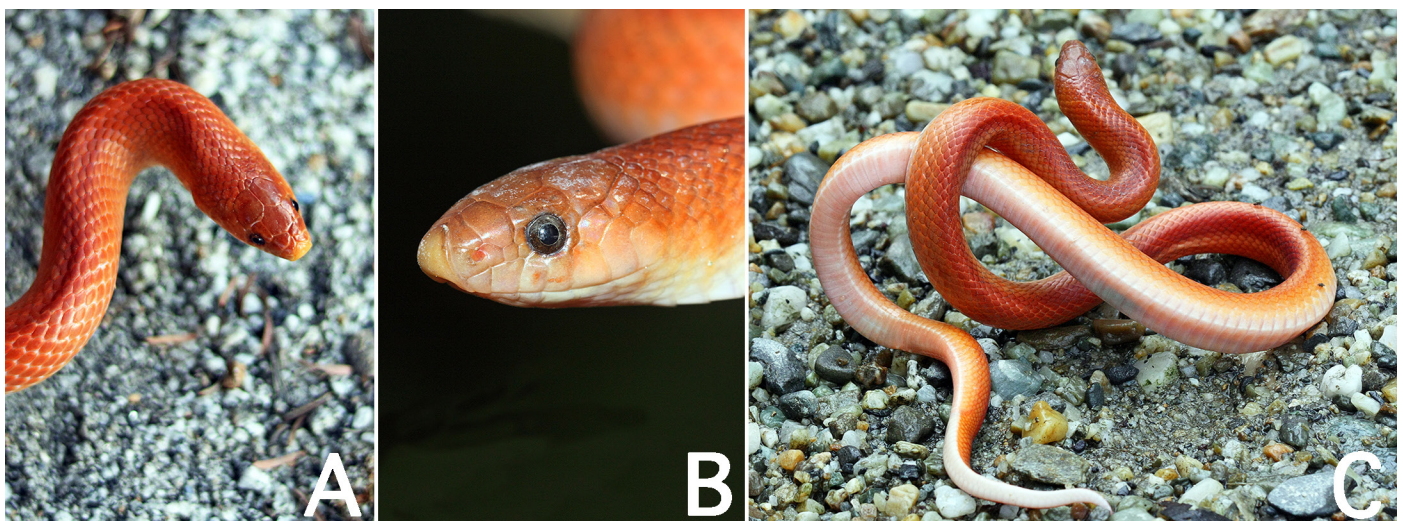


Fig. 1. A Coral Red Kukri Snake (*Oligodon kheriensis*): Dorsal (A) and lateral (B) views of the head and a threat display in response to being stressed (C). Photographs by Anukul Nath (A) and Sanjoy Sutradhar (B, C).

Shirishkala, Jalpaiguri; Assam: Kachugaon, Kokrajhar) and Nepal (Mahendranagar in western Nepal; Pithuwa, Sauraha, and Saktikhori in Chitwan District in central Nepal; Damak-Jhapa in southeastern Nepal) (Acharjee and Ray 1936; Schleich and Kästle 2002; Pandey 2012; Sutradhar and Nath 2013; Pandey et al. 2016; Das et al. 2016; Maurya et al. 2019). In the present note, we confirm additional locality reports of the species from West Bengal and Assam from 2010 to 2019.

In Assam, we found individuals (Fig. 1) in the Bongaigaon (Salbagan, Palpara, Bageswari Hill, Sannashi Pahar, Kakoijana, Manikpur), Chirang (Dhaligaon, Basugaon, Bangaljhora-Bijni, Panbari), Baksa (Manas National Park), and Kokrajhar (Jharbari, Titaguri, Shantinagar) Districts. In West Bengal, the species was locally common in the Coochbehar (Kochbihar) District (Puratan Post Office Para, Badur Bagan, Chilarai Bazar, near Rambhola High School, adjacent to Coochbehar College, Chakchaka area-Moratorsha, Gopalpur, Pundibari By-pass Road, Rasamati, Chilapata, near the Tufanganj Police Station, Lambapara-Tufanganj, Jiranpur-Balarampur, and Mathbhanga) and we documented one report in the Kholta Ecopark of Alipurduar District. These new records fill in gaps in the previously documented distribution of the species (Fig. 2). Photographic vouchers have been deposited in the zoological reference collection of the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum at the National University of Singapore (ZRC(IMG) 2.562a–b). The identity of the species was confirmed by Indraneil Das of the Universiti Malaysia, Sarawak.

Like Sutradhar and Nath (2013) and Pandey et al. (2016), who noted that these snakes often occur in human-dominated landscapes, all our observations were from either human-dominated habitats (agricultural areas, home gardens, fallow land) or areas adjacent to forested edges (Fig. 3). We encountered road-killed snakes in Bongaigaon (Assam) and Coochbehar (West Bengal) Districts. In 2017, a specimen was rescued from a shop in the Chilarai market, one of the busiest areas in Coochbehar District. This unlikely locality probably is attributable to the fact that most of the abandoned areas with vegetation were inundated by heavy rain in July and August of that year, causing that individual to seek shelter on higher ground. Coral Red Kukri Snakes also were rescued from other crowded settlements and townships in Coochbehar (mostly in July and August). In Bangaljhora Village of Bijni in Chirang District (Assam), three individuals were killed in 2017–2019 by local residents who, disturbed by recent snakebite incidents in surrounding areas (Nath et al. 2019), feared that these bright red snakes were venomous.

We recorded Light-barred Kukri Snakes (*O. albocinctus*) and *O. cyclurus* in sympatry with *O. kheriensis*. The geographic distribution of the genus *Oligodon* is complex; several species have overlapping ranges and others have been reported from highly fragmented habitats (Green 2010). Nevertheless, our observations confirm that *Oligodon kheriensis* is distributed throughout the entire Terai Region of India and Nepal where it appears to be far more abundant than had been thought for many years.

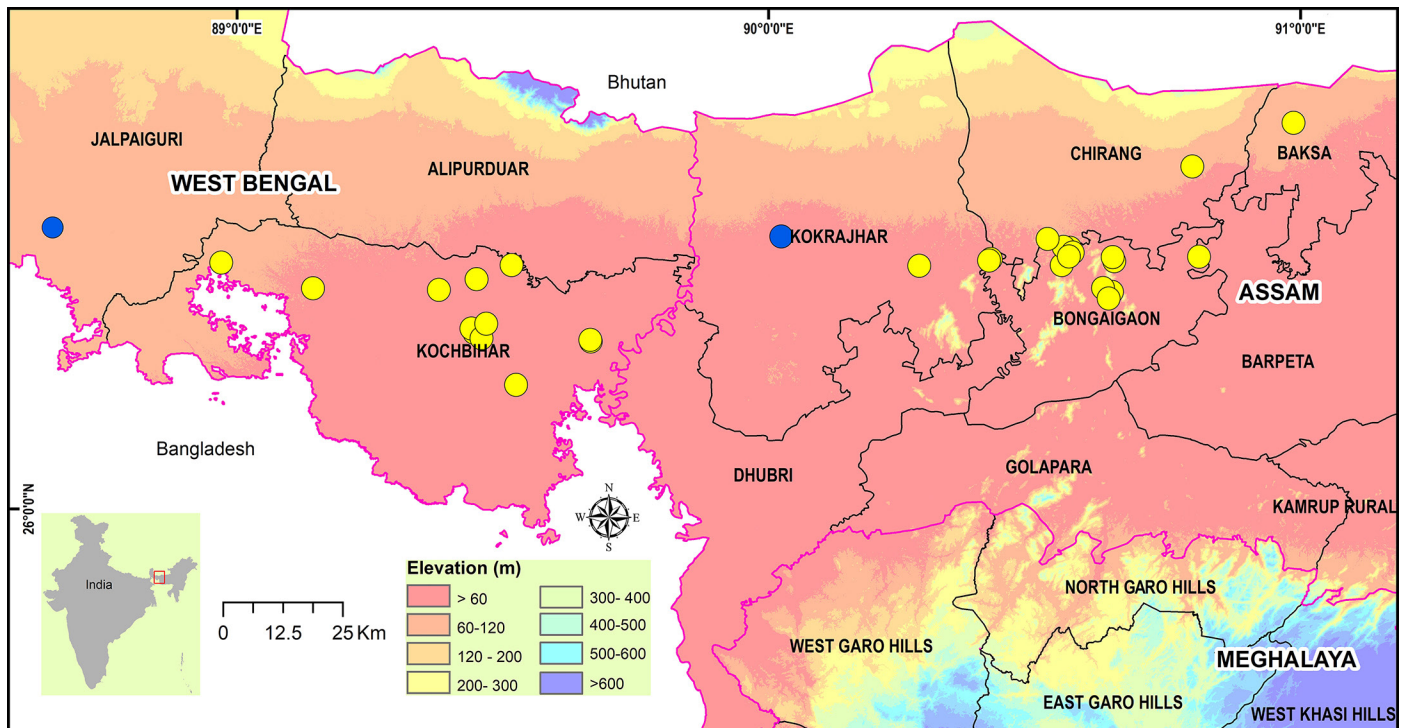


Fig. 2. New (yellow dots) and previously published (blue dots) locality records of the Coral Red Kukri Snake (*Oligodon kheriensis*) from Assam and West Bengal, India.

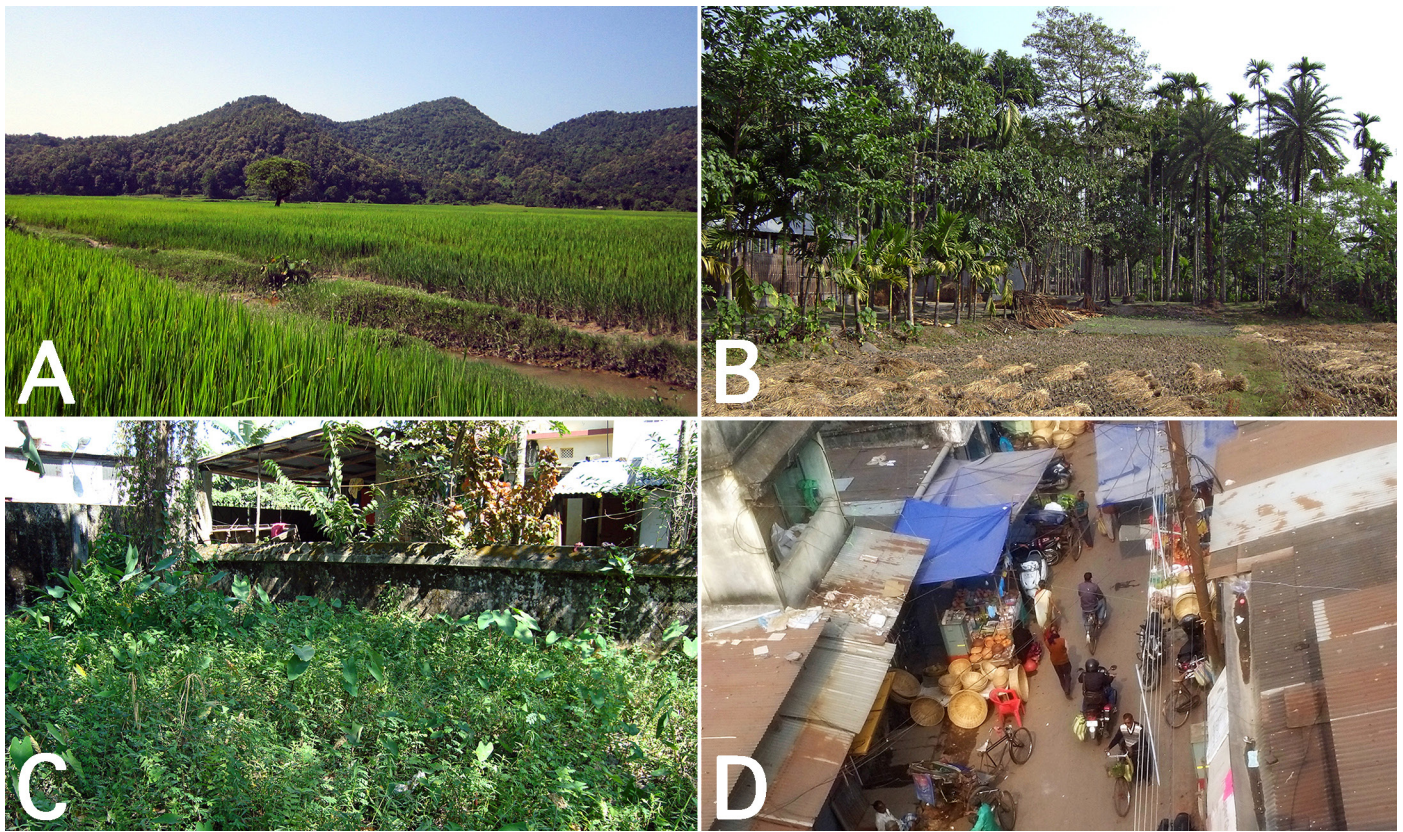


Fig. 3. Habitat of Coral Red Kukri Snakes (*Oligodon kheriensis*) in Assam and West Bengal, India: Agricultural fields adjacent to forests in Kakoijona, Assam (A), and near villages in Balarampur, West Bengal (B); a backyard with ferns and taro (*Colocasia* sp.) in Coochbehar, West Bengal (C), and the busy Chilarai Bazar in Coochbehar, West Bengal (D). Photographs by Anukul Nath (A), Vivek Sarkar (B, C), and Ashish Agrahari (D).

Acknowledgements

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