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First sighting of *Ahaetulla prasina* (Boie, 1827) (Reptilia: Colubridae: Ahaetuliinae) in Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

This study, revealed the first ever sighting of Asian vine snake *Ahaetulla Prasina*, in Dudhwa Tiger Reserve in Uttar Pradesh, India. This new observation of *Ahaetulla Prasina* is presented based on photographic and morphological evidences, which obtained through image data.

Keywords: First sighting, Uttar Pradesh, Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, *Ahaetulla Prasina*, herpetofauna

Introduction

The Dudhwa Tiger Reserve is located in the Terai region of Uttar Pradesh, India, near the Indo-Nepal border. The reserve is famous for its diverse ecosystems, including grasslands, swamps, and dense forests. Dudhwa Tiger reserve comprises of Dudhwa National Park, Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary and Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary. It is located on the Indo-Nepal border in the Palia Kalan Tehsil of district Lakhimpur-Kheri and lies between 28° 18'N and 28° 42'N latitudes and 80° 28'E and 80° 57'E longitudes. Dudhwa is a moist deciduous and mainly dominated by Sal Forests of India. According to Champion and Seth (1968) [3] the forest type of Dudhwa can be divided into following four classes; Northern Tropical Semi Evergreen Forest, Northern Indian Moist Deciduous Forest, Tropical Seasonal Swamp Forest, Northern Tropical Dry Deciduous Forest. The grasslands are the prominent features of Dudhwa National Park. They comprise about 19% of the park and can be divided into two types- wet low-lying areas which are dominated by tall grass species such as *Schlerostachya fusca*, *Phragmites karka*, and *Saccharum spontaneum*, and the drier high grounds which are dominated by grasses like *Imperata cylindrical*, *Desmostachya bipinnata*, *Erianthus munja* (*Tripidium bengalense*), *Cymbopogon martini* (Ahmed 2007) [1]. Majority of the areas are upland grassland and form the major habitats of the Swamp deer, Cheetal, Hog deer, and Greater one- horned rhinoceros. According to approximately 49 species of mammals, 450 species of birds, 10 species of amphibians, 35 species of reptiles and 79 species of fishes are present in Dudhwa.

The genus *Ahaetulla* (link 1807) belongs to the Colubridae family and it is the largest family with approximately 2,060 species (Mirza *et al* 2024; Uetz *et al.* 2021) [7, 10]. Vine snakes of the genus *Ahaetulla* is belongs to the Ahaetuliinae subfamily of the Colubridae family. The genus *Ahaetulla* comprises approximately 20 species of vine snakes widely distributed globally throughout south and southeast Asia and out of these 20 species 12 are present in India (Malik *et al.* 2020; Srikanthan *et al.* 2022) [8, 9].

Ahaetulla Prasina globally found in South and Southeast Asia and widely distributed throughout the region, especially in subtropical and woodland (Whitaker *et al.* 2004) [11]. In India *Ahaetulla Prasina* is found in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Goa, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh (Das 2012; Ahmed *et al* 2009) [4, 2]. It mainly favours arboreal habitats in grasslands, rainforests, and subtropical areas due to its slender shaped body, which allows climbing.

Ahaetulla Prasina is a completely arboreal, nocturnal, long and extremely slender snake; head large; elongated and tapering snout, with a groove running along it; eyes are large having horizontal pupil; tail is long, with a prehensile tip; dorsal are smooth; anal is separated.

It is commonly known as Asian vine snake, Boie's Whip Snake, Gunther's Whip Snake or the Oriental Whip Snake (Lalhriatzuali 2022) ^[6]. The coloration of adults can vary from light brown to dull yellow green, and can be quite remarkable green in colour (Boie 1827). According to IUCN Red List *Ahaetulla Prasina* listed as Least Concern species with stable population trend and listed as a Schedule IV species of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (Ahmed *et al.* 2009) ^[2]. The present study is an observational effort to record the presence of *Ahaetulla Prasina* in Dudhwa Tiger Reserve.

Materials and Methods

The first sighting of *Ahaetulla Prasina* (Oriental Whip Snake) was recorded during a vegetation survey conducted as part of a study on the population and feeding ecology of the Swamp Deer (*Rucervus duvaucelii*) at Bankey Taal, Dudhwa Tiger Reserve (DTR) (GPS: 28.47495°N, 80.71375°E) (Fig. 1). On 15 February 2024, while sampling vegetation in a dry grassland habitat dominated by *Oryza rufipogon*, an individual of *Ahaetulla Prasina* was observed (Fig. 2C & 2D). All photograph documentation of the species was captured by Canon EOS 200D with 70-300mm lens digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera. This opportunistic sighting contributes to the understanding of reptilian diversity within the DTR. This is the first record of the species from the DTR. The identity of the species was confirmed by Soham Patekar.

Results and Discussion: The species was identified as a female exhibiting a brown morph, a relatively uncommon coloration for this typically green arboreal species, with the observed individual measuring approximately 65cm in total length. Photographs were taken without disturbing the snake, and its identification was later confirmed through detailed morphological comparison with existing literature (Lalhriatzuali 2022) ^[6] and consultation with herpetology experts. This new observational record of *Ahaetulla Prasina* in Dudhwa Tiger Reserve or terai landscape represents not only the first record from Uttar Pradesh but also one of the northernmost known occurrences in the Indian subcontinent. Until now, the Western Ghats, Northeastern India, and portions of Peninsular India were the main regions where *Ahaetulla Prasina* was found (Das 2012; Ahmed *et al.* 2009) ^[2, 4].

Another species (*A. oxyrhyncha*) of the genus *Ahaetulla* has previously been reported from Dudhwa (Kanauija *et al.* 2017), but no comprehensive ecological studies have been conducted on it. This new observation of *Ahaetulla Prasina* in a grassland patch is notable due to previous study has described this species as completely arboreal and usually associated with evergreen, moist deciduous, mangrove, or shrub forest habitats rather than open grasslands (Lalhriatzuali 2022; Das 2012) ^[6, 4]. This new record from Dudhwa is ecologically significant because there are currently no documented reports of *Ahaetulla Prasina* in grassland environments elsewhere in its distribution.

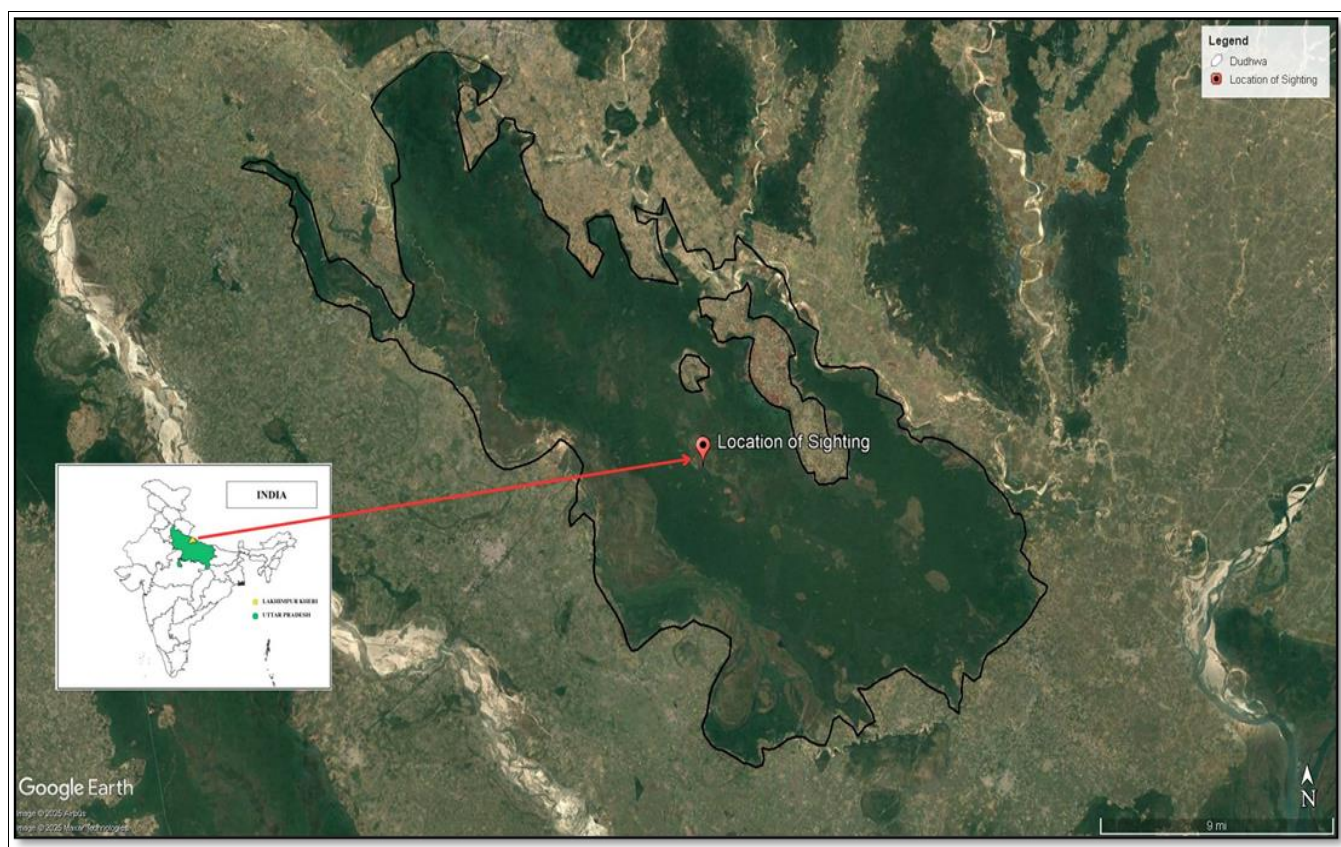


Fig 1: Location of Sighting in Bankey Taal, Dudhwa Tiger Reserve

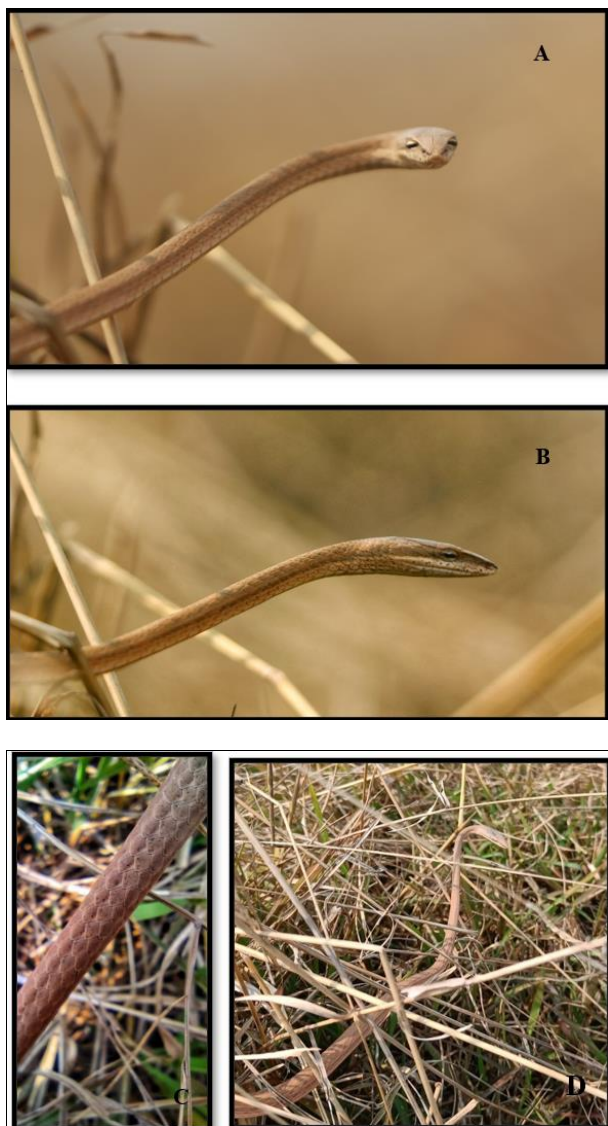


Fig 2: A & B- Front view & Side view of *Ahaetulla Prasina*, C- Scales on the body of species, D- Habitat of species in DTR

Conclusion

This new record of *Ahaetulla Prasina* in Dudhwa Tiger Reserve was confirmed with analysis of all the image data, morphological comparison with existing previous literature and consultation with herpetology experts. This new record also emphasizes the necessity of additional systematic herpetological studies in the region to document and monitor lesser-known reptile taxa. However, the baseline data generated in this study can be utilized for future monitoring and more detailed investigations.

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