

Snakes Alive: Gray's Racer Snake *Platyceps* cf. *ventromaculatus*, (Gray 1834) sensu Schätti and Schmitz 2006, on Sir Bani Yas and Dalma islands

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Platyceps ventromaculatus in a rock crevice on Dalma

During the course of a wildlife survey on 30 May 2007, a live Gray's racer snake *Platyceps* cf. *ventromaculatus* (sensu Schätti and Schmitz 2006, formerly named *Coluber ventromaculatus*) was observed by Simon Aspinall and Andrew Haig on the island of Sir Bani Yas, western Abu Dhabi. This constituted only the second confirmed record of the species in the United Arab Emirates. The earlier record, also from Sir Bani Yas, concerned several dead specimens recorded in August 1989, one of which was collected by Bish Brown and identified by Franz Tiedmann (Brown, 1991; Tiedmann, 1991). Furthermore, on 5 April 2008, a juvenile of the same species was observed and photographed on Dalma island, also in western Abu Dhabi, by Drew Gardner and Brigitte Howarth.

This colubrid species, which is harmless to humans and readily arboreal, is known within the Arabian Gulf region from Kuwait, eastern Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain (Gallagher, 1971; Gasperetti, 1988; Gillespie, 2006). Its world range extends from Iraq to northern India (Gasperetti, 1988). The continued presence of this species on Sir Bani Yas and its recent discovery on Dalma is of some interest.

It is possible that the species has been introduced to Sir

Bani Yas and Dalma, but if so, one might expect it also to occur on the nearby UAE mainland. A bounty scheme was formerly operated for any snakes caught on Sir Bani Yas, and this may have encouraged the import of snakes. However, although the sand racer (*Psammophis schokari*) is well known on the adjacent mainland (Baha El Din, 1996), there are no records of *P. ventromaculatus*, the closest known mainland locality for which is Doha (Gillespie, 2006). Brown (1991) considered the species likely to have been on Sir Bani Yas before development started. The discovery of the species on Dalma, in the hilly area of the island well away from cultivation, also lends support to the species being native to the islands.

The individual on Sir Bani Yas was located when the agitated alarm calls of several White-cheeked Bulbuls *Pycnonotus leucogenys* led the observers to expect they might have encountered a roosting migrant Scops Owl *Otus scops*. Instead, it was the snake that was cause of the commotion, coiled in the foliage about two metres up a planted 'sidr' (*Ziziphus spina-christi*) tree, just above the bulbul's nest. Although the nest's contents were not visible, *P. ventromaculatus* is reported to take birds sometimes (Gallagher, 1971; Khan, 2002) and the bulbul chicks would doubtless also be a suitable prey item. The



A P. ventromaculatus on Dalma

Dalma individual was in a rocky gully amongst haematite outcrops in the central part of the island.

Recently, the morphology and distribution of the snakes presently classified as *Platyceps ventromaculatus* (Gray, 1834) has been reassessed (Schätti & Schmitz, 2006). Schätti & Schmitz suggest that the snakes from the Gulf region and parts of Iran may be specifically distinct from Gray's racer, based on hemipenial structure and preliminary mitochondrial DNA analysis. If further molecular studies support this, these populations would then be recognised as *Platyceps chesneii* (Martin, 1838).

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