

# The Arabian cat snake (*Telescopus dhara* (Forskål, 1775)): a new species record for the United Arab Emirates, with notes on the species in Oman

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Plate 1. Road-killed specimen of *Telescopus dhara* photographed near Ain Al Ghamour, UAE. The coin is a UAE dirham, 23 mm in diameter. Picture by Neil Tovey.



Plate 2. Unpatterned morph of *Telescopus dhara* at Ras Aban Khaluf in central Oman. Photo Andrew Gardner.

The Arabian cat snake *Telescopus dhara* (Forskål, 1775) is a rear-fanged colubrid snake found in the peripheral mountains of Arabia, from the Gulf of Aqaba, southwards through the Hijaz to the Yemen mountains, to the mountainous and rocky areas of Oman. It is also reported from northern central Arabia including the Riyadh area (Gasperetti 1988). A closely-related species *Telescopus obtusus* is found across north and north eastern Africa, and is often included classified as a subspecies of *T. dhara*. While the species is well known in Oman, the only published record from the UAE is of an orange individual reported by Egan (2007) as being caught in Sharjah, but probably transported in date palms from northern Oman. Since then, three UAE records of Arabian cat snakes have been made. The first two were recorded by Damien Egan and Johannes Els of the Sharjah Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife (BCEAW). First, a cat snake was killed and photographed on 10 September 2006 at the Meridien Hotel at Al Aqah, 17 km north of Khor Fakkan. However the specimen was not preserved. On the night of 3 June 2008, a cat snake was caught in Wadi Helo and taken live to the BCEAW. The third record is of a road-killed Arabian cat snake from near Kalba and this is described in more detail here.

The recently killed snake was observed by Clive Temple and one of the authors, Neil Tovey, on the tarmac road near the Ain Al Ghamour picnic site (24.959° E 56.315° E), on the morning of September 20th 2008. The road here runs parallel to the Omani border and is within the lower areas of the Hajar Mountains. The snake appeared to have been recently run over while crossing the road from a group of low-lying hills to the south east of the road. It was approximately 80cms in total length, very thin but with a relatively wide head, narrow neck and

large eyes. The dorsal colouration was pinkish brown with scattered lighter buffy markings, while the ventral side was unpatterned and white. After taking a series of digital photographs (**Plate 1**), the snake carcass was discarded.

Table 1 gives details of unpublished Arabian cat snake records from Oman since 1989. Most adult Arabian cat snakes are between 60 and 70 cm in total length (Egan 2007), though an individual collected near Nizwa on 15 July 1998 and measured by Drew Gardner had a total length of 113.2 cm (of which 16.5 cm was tail). This appears to be the longest specimen of the species on record. The localities of all records known to the authors are plotted in **Figure 1**. Cat snakes are nocturnal and most of the records are of snakes active at night. The 40 cm total length cat snake on Jiddat al Sahasa at 1450 m was active at 21.45 hrs on a February night, when the air temperature was 10.5° C. This snake was rather slow, but still adept at climbing vertical rock faces.

The colour and pattern of these snakes vary enormously. **Plate 2** illustrates an almost unpatterned pinkish orange juvenile photographed near Khaluf, central Oman on 18 January 1999 and similar individuals occur on the Jiddat al Harasis. A heavily patterned individual, also juvenile, was observed climbing in a bush at night in Wadi Ayun, Dhofar, on 27 March 1989 and is shown in **Plate 3**. **Plate 4** shows a living individual, similar in colour and pattern to the Ain Al Ghamour individual, photographed on the Jiddat al Sahasa in the Ru'us al Jibal of the Musandam peninsula. Another Musandam individual, photographed as a road kill by Dr Gary Brown on 6 May 2005 in Wadi Sal al Ala, also appears to be of a similar colour and pattern (**Plate 5**). The photo of the Al Aqah specimen is poor, but this individual appears also to be pinkish brown with buffy

markings. The Wadi Helo specimen (**Plate 6**) is similar in pattern but a darker brown. The individual from Qayut in the Jebel al Akhdar, observed at 2230 hrs, was a 60 cm individual in very poor condition, being thin and with lumps under the skin suggesting it was heavily parasitised. Its colour was similar to the Jiddat al Sahasa, one, as was the road-killed one from NE of Ibra photographed by Chris Hillman in September 2009. With rather few records, one cannot draw firm conclusions, but perhaps the northern Hajar Arabian cat snakes are mainly of this colour morph.

Given that Arabian cat snakes have previously been recorded in Jebel Akhdar and also in the Ru'us al Jibal, and that they have been recorded from sea level to 2150 metres, it is to be expected that this species would also occur in the Hajar mountains of the UAE. Indeed, it is somewhat surprising that the Arabian cat snake has not been recorded until now (Gardner 2005, Gardner 2008). This suggests that Arabian cat snakes are uncommon in the UAE, and deserving of listing on the UAE Red Data List of species of conservation concern.

**Table 1: Unpublished Arabian cat snake records from Oman and the UAE. Unless otherwise indicated, these are by Andrew Gardner.**

Date	Location	North	East	Altitude (m)	Notes
27.03.1989	Wadi Ayun, Dhofar	17.245°	53.888°	675	In bush at night, on rocky wadi side ( <b>Plate 3</b> )
05.01.1992	Ja'aluni, Jiddat al Harasis	19.950	57.100	155	3 juveniles found by S. M. Farook.
30.03.1993	Manttakat Sukaykira, Sur	22.550°	59.517°	200	Wadi in mountains. No collection data.
11.05.1995	Above Qayut	23.150°	57.467°	2150	Observed at night in rocky wadi.
15.07.1998	Nizwa	22.933°	57.533°	550	Collected by Fahad Hamad Al-Kalbani, Sultan Qaboos University.
18.01.1999	Ra's Abana, Khaluf	20.450°	58.050°	15	A juvenile (total length about 30 cm) active at night on rocky outcrops and white sand, 1.0 km from sea. ( <b>Plate 2</b> )
17.02.1999	Jiddat al Sahasa	25.967°	56.217°	1450	Observed at night in rocky wadi. ( <b>Plate 4</b> )
04.12.2002	2.5 km SWS Ad Daffah	22.271°	59.807°	20	Active at night on rocky escarpment 0.75 km from sea.
06.05.2005	Wadi Sal al Ala	26.078°	56.327°	250	Road-killed specimen photographed by Dr Gary Brown. ( <b>Plate 5</b> )
10.09.2006	Al Aqah Le Meridien resort	25.507°	56.363°	Sea level	Killed and photographed by Hotel staff.
3.06.2008	Wadi Helo	25.049°	56.203°	880 m	A male of total length 530 mm (SVL 450mm). BCEAW. ( <b>Plate 6</b> )
20.09.2008	Ain al Ghamour	24.959°	56.315°	50	Road-killed specimen photographed by Neil Tovey. ( <b>Plate 1</b> )
18.09.2009	NE of Ibra	22.716°	58.764°	440	Road-killed specimen photographed by Chris Hillman.





Plate 3. Well patterned morph at Wadi Ayun in southern Oman. Picture: Andrew Gardner.



Plate 4. Individual from Jiddat al Sahasa at 1450 m in the Musandam mountains with similar pattern to the Ain Al Ghamour specimen. Picture: Andrew Gardner



Plate 5. Road-killed specimen from Wadi Sal al Ala, Musandam, Oman close to the UAE border. Picture: Gary Brown



Plate 6. Cat snake from Wadi Helo, UAE, kept in the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife, Sharjah.

## *Telescopus dhara*

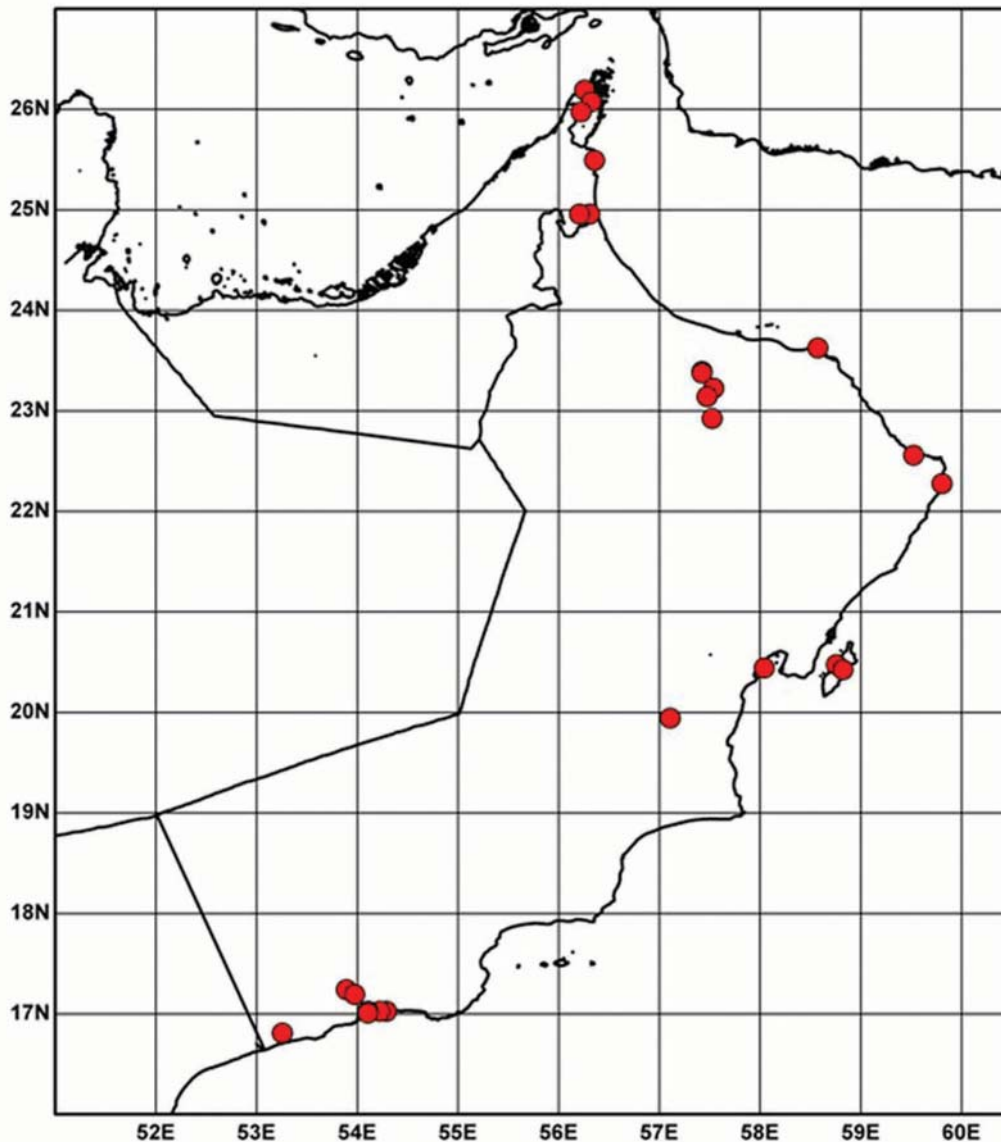


Fig 1. Localities of all records of *Telescopus dhara* known to the authors in Oman and the UAE.

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