



# Hypermelanism in the Cuban Lesser Racer (*Caraiba andreae*: Dipsadidae) from Western Cuba

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*Caraiba* is a monotypic genus endemic to Cuba (Hedges et al. 2009). *Caraiba andreae* (Fig. 1) is a diurnally active, fast-moving, ground-dwelling, pan-Cuban species with a unique color pattern among Cuban snakes. As indicated by one of its English names (Black-and-White Racer), coloration generally is a combination of a black dorsum and a white venter, although each color can invade the other region to some extent. Ventral scales can be completely white or with a black edge of variable width, but white is always present. The dorsum can have small white spots and the flanks can be as much as 50 percent white. In combination with morphological

characters, various coloration patterns are used to differentiate six subspecies (Thomas and Garrido 1967, Garrido 1973).

The nominal subspecies (Fig. 1A) is distributed throughout western and central Cuba (Schwartz and Henderson 1991). It is characterized by having a uniformly black dorsum and a white venter, although ventral scale edges can be black, especially toward the vent. The top of the head is black, but white or yellowish canthal bands, which can extend to the parietal region and onto the nape, are usually present. Labial scales are white. Herein we report a hypermelanistic, almost entirely black individual.

On 12 January 2013 at 1130 h, Luis Pérez Marrero collected an almost completely black male *C. a. andreae* (Fig. 1B) in a tree branch at approximately 2 m above the ground in Cerro municipality, La Habana, Cuba (23.11438°N, 82.38067°W; datum: NAD27). The head lacks parietal bands and those on the canthals are indistinct. A small amount of white color is evident only on the anterior fifth of the body. Labial scales are mostly white, but are stippled with black. The ventral surface of the rostrum has a rosy tint. The



**Fig. 1.** Adult *Caraiba a. andreae* from La Habana, Cuba. (A) Typical black and white pattern. (B) Hypermelanistic pattern. Details of lateral and ventral scales in the right upper corner of each image.

gular region is white with black splashes. The underside of the neck is marbled, with a predominance of white, which fades until the white remains only as splashes anteriorly on scale rows one and two.

Despite the species' relative abundance and wide distribution (Schwartz and Henderson 1991), this constitutes only the second incidence of hypermelanism recorded in this species. Garrido (1973) found a melanistic snake in western Cuba. Not as dark as the individual described herein, the venter of Garrido's specimen was dark gray, unlike the black of the dorsum, and an interrupted light gray line was evident between lateral and ventral scales.

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