



# Taxonomic Notes on the Bella Ratsnake, *Archelaphe bella* (Stanley 1917) (Reptilia: Colubridae), and the First Record of the Species from Manipur, India

Elangbam Premjit Singh<sup>1</sup>, Ht. Decemson<sup>2</sup>, H.T. Lalremsanga<sup>2</sup>, Khoyumthem Brajesh<sup>1</sup>, Ayekpam Lanngamba Meitei<sup>1</sup>, and Jayaditya Purkayastha<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Wildlife Explorers' Imphal, Manipur-795001, India

<sup>2</sup>Developmental Biology and Herpetology Laboratory, Department of Zoology, Mizoram University, Aizawl, Mizoram-796004, India

<sup>3</sup>Help Earth, Raghunath Choudhury Path, Lachitnagar, Guwahati-781007, Assam, India (mail.jayaditya@gmail.com)

The taxonomic history of ratsnakes in the family Colubridae is complex and fraught with numerous nomenclatural changes and misidentifications. The Bella Ratsnake (*Archelaphe bella*), initially described as *Coronella bella* by Stanley (1917) based on a single specimen from the Kuantun Hills in northwestern Fokien (now Fujian) Province, China, was characterized by distinct morphological traits, yet the limited understanding of hemipenial morphology at the time left its classification open to future revision. Werner (1929) complicated the taxonomy of *C. bella* by introducing the generic name *Wallopis* that, while intended to resolve inconsistencies in snake taxonomy, added to the confusion due to the lack of a clear diagnostic framework and explicit descriptions, resulting in taxonomic instability. More recently, another nomenclatural issue arose when Burbrink and Lawson (2007) assigned this species to the genus *Maculophis*, a name later deemed unavailable due to the absence of a formal diagnosis and an explicit statement indicating its novelty. Consequently, Schulz et al. (2011) proposed the new generic name *Archelaphe* to resolve this taxonomic ambiguity.

Wall (1921) described *Coluber leonardi* based on a single specimen from Sinlum Kaba, Burma, but Schulz et al. (2011) determined that *C. leonardi* was a junior synonym of *A. bella*. Bourret (1934, 1936) described two subspecies, *Elaphe leonardi chapaensis*, with a more vibrant and reddish ground color with prominent, dark cross bands in comparison to *Elaphe leonardi leonardi* (see Orlov et al. 2010), with a series of dark, often indistinct cross bands or blotches along the body. Following Schulz et al. (2011), the subspecies should be addressed as *A. b. bella*, which is distributed in Myanmar and Northeast India, and *A. b. chapaensis*, with a distribution in Vietnam and China. See Uetz et al. (2025) for a complete synonymy.

In India, Wall (1923) mentioned the presence of *A. b. bella* in Assam and from near the Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary in Nagaland. We herein provide a third record of *A. b. bella* from India and the first record from the state of Manipur.

At 0930 h on 10 April 2024, we encountered a roadkilled *A. b. bella* (Fig. 1) (TL = 0.82 m) on the forest hill trek near Zaimeng Lake near Chawangkinging Village, Koubru Forest Division, Kangpokpi District, Manipur, India (25.2109, 93.9374; elev. 1,939 m asl). A photograph of this snake was deposited in the University of Kansas Digital Archive (KUDA 14690) and the identity of the snake was independently verified by Sanath Bohra. Habitat in the area consisted of ever-



**Figure 1.** A roadkilled Bella Ratsnake (*Archelaphe bella*) from Kangpokpi District, Manipur, India. Photograph by Elangbam Premjit Singh and Ngamsongbou Newmai.

green montane secondary forest composed of trees (e.g., *Michelia champaca*, *Magnolia* spp., *Musa acuminata*) with a dense undergrowth of bamboo (*Melocana baccifera* and *Chimonobambusa callosa*) and herbs such as *Girardinia diversifolia* and *Agerantina* sp.

### Acknowledgements

Fieldwork organized by the Mizoram University and Wildlife Explorers, Manipur (WEM) was conducted under permit No: 3/22/2018-WL (Vol-II) issued on 3 August 2022 by the Chief Wildlife Warden, Dr. Aditya K. Joshi, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Sanjenthong, Imphal, Government of Manipur. We thank Mr. Ngamsongbou Newmai for collecting the specimen. We are grateful to all members of WEM and to the funding agency DST-SERB, Government of India (File No: EEQ/2021/000243) for financial support.

### Literature Cited

- Bourret, R. 1934. Notes herpétologiques sur l'Indochine française. II. Sur quelques serpents des montagnes du Tonkin. *Bulletin Général de l'Instruction Publique* 6: 1–11.
- Bourret, R. 1936. *Les serpentes de l'Indochine. Tome 2. Catalogue Systématique Descriptif*. Henri Basuyau & Cie, Toulouse, France.
- Burbrink, F.T. and R. Lawson. 2007. How and when did Old World ratsnakes disperse into the New World? *Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution* 43: 173–189. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ympev.2006.09.009>.
- Orlov, N.L., S.A. Ryabov, T.T. Nguyen, and T.Q. Nguyen. 2010. Rediscovery and redescription of two rare snake species: *Oligodon lacroixi* Angel et Bourret, 1933 and *Maculophis bellus chapaensis* (Bourret, 1934) (Squamata: Ophidia: Colubridae) from Fansipan Mountains, Northern Vietnam. *Russian Journal of Herpetology* 17: 310–322.
- Schulz, K.D., W. Böhme, and F. Tillack. 2011. Hemipenis morphology of *Coronella bella* Stanley, 1917 with comments on taxonomic and nomenclatural issues of ratsnakes (Squamata: Colubridae: Colubrinae: *Elaphe* auct.). *Russian Journal of Herpetology* 18: 273–283.
- Stanley, A.R. 1917. Two new species of Chinese snakes. *Journal of the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 47: 83–84.
- Uetz, P., P. Freed, R. Aguilar, F. Reyes, J. Kudera, and J. Hošek (eds.). 2025. *Archelaphe bella* (Stanley, 1917). *The Reptile Database*. <[http://reptile-database.reptarium.cz/species?genus=Archelaphe&species=bella&search\\_param=%28%28search%3D%27Archelaphe+bella%27%29%29](http://reptile-database.reptarium.cz/species?genus=Archelaphe&species=bella&search_param=%28%28search%3D%27Archelaphe+bella%27%29%29)>.
- Wall, F. 1921. Notes on some notable additions to the Bombay Natural History Society's collection. *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 28: 43–44.
- Wall, F. 1923. Notes on a collection of snakes from Sinlum Kaba. *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 29: 466–468.
- Werner, F. 1929. Übersicht der Gattungen und Arten der Schlangen aus der Familie Colubridae. III. Teil (Colubrinae). Mit einem Nachtrag zu den übrigen Familien. *Zoologische Jahrbücher, Abteilung für Systematik* 57: 1–196.