ON THE NEW GUINEA TAIPAN.

By K. R. Slater, Port Moresby.

Pseudechis scutellatus was described by Peters[1] in 1867 from a specimen collected at Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia. In 1929 further specimens from Coen, North Queensland, were redescribed by Kinghorn[2] under the name *Oxyuranus maclennoni,* after their collector, W. McLennon. Thomson[3], in 1933, reviewed Kinghorn's paper, and placed *maclennoni* in the synonomy of *scutellatus.* However, he agreed that the cranial and dental pecularities were sufficiently different from *Pseudechis* to warrant the retention of the generic name *Oxyuranus.* Thomson was in error in stating the type locality to be eastern New Guinea, whereas it was actually Queensland, as stated above. Boulenger[4], has recorded New Guinea specimens.

During the past eighteen months several specimens of *Oxyuranus scutellatus* were collected by the writer from the Port Moresby District in Papua. A detailed examination was made, though unfortunately no Australian examples were available for comparison. However, it is obvious that there are some considerable differences in colour, and the keeling of the dorsal and lateral body scales is more pronounced. There is also a difference in the chemical constitution of the venom.

Further, Mr. E. Worrell (personal communication) has prepared a paper for the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales in which cranial comparisons are made between the two forms. A difference in the shape of the pterygoid as described by him, appears to be sufficiently pronounced for diagnostic use.

The Port Moresby District specimens are very uniform in their colour pattern, and two heads and necks sent from the Fly River area suggest that these individuals, too, conform to the distinctive colouration.

Because of the differences noted above, and, that New Guinea has long been separated from the Australian mainland therefore affording no contact between the two forms in recent times, it is proposed to distinguish the Papuan reptile from the originally described Australian form. It is my pleasure to acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. George Cann, Curator of Reptiles at Taronga Park Zoo, Sydney, by naming this sub-species after him.

OXYURANUS SCUTELLATUS CANNI SUBSP. NOV.

PAPUAN TAIPAN.

Holotype. Nat. Mus. Vic. No. D8614. Collected at Napa Napa, Port Moresby, on August 7, 1953, by K. R. Slater.

Description (3 months prior to death).

Sex:—Female.

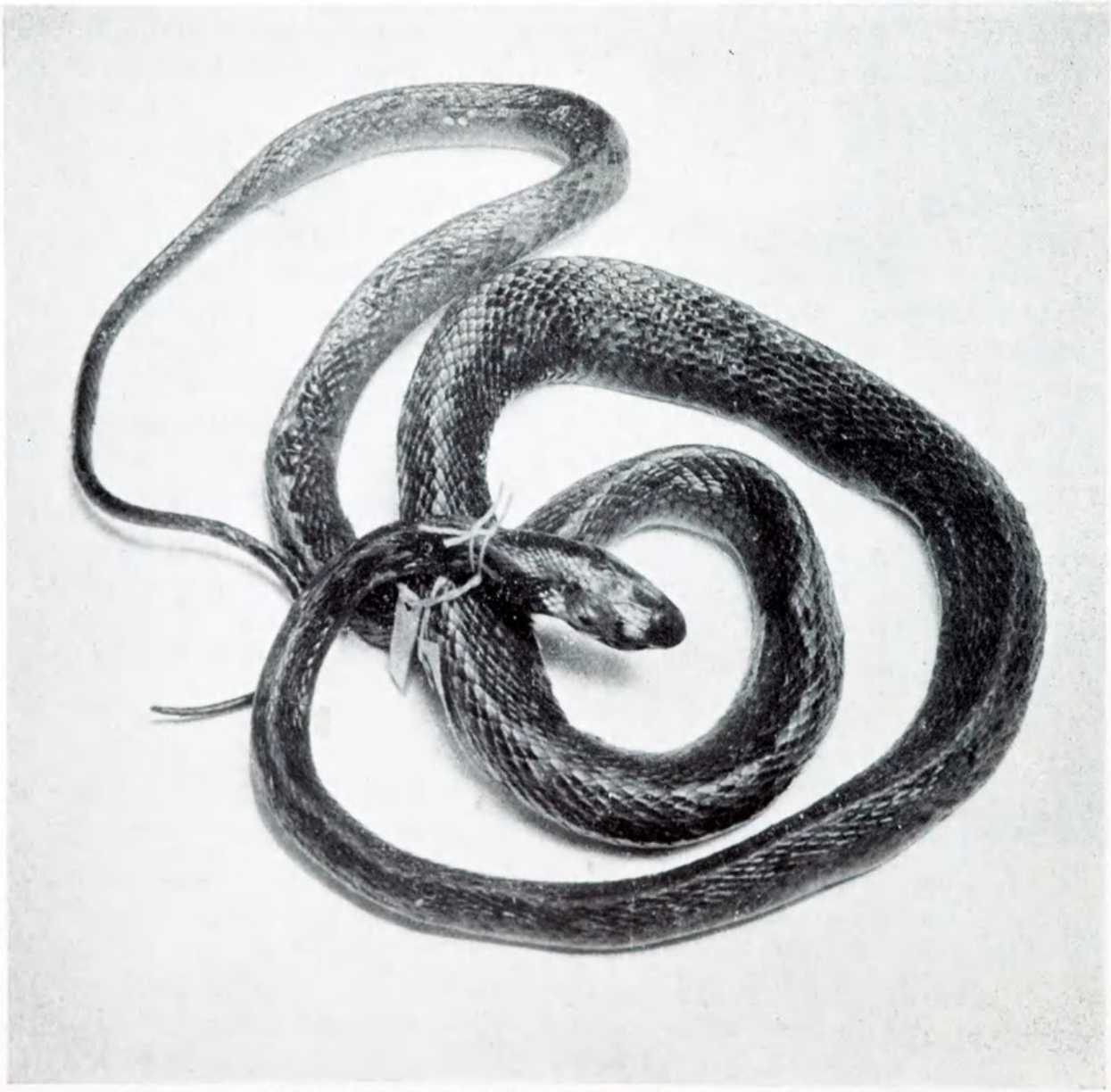
Head:—Distinct from neck, moderately long and slender, canthus rostralis positive.

Body:—Elongate, subcylindrical being capable of both compression and depression.

Tail:—Comparatively long, tapering evenly to a fine tip.

Eye:—As large as distance to nostril, one and two-fifths times larger than distance to mouth, pupil round.

Dentition (after death):—Maxillary—large fang followed after space by a single tooth; palatine teeth 5, pterygoid teeth 9 on each side.



Oxyuranus scutellatus canni subsp. nov.

HEAD SHIELDS.

(1) Rostral:—Visible from above, as wide as deep.

(2) Nasal:—Divided by large nostril, 1½ times longer than (3).

(3) Internasal:—Slightly broader than long, ½ length of (6).

(4) Loreal:—Absent.

(5) Preocular:—Single, deeper than long, markedly concave inferiorly and convex superiorly, contacting (6), (8), (2), and 2nd and 3rd of (12).

(6) Prefrontal:—Slightly broader than long, one and one-third times longer than (7), contacting (2), (3), (5), (7), (8), and 2nd of (12).

(7) Frontal:—Lateral margins parallel, 1¾ times longer than broad, almost as long as (9).

(8) Supraocular:—Slightly shorter than and almost as wide as (7).

(9) Parietal:—One pair, reasonably large though barely longer than (7).

(10) Postocular:—Two, inferior one the larger.

(11) Temporal:—Five (2 plus 3) inferior of first series largest and almost reaching mouth.

(12) Supralabial:—Six; 3rd and 4th entering eye, 5th and 6th largest.

(13) Infralabial:—Eight; first three contacting anterior pair of (14), 3rd and 4th largest.

(14) Chin shields:—Two pairs, posterior pair slightly the smaller and separated by two gulars.

BODY SCALES.

Dorsal:—Twenty-three rows, imbricate, obliquely arranged, noticeably keeled on neck region whilst keel broadens on body and finally becomes obscure posteriorly; scale series 1 and 23 the largest.

Ventral:—Two hundred and thirty-eight, convex, occupying the entire width of ventral surface.

Gular:—Five series.

Subcaudal:—Seventy-one, all paired, tail complete.

Anal:—Single.

COLOURATION.

Head:—Dark greyish-brown dorsally, lower half of supralabial light-grey, infralabials and underparts whitish.

Body (dorsal):—Ground colour dark greyish-brown, a median vertebral streak of orange—affecting longitudinal scale series 8 to 16 (mid-body)—commencing after first quarter of overall length and occupying the following two quarters whilst becoming narrower posteriorly. Scales within this area are orange anteriorly (particularly so beneath the imbrication) whilst the posterior half of each is invaded by the ground colouration.

Body (ventral):—Silvery grey with faint-orange speckles and the lateral extremities of each ventral being tinged with dark-grey.

Tail (dorsal):—As body ground colouration.

Tail (ventral):—Whitish with each scale faintly rimmed with orange.

Tongue:—Black.

Eye:—Dark-brown with pupil thinly ringed with orange.

MEASUREMENTS.

Overall length:—1,428·7 mms.

(A) Body length ..	..	1,165·2 mms.	.. ·815 of (O.L.)
(B) Body width ..	..	27·0 mms.	.. ·023 of (A)
(C) Body depth ..	..	30·2 mms.	.. ·026 of (A)
(D) Neck width ..	..	11·1 mms.	.. ·500 of (F)
(E) Head width ..	..	22·2 mms.	.. ·583 of (G)
(F) Head length ..	..	38·1 mms.	.. ·027 of (O.L.)
(G) Head depth ..	..	11·9 mms.	.. ·536 of (F)
(H) Across snout	..	7·1 mms.	.. ·321 of (F)
(I) Between eyes	..	10·3 mms.	.. ·464 of (F)
(J) Eye diameter	..	5·6 mms.	.. ·467 of (H)
(K) Eye to nostril	..	5·6 mms.	.. 1·000 of (K)
(L) Eye to mouth	..	4·0 mms.	.. ·714 of (K)
(M) Tail length ..	..	225·4 mms.	.. ·158 of (O.L.)

FIELD NOTES

As mentioned earlier, a number of specimens of the New Guinea Taipan have received similar scrutiny to that afforded the type specimen. However, approximately fifteen individuals were seen by the author during the period mentioned. Although the depth of the basic body colouration has shown some variation, the marked vertebral streak was constant in all. The number of scale rows influenced by it varies slightly, making it a little wider or narrower. In some, the orange colour occupies a larger area of each scale than in others and is therefore more vivid.

Papuan natives, living along the coast from the Fly River to the east of Port Moresby, well know the blackish snake with the " red " back, and more than one village has lost an occupant by an encounter with this reptile. It is reported as being abundant in the districts around the mouth of the Fly and the natives of Parama village call it " Dirioro ". Further east at the Vailala River it is locally known as " Gobari ".

When considering the distribution of the sub-species, it must be taken into account that it can exist in many and varied habitats. The type specimen (from Napa Napa) comes from an area well known as " dry ", and indeed without permanent water; a specimen was seen by me from Sogeri, 1,100 feet above sea level; and as before mentioned, the sub-species not uncommon in the Fly delta. The author's personal experience suggests that the Taipan is a shy and retiring snake, preferring flight when encountered, but if interfered with defending itself readily. Speed and accuracy in striking, combined with its great agility, demand in these circumstances, the utmost respect. Any suitable object,

natural or artificial, serves as its shelter—an opening beneath a boulder on a grass covered slope, a hole in a river bank, an overgrown hollow log, amongst debris of old army dumps, or under an old and broken concrete slab; all serve the purpose.

In the past, European residents have not been aware of the true identity of this species and have regarded it as "another kind of black snake". Since its identification, numerous accounts of its occurrence have come to hand and its numbers and range would appear to be greater than was previously supposed. The author's personal observation are that it may be encountered throughout all hours of the day, even while rain is falling, and reliable reports also suggest that it is active after sunset.

Acknowledgments

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