

A Preliminary Study on Diversity of Snakes rescued from Gauhati University Campus, Assam

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ABSTRACT: During a four years study period, from 2018 to 2022, as per calls received from inhabitants of the Gauhati University campus for rescue of snakes in the campus, a checklist of rescued snake was prepared. Snakes were captured with Snake Catcher Stick taking proper safety measures and released them into their natural habitat, way from human settlement without hurting the individuals. A total of 19 species of snake belonging to 8 families were recorded out of which 6 species belonging to 3 family were venomous, 1 species was mildly venomous and 12 species belonging to 5 family were non-venomous. Two species are vulnerable, one species belonging to near threatened and other 14 species are enlisted in least concern categories of IUCN red list. It's positively unusual to find such a variety of snakes on a campus housing an educational institution. These species should be protected because they are crucial to sustaining ecological balance. Conducting a preliminary study on the diversity of snakes rescued from a campus presents several challenges, including capturing a representative sample of the campus's snake population, which is difficult to locate, and ensuring safety during this type of study, considering the potentially venomous nature of some snake species.

Keywords: Snake diversity, checklist, rescued, Gauhati University, Conservation.

INTRODUCTION

Reptiles, a group of animals among vertebrates, are considered highly successful despite being poorly understood and facing significant threats. Their populations are deteriorating due to factors such as habitat loss, pollution, unsustainable use of natural resources, and climate change (Ana *et al.*, 2010; Sarkar *et al.*, 2022). Snakes, fall under Reptilia, are crucial component of the natural world and the ecological food chain. These creatures possess the ability to both ambush their prey and excel in hunting (Bhandarkar and Paliwal 2021; Bharath *et al.*, 2023). In India, the snake fauna is extremely diverse and rich (Vyas, 2013). The majority of snake species inhabit the dry regions of the world (Whitaker and Captain 2008). In India, snakes, commonly known as the friends of farmers, serve as natural predators of rodent pests that pose a threat to agricultural fields. Unfortunately, due to insufficient knowledge and awareness among the population and farmers, these snakes are often killed without recognizing their vital role (Bharath *et al.*, 2021). But the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 provides legal protection for every species of snake from Schedule I to Schedule IV (Vyas, 2007), but few newly described species has not been enlisted yet. Out of the 572 species of reptiles found in India, 304 snake species from 36 families are present (Aengals *et al.*, 2018).

Studies on the distribution and diversity of snakes have been conducted recently by Sirsat *et al.* (2016); Kale *et al.* (2019); Prabhakar *et al.* (2020) in Maharashtra, Pradhan *et al.*, (2014) in Orissa, Das and Baishya (2018) in Assam, Manhas *et al.* (2016) in Jammu and Kashmir, Dhawal *et al.* (2021), in Rajasthan which serve as a resource for future research as well as giving us a greater understanding of snakes. A wide range of herpetofauna is also found in North East (NE) India, where more than 272 species have been recorded (Ahmed *et al.*, 2009). However, there are no records on the herpetofauna found in the urban regions of the area (Purkayastha *et al.*, 2011). On the other hand, reports on snake have been done in certain other regions of NE India.

For the first time, two snake species from the families Colubridae (*Oligodon nikhili*, *Oligodon kheriensis*) and one Viperidae (*Trimeresurus medoensis*) have been identified in Tura Peak Reserve Forest of the West Garo Hills and Meghalaya state of NE India (Sangma and Saikia 2014). Agarwal *et al.* (2010) have found 23 species of snake belonging to 16 genera and four families viz., Typhlopidae, Boidae, Colubridae, Elapidae respectively from Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh, India and 15 different species of snakes under 5 families, including the Elapidae, Colubridae, Typhlopidae, Pareidae and Pythonidae were recorded from Nalbari district of Assam (Baishya and Das 2018). A study by Das *et al.*

(2009) at the Barail Wildlife Sanctuary, Assam and its surrounding areas revealed the presence of 25 different snake species from 5 families. Sutradhar & Nath (2013) for the first time has recorded the kukri snake *Oligodon kheriensis* from Kokrajhar, Assam which was initially reported from North Kheri Division, Eastern Circle, Kheri-Lakhimpur, in the United Provinces of Uttar Pradesh. Purkayastha *et al.* (2020a) found 41 species of reptiles in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary, Assam and stated about the declining population due to various reasons like encroachment, habitat destruction etc. However, 33 species of reptiles were found from Rowa Wildlife Sanctuary, Tripura out of which 17 species of snakes representing 4 families were observed (Purkayastha *et al.*, 2020b). Husain (2020), described new records of Banded Krait from Ranchi (Jharkhand), preying on Checkered Keel-back snake (*Fowlea piscator*, Schneider 1799). Purkayastha *et al.* (2021) also described the *Ahaetulla laudankia* that has been recorded from the urban areas of Guwahati, Assam. Gogoi *et al.* (2023), recently described rare sightings of four different snakes in Gauhati University Campus, Assam. This note aims to prepare a preliminary checklist on its diversity, basically encountered during the rescue of snake from the Gauhati University campus.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study site. The study was conducted at Gauhati University Campus (26°12'N latitude and 91°5'E longitude), Kamrup, Assam (Fig. 1). The campus of Gauhati University is dotted with rivulets, grasslands, plains, hills, narrow valleys and the campus's southern boundary is primarily made up of hills rising to a height of 168 m. In the east-west direction of the campus, national highway 37 is passes and in its northern boundary is primarily made up of wetlands (Bhattacharya, 2022; Gogoi *et al.*, 2023). The area is endowed with varied vegetations *viz.*, evergreen, semievergreen, deciduous type, tall, short shrubs and grasslands (Saikia *et al.*, 2015). The hills reach a maximum height of 327 meters, whereas in the plains the elevation varies from 49.5 to 55.5 meters above the mean sea level (Patowary and Sarma 2018). The climate in this area is characterized as a humid subtropical climate, with significant amounts of rain from May to July and a hot summer season with elevated humidity level. On an average basis, the amount of rainfall received annually is 1,752 mm, while the temperature averages at 16.5°C during winter and 26°C during summer (Nath *et al.*, 2021).

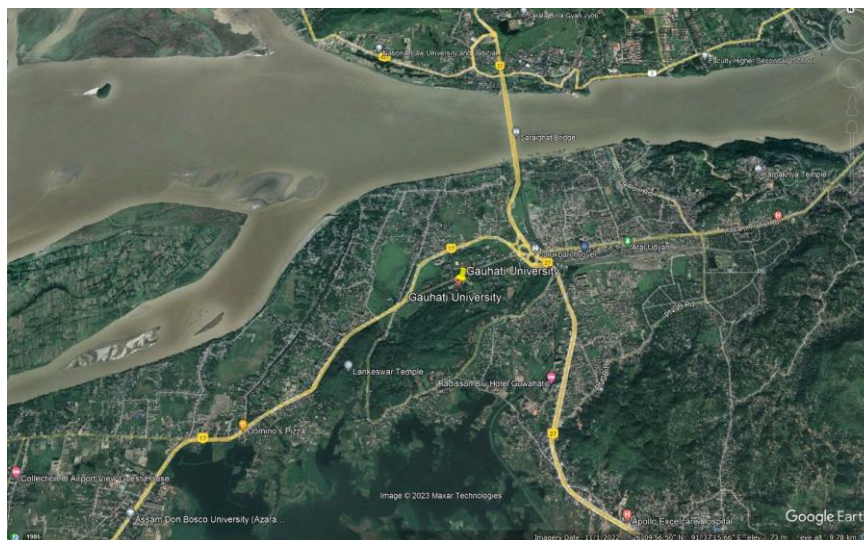


Fig. 1. Map of study area.

METHODOLOGY

Snakes were voluntarily rescued as per information received from the students and inhabitants of the campus for a period of four years from 2018-2022. Falcon 6 Feet Yellow & Black Snake Catcher Stick (FPSC-66) was used to catch the snakes. Snakes were rescued without hurting and were immediately kept in snake bags or PVC pipe encaped with cloth or other safe containers with holes to supply enough air for survival inside the enclosure and then released as early as possible.

The detail information during the rescue operations from different parts of Gauhati University were noted down including the information of date and time of rescue, details of the area, species name of the snake that is rescued including details about whether the

snake is venomous, mildly venomous or non-venomous etc.

Sighted individuals were captured on camera and checked out for further information. Special care was taken so that no species get injured or stressed during rescue processes. None of the individuals were kept as samples, and after collecting data, they were released into natural habitat i.e., to the nearby Jalukbari Reserve Forest. Daniel (2002) and Whitaker (2006)'s field guides and books were used for accurate identification.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total number of 19 species of snakes from 8 families were rescued during the study period out of which 6 species belonging to 3 families were venomous, 1 species was mildly venomous and 12 species belonging to 5 families were non-venomous (Table 1).

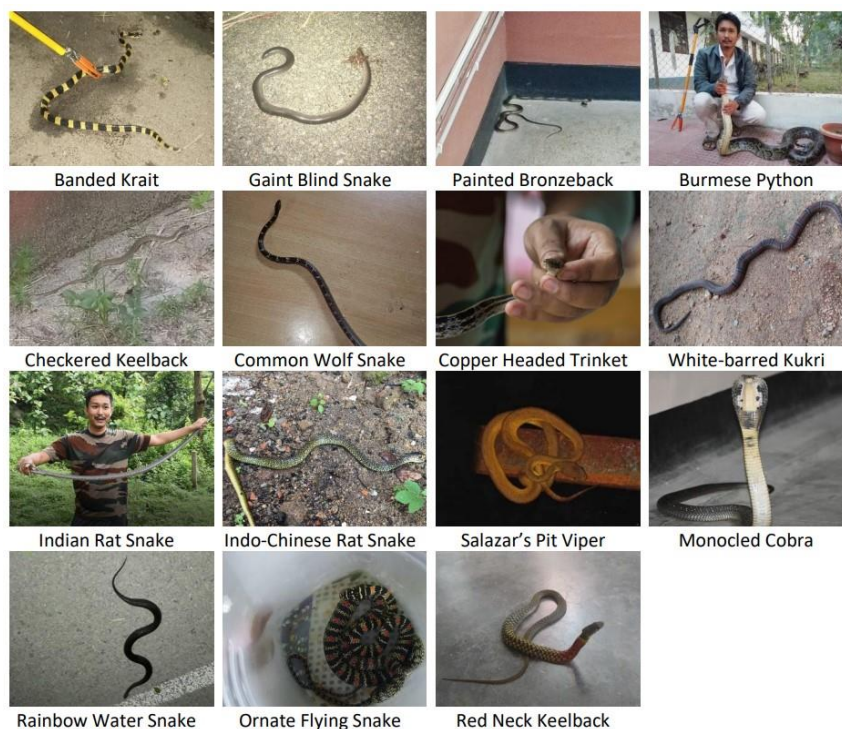


Fig. 2. Some of rescued and released snakes from the campus.

Table 1: Preliminary checklist of snake diversity from the Gauhati University campus, basically encountered during the rescue initiatives

Sr. No.	Common name	Scientific name	Family	Distribution in India	IUCN status	Category	IWPA
1.	King Cobra	<i>Ophiophagus Hannah</i> (Cantor,1836)	Elapidae	Western Ghats; Eastern India; Andmans	VU	Venomous	II
2.	Monocled Cobra	<i>Naja kaouthia</i> (Lesson,1831)		Eastern India	LC	Venomous	II
3.	Banded Krait	<i>Bungarus fasciatus</i> (Schneider,1801)		Eastern India	LC	Venomous	IV
4.	Lesser Black Krait	<i>Bungarus lividus</i> (Cantor,1839)		Northeast India	LC	Venomous	IV
5.	Salazar's Pit Viper	<i>Trimeresurus salazar</i> (Zeeshan Mirza, 2020)	Viperidae	Northeast India	NE	Venomous	Not listed
6.	Red Necked Keelback	<i>Rhabdophis helleri</i> (Schlegel, 1925)	Natricidae	Northeast India	LC	Venomous	Not listed
7.	Ornate Flying Snake	<i>Chrysopelea ornata ornata</i> (Shaw, 1802)	Colubridae	Western Ghats, Eastern India	LC	Mildly venomous	IV
8.	Painted Bronzeback	<i>Dendrelaphis proarchos</i> (Wall, 1909)		Northeast India	NE	Non venomous	IV
9.	Indian Rat Snake	<i>Ptyas mucosa</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)		India, except Nicobars	LC	Non venomous	IV
10.	Indo Chinese Rat Snake	<i>Ptyaskorros</i> (Schlegel, 1837)		Northeast India	NT	Non venomous	IV
11.	Common Wolf Snake	<i>Lycodon aulicus</i> (Linnaeus,1754)		Throughout India	LC	Non venomous	IV
12.	White-barred Kukri Snake	<i>Oligodon albocinctus</i> (Cantor,1839)		Northeast India	LC	Non venomous	IV
13.	Copper Headed Trinket	<i>Coelognathus radiatus</i> (Boie, 1827)		Eastern India	LC	Non venomous	IV
14.	Burmese Python	<i>Python bivittatus</i> (Kuhl, 1820)	Pythonidae	Northeast India	VU	Non venomous	I
15.	Checkered Keelback	<i>Fowlea piscator</i> (Schneider,1799)	Natricidae	Through out India	LC	Non venomous	IV
16.	Buff Striped Keelback	<i>Amphisma stotatum</i> (Linnaeus,1758)		Through out India	LC	Non venomous	IV
17.	Rainbow Water Snake	<i>Enhydris enhydris</i> (Schneider,1799)	Homalopsidae	Eastern India	LC	Non venomous	IV
18.	Diard's Worm Snake	<i>Argyrophis diardii</i> (Schlegel, 1839)	Typhlopidae	Northeast India	LC	Non venomous	IV
19.	Brahminy Worm Snake	<i>Indotyphlops braminus</i> (Daudin, 1803)		Through out India	LC	Non venomous	IV

Two species namely- *Ophiophagus hannah* and *Python bivittatus* were vulnerable, only one species namely *Ptyas korros* belonging to near threatened and other 14 species were enlisted in least concern categories of IUCN red list category whereas two species- *Trimeresurus salazar* and *Rhabdophis helleri* were not

evaluated by IUCN till date. On the other hand, out of these 19 species, 1 species namely *Python bivittatus* enlisted in schedule I, two species in schedule II, 14 species in schedule IV respectively. However, two species viz., *Trimeresurus salazar*, *Rhabdophis helleri* have not been enlisted yet.

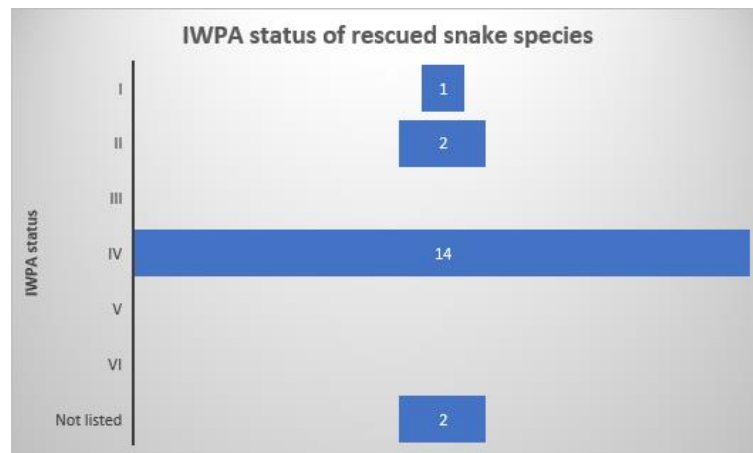


Fig. 3. Graphical representation of IWPA status of snake species found during rescue initiatives from Gauhati University campus.

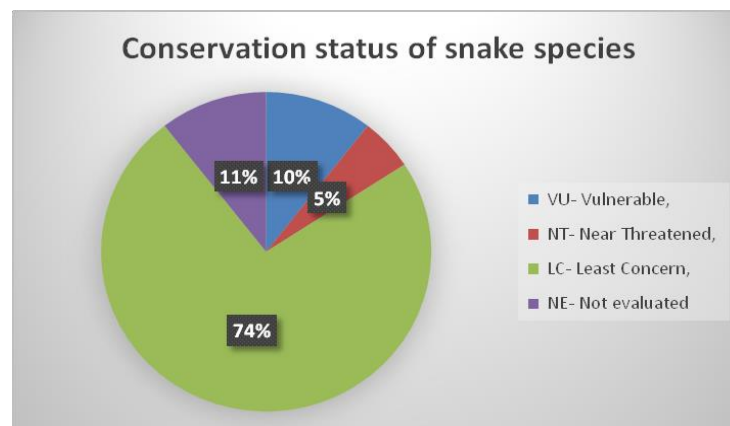


Fig. 4. Pie diagram showing percentage of IUCN status among rescued snake species from Gauhati University campus.

North East India harbours a wide range of snake fauna. It was found in our study, that Gauhati University is home to a wide variety of snakes viz., venomous, mildly venomous and non- venomous. Reportedly, overall reptilian populations have been consistently decreasing worldwide and severely affected by anthropogenic activities (Gibbons *et al.*, 2000). Moreover, as compared to birds and mammals, rapid decline in populations of herpetofauna is observed (Stuart *et al.*, 2004) and conservation strategies mainly focuses on birds and mammals than herpetofauna (Vasudevan *et al.*, 2006). Purkayastha *et al.* (2021) rescued a male and female *Ahaetulla laudankia* from urban Guwahati, Assam. However, according to Purkayastha (2018), *Ahaetulla laudankia* is the 30th species of snake discovered in Guwahati's urban environment. The first record of *Lycodon zawi* was made from Tripura, North East India, with the nearest localities being Tinkopani RF in Upper Assam and Pachunga college campus in Mizoram, respectively (Majumder, 2018). Moreover, three of the 16 recognised species in the genus *Elaphe* are known to

exist in India (*E. cantoris*, *E. hodgsoni*, and *E. taeniura*) (Sharma, 2003; Uetz *et al.*, 2021), where they are primarily found in the western and eastern Himalayan regions.

Based on specimens obtained from the states of Mizoram and Meghalaya, a new cryptic species of green pit viper from North East India is identified that belongs to the subgenus *Viridovipera* and is sister to *Trimeresurus medoensis* while visually resembling *Trimeresurus gumprechtii* (Rathee *et al.*, 2022). The study of Sinha *et al.* (2021) revealed 37 species that make up the herpetofaunal diversity on the ZSI campus in Itanagar are divided into 32 genera, 14 families, and 3 orders. The presence of several taxa with legal protection value as well as one endangered species, *Coura mouhotii* (Grey, 1862), emphasises the significance of the herpetofaunal diversity of the ZSI campus in Itanagar. Bharath *et al.* (2021), studied a total of 39 species of snakes, belonging to 30 genera and eight families which were reported from Telangana state out of which majority of snakes were non-venomous (i.e. 65%) like the present study.

Further the sight of a snake in the locality may create a frightening situation and the observer may try to defend itself by killing or harming the snake (Janani *et al.*, 2016). But, instead of harming it, people should consider the safety of snake and call snake rescuers or NGOs involved in such rescue activities to shift it from residential areas. Gogoi *et al.* (2023) reported four unusual snakes in the Gauhati University Campus which indicates the campus is potential habitat of various rare as well as more common herpetofauna diversity.

CONCLUSIONS

The abundance of biodiversity is a valuable asset for humanity, and taking appropriate measures to preserve it can greatly benefit the current generation and fulfill the needs of future generations to the highest degree (Lekharu *et al.*, 2023). Hence, the sighting of such a diverse range of snakes indicates a potential herpetofaunal habitat in the area. Moreover, these findings also state that the organisms of the lower habitat must also be present to enable the proper functioning of food web. The presence of this diversity of snakes in an educational campus is very unique in a positive manner. We should try to conserve these species as they are of utmost importance in maintaining the ecological harmony. Since we have so many misunderstandings about snakes, many of them are killed. It's time for us to understand the importance of snakes in our environment and the fact that they are not unnecessary animals. Further elaborative study on the faunal diversity in the campus is very crucial to have a vast knowledge on the wild inhabitants in the area.

FUTURE SCOPE

We want to continue our voluntary rescue operation in the campus and nearby places as far as possible. We would like to aware the people not to panic at the sight of snake as it is most often not aggressive unless teased or attacked. Observation of such diversity only via rescue operation indicates the rich herpetofaunal diversity of the campus if studied thoroughly. Hence, there is a potential scope to make intense study in and around the campus. On the other hand, anti-venom must be made available in the University hospital as well as nearby dispensaries.

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Conflict of Interest. None.

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