

***Micrelaps* in the southern Levant: variation, sexual dimorphism, and a new species (Serpentes: Atractaspididae)**

by Yehudah L. Werner, Gergely Babocsay, Hilla Carmely and Mindy Thuna

Abstract. Variation in the primarily East African snake genus *Micrelaps* (Atractaspididae) was investigated in the southern Levant (mainly Israel) from museum specimens and some photographs. The fossorial *M. muelleri* Boettger, 1880, hitherto considered rare, inhabits the mesic Mediterranean zone (n=82). Its usual colour pattern is a variable number of black and yellow rings but two rare longitudinally striped morphs also occur. Sexual dimorphism, hitherto unknown, affects pholidosis, proportions and colour pattern. A new species, *M. tchernovi* Werner, is described (n=6) from the semi-arid Irano-Turanian zone in the central Jordan Valley. It differs mainly in colour characters, having black saddles rather than rings. The distinction of the two species is verified using Principal Coordinates Analysis. Their relationships with the African members of the genus are briefly discussed.

Kurzfassung. Die Variation der primär ostafrikanischen Schlangengattung *Micrelaps* in der südlichen Levante (hauptsächlich Israel) wurde anhand von Museumsexemplaren und einigen Photographien untersucht. Die grabende *M. muelleri* Boettger, 1880, bisher für selten gehalten, bewohnt die feuchtere mediterrane Zone (n=82). Ihr übliches Farbmuster besteht aus einer variablen Zahl von schwarzen und gelben Ringen, aber es gibt auch zwei seltene längsgestreifte Morphen. Sexualdimorphismus, bisher unbekannt, beeinflusst Pholidosis, Proportionen und Farbmuster. Eine neue Art, *M. tchernovi* Werner, wird vom relativ ariden irano-turanischen Gebiet des zentralen Jordantales beschrieben (n=6). Sie unterscheidet sich hauptsächlich in Farbmerkmalen, hat schwarze Sattel statt Ringe. Die Verschiedenheit der zwei Arten wird durch eine Hauptkoordinatenanalyse (Principal Coordinates Analysis) bestätigt. Das Verhältnis der beiden Arten zu den afrikanischen Vertretern der Gattung werden kurz erörtert.

Key words. Great Rift Valley, Israel, Jordan, *Micrelaps muelleri*, *Micrelaps tchernovi*, polymorphism, sexual dimorphism, variation.

Introduction

Micrelaps Boettger, 1880, is a small genus of snakes, all of which are small-sized and rarely encountered, probably due to their fossorial habits. The genus currently comprises four taxa; three are East African, and are known from fewer than 60 specimens (RASMUSSEN 2002, 2003). The fourth, *M. muelleri*, is endemic to the mesic part of the Levant: westernmost Syria, Lebanon, northern Israel and north-western Jordan (WERNER 1995, DISI et al. 2001, DISI 2002, BOUSKILA & AMITAI 2003) and is sufficiently rare that the discovery of a single or a few individuals has been reported (AMR et al. 1997, BISCHOFF & SCHMIDTLER 1997).

Unlike its African congeners, which are longitudinally patterned, *M. muelleri* is coloured in black and yellow alternating rings (Figs. 1, 2A). Although it, too, is difficult to locate in the wild, several tens of specimens have reached the collections at the Hebrew University of