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First record of the Cat snake *Telescopus fallax* Fleischmann, 1831 (Reptilia: Serpentes) in the Eastern Rhodopes Mt., Bulgaria

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Abstract. We report the occurrence of the Cat snake (*Telescopus fallax*) from the central parts of the Eastern Rhodopes (Madjarovo). The region was intensively herpetologically studied in the recent years but this species of snake was overlooked. Almost no data, beside a single juvenile specimen, is available in order to assess its local range and relative density. Although the new locality does not extend considerably the species range it has zoogeographic and conservation importance.

Key words: *Telescopus fallax*, Eastern Rhodopes Mt., Bulgaria

Introduction

The Cat snake (*Telescopus fallax* Fleischmann, 1831) occurs in Europe only in the Balkans following its western (Adriatic) coast southwards of Trieste, Continental Greece, on most of the Aegean islands (incl. Crete), Malta, Macedonia, Bulgaria and the coastal parts of European Turkey (GASC et al., 1997). In Bulgaria it was discovered relatively late (BESHKOV, 1959). Up till now this snake was known only from the valley of the river Struma south of Kresna Gorge (PETROV & BESHKOV, 2001) (Fig. 1). Its highest localities are situated at about 700 m a.s.l. In NE Greece the Cat snake occurs almost continuously in the hilly lowlands, including the southern slopes of the Rhodopes Mt. It was reported within the Greek Eastern Rhodopes, where this snake is relatively rarely encountered (HELMER & SCHOLTE, 1985). It has never been reported nor suspected to occur in the Bulgarian part of the Eastern Rhodopes, though intensive herpetological research was carried out in the period 1992-2000 (PETROV et al., 2001).

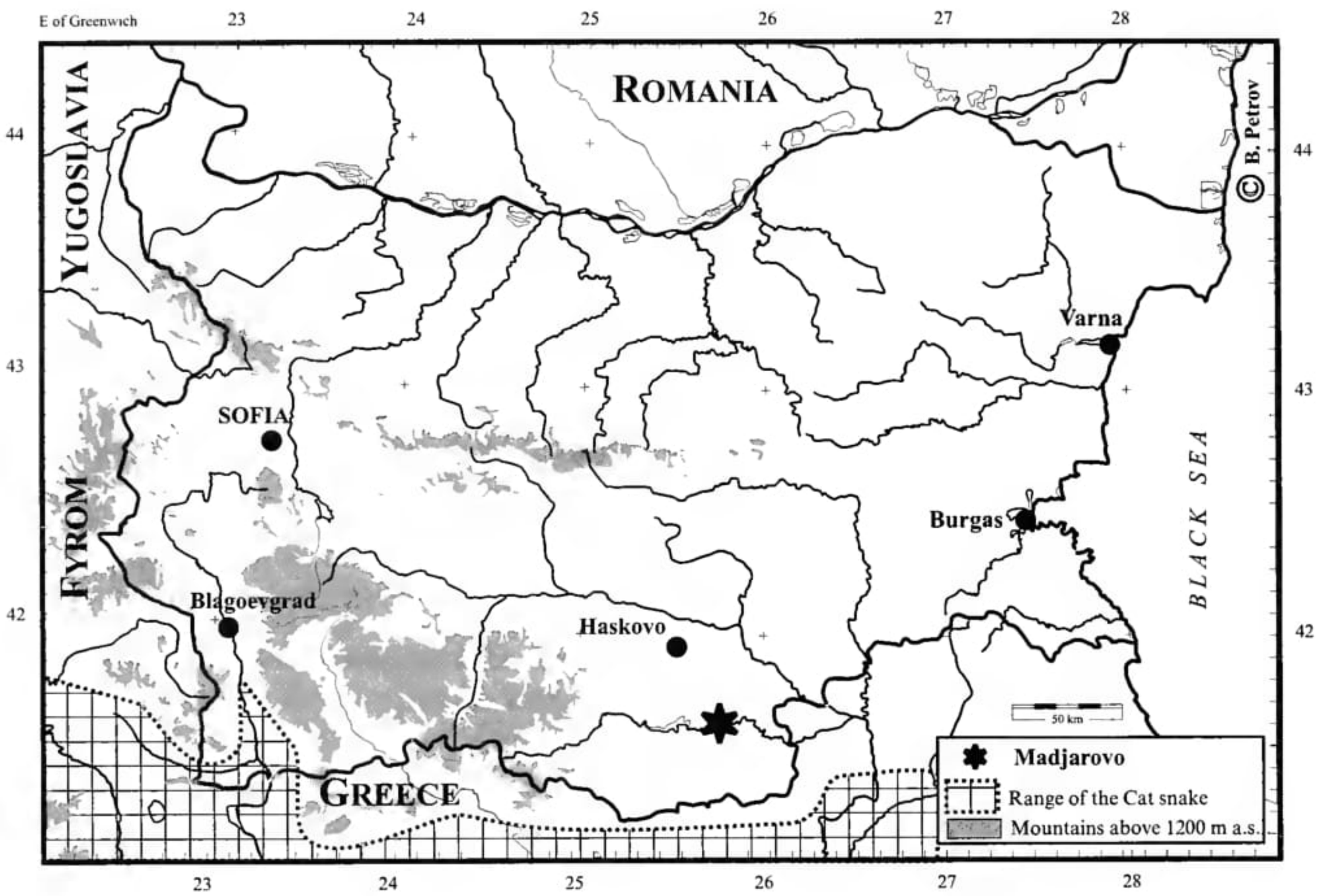

Fig. 1. Distribution of *Telescopus fallax* in Bulgaria and some adjacent countries

Material and methods

On 30.08.2002 a freshly killed subadult Cat snake was brought to the Nature Information Conservation Centre "Eastern Rhodopes" (NICCER) in Madjarovo. The specimen was found in a rocky gorge formed by a temporal stream, which crosses the periphery of the urban area. The body measurements are as follows: total length: 292 mm, length of the tail: 40 mm. The shape of the pupil was visibly narrow and vertical. Coloration, head and dorsal patterns are typical for the species. The specimen was mounted on glass and stored in 70% alcohol. It will be housed in the NICCER in Madjarovo.

Discussion

The valley of the river Arda offers great variety of habitats. The stoniest ones are found around Madjarovo, where volcanic screes with scarce vegetation, rock faces and other rocky formations are very common. On the other hand, Madjarovo is far to the north of the localities reported in NW Greece. Out of the 10 species of snakes reported for the Eastern Rhodopes (PETROV et al., 2001) only the juveniles of the Four-lined snake,

Elaphe quatuorlineata sauromates (Pallas, 1811), resemble the coloration and dorsal features of the Cat snake.

Regarding the frequent visits of many zoologists (mainly bird-watchers) in Madjarovo in the last 12 years, as well as our own field research in the region, it was hard to believe that a new species of snake could be found around the city. We have no other data on the occurrence of the Cat snake in the Eastern Rhodopes Mt. but presumably it is locally very rare and occurs in small-sized isolated populations. In conclusion, this record did not extend considerably the range of the Cat snake, but we add a new surprising point to its distribution in Bulgaria and increase the number of the reptiles, found in the Eastern Rhodopes, to 26 species 11 of which are snakes.

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Първа находка на котешката змия (*Telescopus fallax* Fleischmann, 1831) (Reptilia: Serpentes) в Източните Родопи, България

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(Р е з ю м е)

Досега в България котешката змия беше известна само от Струмската долина, южно от Кресненския пролом. През 2002 г. в гр. Маджарово е уловен един млад екземпляр, което потвърждава някои по-ранни наблюдения в Източните Родопи. Популацията вероятно е изолирана и е с ниска плътност. Новото находище не променя значително ареала на вида, но представлява интерес от зоогеографска и природозащитна гледна точка.