

## A Note on the Distribution of *Varanus dumerilii* and *V. rudicollis* in Peninsular Malaysia

DANIEL BENNETT<sup>1</sup> & LIM BOO LIAT<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *Varanus rudicollis* and *V. dumerilii* are two large monitor lizards that occur in Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. They have been recorded very infrequently in Peninsular Malaysia and both species have been protected since 1947. This note collates location data for these endangered monitor lizards in the hope that more information on their distribution in the country will come to light.

### INTRODUCTION

Of the four monitor lizards known to occur in Malaysia two species, *Varanus salvator* and *V. bengalensis* (= *V. nebulosus* of Harrison & Lim 1957) can be said to be reasonably common and ubiquitous, whilst *V. dumerilii* and *V. rudicollis* are either rare or extremely secretive. Although the occurrence of the latter two species in the Peninsula has never been in doubt (Harrison and Lim 1957), almost all of the known specimens have come from the island of Borneo and only a few collection localities are recorded in the literature.

*Varanus dumerilii* is a medium sized monitor lizard, rarely exceeding 120 cm total length (see Bennett 1995 for review). It is known to occur in southern Thailand, southern Myanmar, Sumatra and Borneo (Kalimantan, Sabah and Sarawak). Mertens (1942), Harrison and Lim (1957) and others refer to a specimen collected on Singapore Island (ZMH 4487) but the only published locality records of this species' occurrence in the Peninsula seem to be "Kuala Teku, Pahang" (Smith 1922) and "Kedah, Malakka" (Scortecci 1929).

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Between 1965 and 1976 one of us (LBL) collected 7 specimens of *V. dumerilii* in Peninsular Malaysia, all of which were measured, marked and released. None of the animals were recaptured. Three specimens were collected in Ulu Gombak Forest Reserve (Selangor) and one each from Templer's Park (Selangor), Ulu Langat Forest Reserve (Selangor), Fraser's Hill (Pahang) and Cameron Highlands (Pahang). The animals were collected in February, April, May, August, September and October. All were adults with mean snout-vent length (SVL) of 292 mm and mean weight of 988 g.

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<sup>1</sup>14 Middlefield Place, Aberdeen AB2 2NX, Great Britain.

<sup>2</sup>12 Jalan Koop Cuepacs 3E, Taman Cuepacs, Cheras 43200, Selangor, Malaysia.  
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On 10 December 1991 a small monitor lizard was collected close to a pig farm near Rawang, Selangor. Its coloration (from a photograph of the newly-caught animal) indicated that it had hatched recently. It was kept in captivity for a short time and when it died the body was deposited at Zoo Negara in Kuala Lumpur, where it was examined (DB). The scalation and morphology of this animal confirm that it was a young *V. dumerilii* (SVL 140 mm, tail 184 mm). Following this discovery the *Varanus* lizards in the Zoological Reference Collection at the National University of Singapore were examined. In total there are six specimens of *V. dumerilii* in the collection, of which two are from Peninsular Malaysia and four from elsewhere.

ZRC 2.1870. "Penang Hill, below Belercteiro, May 1917." SVL 267 mm, tail 416 mm.

ZRC 2.3195. "Malaysia Johor, Kota Tinggi". Incorrectly labelled as *Varanus nebulosus* and *V. gouldii*! SVL 80 mm, tail 105 mm.

ZRC 2.1873. "Gallang" (Rhio Archipelago). Skin and head only. Incorrectly labelled as *Varanus rudicollis*. SVL approx. 280 mm, tail 495 mm.

ZRC 2.1872. "Lundu, Sarawak, April 1913". The scalation of this specimen differs from the others in the large, oval nuchal scales, reminiscent of *V. exanthematicus* from west Africa; they become slightly smaller on the dorsum but remain enlarged, widely separated and distinct. 82 scales at midbody. Scales on limbs, tail and ventrum similar to those described above. SVL 323 mm, tail 495 mm. This animal is referable to the dubious subspecies *V. dumerilii heteropholis* (see Sprackland 1994).

ZRC 2.1871. "P. Gallang, Rhio Archipelago. May 1926". It was not possible to make accurate measurements of this specimen.

Not labelled. A juvenile (SVL 93 mm, tail 113 mm).

*Varanus rudicollis* is a larger lizard than *V. dumerilii*, attaining a total length of over 150 cm (see Bennett 1994 for review). Again there are few reliable location data in the literature for this animal on the Peninsula: Jebebu, Malay Halbinsel (Hanitsch 1901); Gunung Inas, Perak (Laidlaw 1901); Malakka and Selangor (Boulenger 1912); Ampang Forest Reserve, Selangor (Lim 1958); and Sungai Dusun Reserve, Selangor (Jasmi in Luxmoore & Groombridge 1990).

Between 1949 and 1991 28 *V. rudicollis* were caught, marked and released at the following locations: Pasoh Forest Reserve, Negeri Sembilan; Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve, Selangor; Bukit Lanjan Forest Reserve, Selangor; Ulu Gombak Forest Reserve, Selangor; Maxwell Hill, Perak; Kedah Peak, Kedah; National Park, Pahang; Sungkai Wildlife Reserve, Perak; Ulu Langat Forest Reserve, Selangor; Fraser's Hill, Pahang; Cameron Highlands, Pahang.

Animals were collected in all months of the year. None were recaptured. Mean snout-vent length was 336 mm, mean mass was 1446 g. The smallest animal (SVL 125 mm, tail 178 mm, weight 345 g) was caught at Maxwell Hill, Perak in May 1969.

Between June and September 1993 the mangrove forest at Kuala Selangor,

the forest at several small reserves outside Kuala Lumpur (including Templer's Park) and the primary forest around the Trengganu River in Taman Negara National Park were searched for evidence of the presence of *V. dumerilii* and *V. rudicollis*. The search failed to find any trace of either species but as a result of the trip photographic evidence of *V. rudicollis* at Nusa Camp, a small settlement approximately 4 km east of Kuala Tahan on the Tembeling River, was procured. This animal was extricated from a washing machine, where it had taken refuge, photographed and released.

There are no specimens of *V. rudicollis* from Peninsular Malaysia in the Zoological Reference Collection at the National University of Singapore.

*V. dumerilii* and *V. rudicollis* are not common creatures, but they may not be as rare as is suggested by museum collections. Four specimens of *V. rudicollis* were caught in a 50 ha area in Pasoh forest reserve, indicating that in some areas at least, the species is quite abundant. It seems likely that *V. rudicollis* is widely distributed throughout the Peninsula but the distribution of *V. dumerilii* may be more limited. Both are extremely shy species and at present our knowledge of their biology is negligible. It may be that they are much more abundant than is suggested by the literature, and that their shyness and arboreal habits make them unlikely to be encountered. Unlike *V. salvator* and *V. bengalensis* they are rarely, if ever, found in association with human habitations, and are probably restricted to secondary and primary forest.

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