

A new record for the Blotched Snake *Elaphe sauromates* (Reptilia: Colubridae) in Romania

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Abstract. *Elaphe sauromates* is a critically endangered species in Romania, being cited in the past in very few localities from south-eastern Romania (Dobruđja and Moldavia). On the 13th of May, 2007, a young adult female *Elaphe sauromates* was found in the geographical unit of "Subcarpatii de curbură", near the "Vulcanii Noroiosi Păcelele Mari" Nature Reserve in the administrative territory of Păcelele, in Buzău county (Romania). This is the first sighting of this species outside of Dobruđja for the past 70 years and the first ever record for this species in this region of Romania.

Key Words: *Elaphe sauromates*, blotched snake, Romania, Buzău county.

Elaphe sauromates is known to occur in European Turkey, North-Eastern Greece, the South-Eastern and the Danube area of Bulgaria and south-eastern Romania (Fuhn & Vancea 1961). Recently, this species has also been identified in the Republic of Moldavia (Țurcanu V., pers. comm. 2007). Romania lies at the northern limit of this species' range, with *Elaphe sauromates* being previously recorded in very few and scattered locations from Dobruđja and Moldavia. Fuhn & Vancea (1961) cited this species, in the counties of Constanța, Tulcea and Galați, based on previously published records. According to a more recently published review on the records of this species in Romania, one based

both on previously published papers and on data personally collected by the author and verbal communications from other naturalists, only 42 - 45 specimens of *Elaphe sauromates* have been recorded/collected in Romania since prior to 2006 (Torok 2006). This review also indicates bibliographical references of records of the blotched snake in the counties of Iasi (Băcescu 1937) and Vrancea (Honigmann 1917, Mertens 1927). However, the most recent previous record of *Elaphe sauromates* outside of Dobruđja dates back to 1937 (Băcescu 1937, Fuhn & Vancea 1961, Torok 2006). Despite the numerous records of this species for Dobruđja, this species is very rare within the region. For example, the most recent field

study on the herpetofauna of Dobrudja revealed the presence of *Elaphe sauromates* in only 4 localities (Covaciu-Marcov et al 2006). In the Romanian red data book of vertebrates, the Moldavian populations are shown as extinct (Iftime 2005).

On the 13th of May, 2007, at 16.00 h. a young adult (total length circa 100cm) female *Elaphe sauromates* was captured approximately 500-600 m north of the "Vulcanii Noroioși Pâclele Mari" Nature Reserve (fig. 1), in the administrative territory of the locality of Pâclele, Buzău County. At the moment of capture, the snake was lying in an open field, partially coiled in the short grass. The specimen was photographed and subsequently released into its natural habitat (fig.2, 3).



Figure no.1 The location of the area in Buzău County in which *Elaphe sauromates* was recorded

The geographic coordinates of the area are 45°20'40.61" N and 26°42'46.80" E and the altitude is 315-320m ASL. The habitat in which the snake was found was that of a small hill with typical steppe vegetation (mostly *Stipa sp.* and *Fescuta sp.*) with a few scattered bushes (*Prunus spinosus* and *Rosa canina*). One species of amphibian (*Bombina variegata*) and two other species of reptiles (*Lacerta viridis* and *Lacerta agilis*) were also recorded in the area in which the blotched snake was found.

Elaphe sauromates is considered critically endangered in the Romanian red data book of vertebrates, and is likely to be represented in Romania by less than a few hundred individuals (Iftime 2005). Being a typical species of the steppe regions (Fuhn & Vancea 1961, Fuhn 1969, Iftime 2005), it has probably lost most of its original habitat due to the rapid extension of agricultural fields in all parts of its range.

Furthermore, *Elaphe sauromates* is mentioned in Annex 2 of the Order MMGA 1198/2005, the conservation of this species demanding the establishment of "Special Areas of Conservation" (SAC) - as part of the Natura 2000 network. In order to establish correct conservation measures for the herpetological fauna, the precise distribution of the species must be known (Ghira et al 2002). Therefore, taking the rarity of *Elaphe*



Figure no.2 Habitat of *Elaphe sauromates* in Buzau County (photo: Paul Țibu)



Figure no.3 *Elaphe sauromates* specimen recorded in Buzău County (photo: Paul Țibu)

sauromates in Romania and the scarcity of the data with regards to its distribution into consideration, it is the authors' opinion that more thorough herpetological studies of the "Subcarpații de Curbură" area are required in order to establish this species' distribution and situation in the area.

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- **** Ordin Nr. 1198 din 25/11/2005, Publicat in Monitorul Oficial, Partea I nr. 1097 din 6/12/2005. ANEXA nr. 2: Specii de plante si animale a căror conservare necesită desemnarea ariilor speciale de conservare și a ariilor de protecție avifaunistică.

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