

'LACERTA' AUSTRALIS: ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

In a previous issue of the HAA Journal, Wulf Haacke (1982) reported the rediscovery of 'Lacerta' australis. Two additional lizards, collected by him in the Cedarberg, were the first to be found since the type had been described over 50 years earlier (Hewitt, 1926). This species and the morphologically similar 'Lacerta' rupicola (FitzSimons, 1933) were assigned to Lacerta, a basically palearctic genus. However, this has been questioned by Arnold (1973). He has concluded that they are not congeneric with Lacerta sensu stricta, and may be more closely related to Tropidosaura, small montane lacertids endemic to South Africa. The generic affinities of the two South African 'Lacerta' could not be resolved, however, as both were known only from single types. Moreover, the type of 'L'. australis had been mislaid, although it has subsequently been re-located. Fresh material was urgently required.

It was not long before 'L'. rupicola was rediscovered by Niels Jacobsen during his extensive herpetological fieldwork in the Northern Transvaal. 'Lacerta' australis remained more elusive. The Cape Department of Nature and Environmental Conservation (CDNEC) was concerned about the conservation status of the species. The type locality - Matroosberg in the Hex River Mountains near Ceres, was in a heavily farmed region. Habitat loss, particularly of the vegetational complex coastal renosterbosveld (Acocoks, type 46) has been important in the decline of the geometric tortoise (Psammobates geometricus). Whether similar habitat loss had affected 'L'. australis cannot be assessed.

For these reasons specific trips to find 'L'. australis were undertaken by CDNEC and Port Elizabeth Museum staff in September 1979 and October 1982.

The Matroosberg and surrounding areas were searched. Numerous reptiles and amphibians were collected, including the montane lacertids Tropidosaura gularis and T. montana. 'L'. australis was noticeable by its absence.

Wulf Haacke's discovery of the species in the Cedarberg revealed that, perhaps, we were looking in the wrong place. To our chagrin we should have known this for over a decade! During a rationalisation of the herpetological collection at the CDNEC Research Station, Jonkershoek, an unidentified lizard was discovered. The specimen was well preserved and had detailed locality data. It had been collected on 28 January 1973 "in a rocky area near a stream". The spot locality was 32°51'45"S; 19°04'50"E. Altitude 305m. The specimen was accessioned as CDNEC 573 (now PEMR 3859) but was only identified as 'Lacerta' australis ten years later in February 1983 while specimens from the large herpetological collection were being sorted before being deposited in the Port Elizabeth Museum collection. It should be pointed out that there was no herpetology section in existence at CDNEC in 1973.

On 21 February 1983, E. Baard, A. de Villiers and R. Boycott visited the area in search of additional material. The locality is situated on the farm "Grootfontein" in the Olifants River Mountains (3219 CC Keerom). It was an exceedingly hot day and time was limited. Very few lizards were seen, and no 'L'. australis.

On 26 April 1983 EB and A.deV. visited the same area for 5 days. Warm, berg wind conditions prevailed. Searches at the reported locality revealed numerous Mabuya variegata on the rocks bordering the eastern banks of the Ratel River. Pachydactylus bibronii (CDNEC 5227), Phyllodactylus lineatus (CDNEC 5228, Bufo rangeri (CDNEC 5229), and Lamprophis guttatus (CDNEC 5232) were all collected from underneath rocks on top of sheet bed rock bordering the river. Agama atra and Cordylus polyzonus were also observed. On the following day the search was concentrated among rockier terrain. At about 12h30 success at last came when a 'Lacerta' australis was seen on a rock ledge beneath a large sandstone boulder about 4 feet above ground. The lizard retreated into a vertical crack but was extracted with the aid of a restio stalk. The lizard was not very active - the air temperature was 26°C, the spot locality 3219 CC Keerom; 32°55'00"S; 19°03'42"E; Alt: 700m. The habitat consisted of well-weathered sandstone boulders in restio grass veld. Another australis was spotted in similar habitat 100m NW of the first, but retreated into cover. The next morning was overcast after rain during the night. However, the australis missed the previous day was successfully collected when it emerged to bask at midday. Juvenile Agama atra were also seen running on the rocks, whilst a large Pachydactylus rugosus (CDNEC 5237) was collected from a shallow crack on a large sandstone boulder on bed rock.

All three new specimens of 'L'. australis have been accessioned into the Port Elizabeth Museum collection (PEM R3859-61). They will be utilised in a re-assessment of the generic status of South African 'Lacerta', and revision of the genus Tropidosaura (Branch, in prep.). Their scalation and colouration conform closely with

that of the type, and of the two specimens collected by Wulf Haacke (1982). The new material extends the known distribution of 'L'. australis into the Olifants River Mountains 60km south of the Cedarberg. It bridges the gap between the latter and the type locality in the Martoosberg. Whether 'L'. australis is indeed found in the Matroosberg will only be resolved by further fieldwork. Careful search has not revealed it. In its habits and habitat, 'L'. australis appears to occupy a similar niche to that of Tropidosaura gularis. The latter has been recorded from the Matroosberg, but not from the Cedarberg, and it is possible that T. gularis and 'L'. australis are mutually exclusive. The smaller, more terrestrial T. montana is found in both areas.

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