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# Journal of Threatened Taxa

10.11609/jott.2026.18.5.28739-29002

[www.threatenedtaxa.org](http://www.threatenedtaxa.org)

26 May 2026 (Online & Print)

18(5): 28739-29002

ISSN 0974-7907 (Online)

ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)



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ISSN 0974-7907 (Online); ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)

Publisher  
**Wildlife Information Liaison Development Society**  
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Cover: Oil painting of Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*. © R. Mahesh.



## First record of the Sistan Sand Boa *Eryx sistanensis* Eskandarzadeh et al., 2020 (Reptilia: Serpentes: Erycidae) from India

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**Abstract:** We report the presence of Sistan sand boa *Eryx sistanensis*, a species known from Iran and Pakistan, from northern parts of Thar desert of northwestern India by presenting detailed diagnosis of three live individuals from Rajasthan. Data obtained from the Indian individuals offers moderately updated definition of *E. sistanensis* and helps distinguishing it more effectively from its look-alike, *Eryx johnii* by comparing their morphology in life. Additionally, based on our past findings and sightings posted in social media and from wildlife colleagues from our network, we hint its wider presence in the low rainfall areas of three states of northwestern India, including Haryana and Punjab, apart from Rajasthan.

**Keywords:** *Eryx johnii*, farmlands, morphology, Pakistan, Rajasthan, sandy plains, trade, Thar Desert.

**सार:** हम उत्तर-पश्चिमी भारत के थार मरुस्थल के उत्तरी राजस्थान के भागों से सिस्तान सैंड बोआ *एरिक्स सिस्तानेंसिस* प्रजाति की उपस्थिति विस्तृत विवरण के साथ प्रस्तुत कर रहे हैं जो अब तक ईरान एवं पाकिस्तान से ज्ञात थी। भारत से प्राप्त साँपों के अवलोकन *एरिक्स सिस्तानेंसिस* की पहचान को अधिक स्पष्ट करते हैं जो जीवित अवस्था में इससे मिलती-जुलती दिखने वाली प्रजाति रैंड सैंड बोआ *एरिक्स जोहनी* की पहचान से अंतर करने में सहायता करते हैं। इसके अतिरिक्त, हमारे पूर्व अवलोकनों, सोशल मीडिया में उपलब्ध अवलोकनों एवं वन्यजीवों पर कार्यरत सहयोगियों से प्राप्त सूचनाओं आधार पर हम उत्तर-पश्चिमी भारत के कम वर्षा वाले तीन राज्यों में इस प्रजाति की व्यापक उपस्थिति का संकेत देते हैं जिनमें राजस्थान के अतिरिक्त हरियाणा एवं पंजाब सम्मिलित हैं।

**Editor:** S.R. Ganesh, Kalinga Foundation, Agumbe, India.

**Date of publication:** 26 May 2026 (online & print)

**Citation:** Sharma, V. & D. Khandal (2026). First record of the Sistan Sand Boa *Eryx sistanensis* Eskandarzadeh et al., 2020 (Reptilia: Serpentes: Erycidae) from India. *Journal of Threatened Taxa* 18(5): 28911–28918. <https://doi.org/10.11609/jott.10589.18.5.28911-28918>

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**Funding:** Tiger Watch organisation provided logistical support for the survey.

**Competing interests:** The authors declare no competing interests.

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**Author contribution:** VS: conducted fieldwork, gathered taxonomic data, conceptualized and wrote manuscript. DK: collected initial data of species, conducted fieldwork with VS to examine latest specimens, participated in designing manuscript.

**Acknowledgments:** We are grateful to Tiger Watch for providing logistical support and funding for the surveys, made possible by the generous support of Dieter Gutmann and Liz Gutmann. We sincerely thank Sushil Soni for accompanying us during the documentation of snakes in the Sikar District. We are thankful to Praveen Kumar for preparing the map for this study. We also extend our gratitude to Abid Ali Khan, Nidhi Singh, and Sukhdev Bhat for their kind support during the field stay in Ajmer. VS is grateful to Dr. Pratyush Mohapatra for supporting him and sharing his inputs on our findings. We thank Aadya Kalia for her valuable inputs on write-up, which helped improve the manuscript. Lastly, we are grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions, which significantly improved various aspects of the manuscript.



## INTRODUCTION

The boid snake genus *Eryx* Daudin, 1803, comprises a group of short and robust-bodied boas of burrowing habits. The known geographic expansion of this genus is from Indian subcontinent, Middle East, southeastern Europe to northern Africa (Whitaker & Captain 2004; Pyron et al. 2014). Since the description of *Eryx whitakeri* Das, 1991, the number of *Eryx* species in India has remained unchanged at three (Whitaker & Captain 2004). The other two species, *Eryx conicus* (Schneider, 1801) and *Eryx johnii* (Russell, 1801), are widespread in the Indian subcontinent, whereas *E. whitakeri* is endemic to the western coastal versant of the Western Ghats (Whitaker & Captain 2004).

The Sistan Sand Boa *Eryx sistanensis* Eskandarzadeh, Rastegar-Pouyani, Rastegar-Pouyani, Zargan, Hajinourmohamadi, Nazarov, Sami, Rajabizadeh, Nabizadeh & Navaian, 2020 was described from Sistan in Balochistan Province of Iran (Eskandarzadeh et al. 2020). Prior to its formal description, although distinguishable based on colour and patterns, it remained taxonomically overlooked or misinterpreted for more than a century. The taxon was either considered *E. johnii* or treated as a regional morph in its western range due to similarities in head, body, and tail type as well as overlapping pholidosis, which likely offered less motivation for further work on it (Wall 1911; Minton 1966). Alternatively, it was classified and treated as a subspecies, *Eryx johnii persicus* Nikolsky, 1907 (see Stull 1935; Constable 1949; Biswas & Sanyal 1977). Subsequent studies (Tokar 1991; Ananjeva in Wagner et al. 2016) re-evaluated its taxonomic status and confirmed *E. persicus* as a junior synonym of *Eryx jaculus* (Linnaeus, 1758), with no taxonomic affinity to *E. johnii*. This arrangement of *E. persicus* provided the basis for Eskandarzadeh et al. (2020) to revise the western morph/population of *E. johnii* with a new approach and assign new name to this innominate population as, *E. sistanensis*.

Hussain et al. (2024) recently reported *E. sistanensis* from multiple localities from the Cholistan Desert, a northwestern extension of the Thar Desert in Pakistan. The present study builds on the existing literature and confirms the presence of *E. sistanensis* in the Indian Thar Desert, representing first confirmed record from India.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

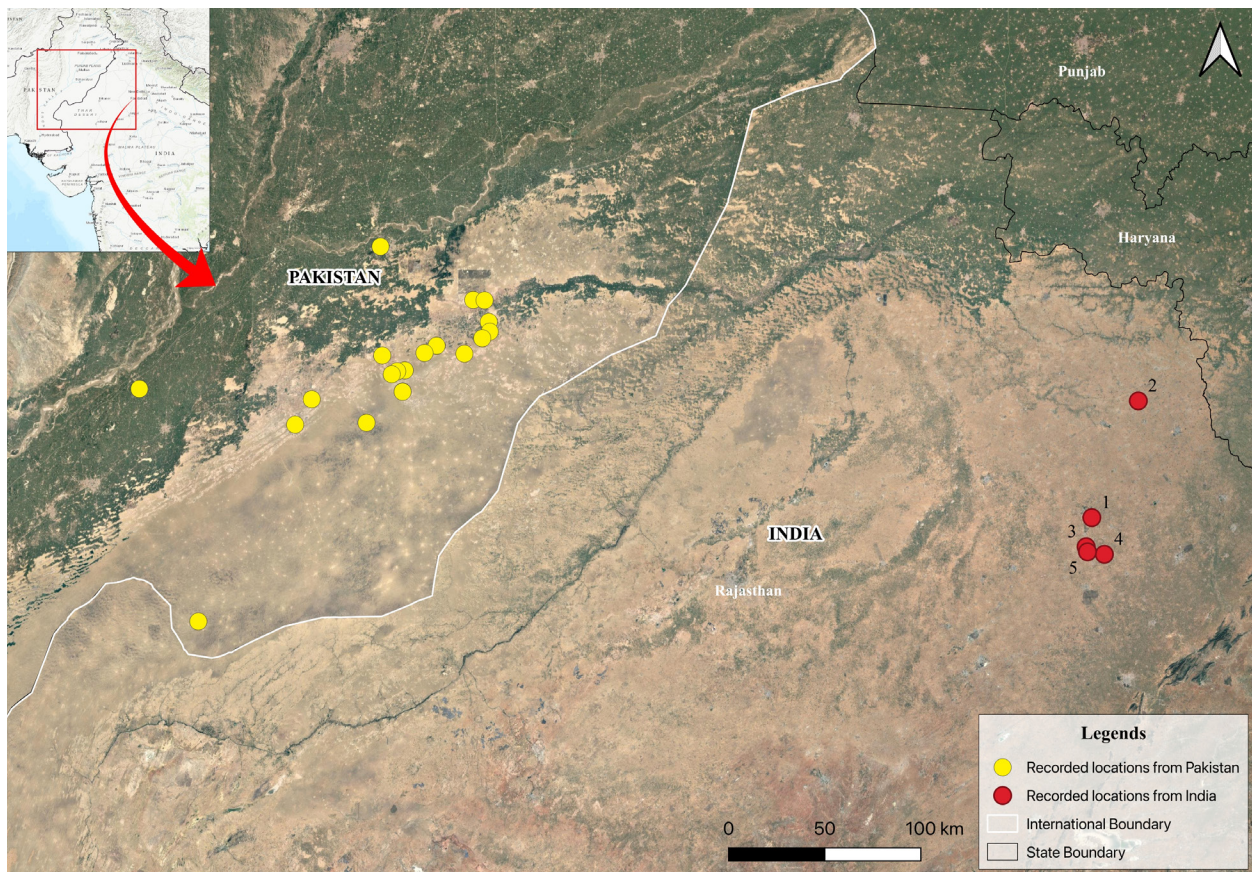
This study is based on live individuals of the Sistan Sand Boa *E. sistanensis* that were documented in

Ramgarh-Shekhawati Tehsil of Sikar District, Rajasthan. Additionally, we revisited past uncollected sightings of *E. sistanensis* from our own and colleague's collections to get further information on distribution of this species in India. Also, morphological data of uncollected live and road-killed individuals of *E. johnii*, mainly from Rajasthan (Ajmer, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Kota, and Phalodi), Madhya Pradesh (Jabalpur) and from Tamil Nadu (Madurai, 250 km south west off the type locality Tranquebar, now Tharangambadi) was gathered to compare these two species in live or freshly dead states.

No live individual was harmed or kept in long captivity for study, and no road-killed individual was collected for preservation. All individuals were photographed with the help of DSLR cameras; mounted with macro lenses. Body and tail length were measured with the help of unstretchable thread and measuring tape, whereas other body characters were measured with the help of Mitutoyo digital caliper with the accuracy of 0.1 mm. Eleven meristic and seven morphometric characters were documented which are presented in Table 1. Except last two, all characters and their definitions were taken from Eskandarzadeh et al. (2020) and their abbreviations are: SVL—Snout-ventral length, TaL—Tail length, TL—Total length, V—Ventrals, SC—Subcaudals, BE—Scales falling in shortest distance between eyes, SE—Scales around eyes, SL—Number of supralabials, PIN—Scales posterior to internasals, NE—Scales between eyes and nasals, IO—Interocular distance, EM—Distance between posterior edge of eye and corner of mouth, DH—Dorsal scale rows one head—length after head, DM—Dorsal scale rows at mid body, DP—Dorsal scale rows one head-length before anal, TR—Scale rows taken at the middle of tail, CB—Breadth of tail base at cloaca region, TB—Breadth of tail at the middle of tail. Head characters in which data is shown in pair, data from left side of head is written first.

## RESULTS

Three live individuals of *Eryx sistanensis* were documented from the outskirts and farmlands of Ramgarh Shekhawati, viz., near Goshala (28.163° N, 74.957° E, 320 m) on 19 August 2025 at 2130 h inside cowshed, Sunda ki Dhani (28.131° N, 75.042° E, 334 m) on 12 September 2025 at 0930 h from a local boy who caught it from his courtyard and playing with it sometime before it was taken for safe release, and outskirts of Rukansar (28.142° N, 74.964° E, 324 m) on 21 September at 1230 h from brick pile of under construction house near farmland. All locations are situated in Ramgarh-Shekhawati Tehsil of



**Image 1.** Map of northwestern Indian subcontinent showing published and new records of *Eryx sistanensis* from Pakistan (yellow dots) and India (red dots) respectively. Indian localities in Rajasthan state are chronologically numbered: 1—Churu city outskirts (Churu District) | 2—Leelki Beed (Churu District) | 3—Outskirt of Ramgarh Shekhawati (Sikar District) | 4—Sunda ki Dhani, Ramgarh Shekhawati (Sikar District) | 5—Rukansar, Ramgarh Shekhawati (Sikar District).

Sikar District (Image 1), Rajasthan, India.

The Indian individuals (A–C in both Images 2 & 3) had the following morphological characteristics: Dorsal scales in 44–50 (neck): 52–57 (midbody): 34–38 (before tail) rows. Ventrals 187–197, subcaudals 30–31. The body was robust and cylindrical from the posterior of the head to starting of the tail, which gently tapered and terminated in an obtusely pointed tip made from large shield (Image 4). Dorsal scales were superficially subequal, although the first two rows bordering ventral scales were larger than the rows on the upper body. Upper dorsal rows were keeled, whereas the scales on the anterior part of the body were weakly keeled, and pronounced toward the posterior one-third of the body and tail. Dorsal body colour was buff in juvenile, whereas tan in subadult and adult. Both individuals, the juvenile and the adult, had distinct 14 and 15 sooty dorsal bands from neck to cloaca respectively, while the subadult had around six obscure and mutually fused bands on the posterior half of the body hence made posterior vertebral region of

body obscurely striped with sooty colour. All individuals had various degrees of sooty edges on random scales, hence made the overall dorsal surface speckled with sooty colour on tan/buff ground colour. All individuals had distinct three or four bands (including band over cloaca region) on tail which were noticeably darker than body bands, with upper interspace orange/tangerine coloured. The underside was distinctly paler than dorsal surface, with pale colouration extending across nine or ten scale rows and could be seen from lateral view when individuals were resting on flat surface. The underside patterns were variable, juvenile exhibited predominantly creamy ventrals with minimal number of black patches; subadult showed moderate black mottling on sunset orange-colored ventrals of subadult; and adult displayed heavy black mottling on sunset orange ventrals and lower dorsal rows. The underside of the tail in juvenile and subadult was creamy white and patternless, resembling the lower dorsal rows; in adult, however, it was speckled with small black patches and appeared slightly lighter

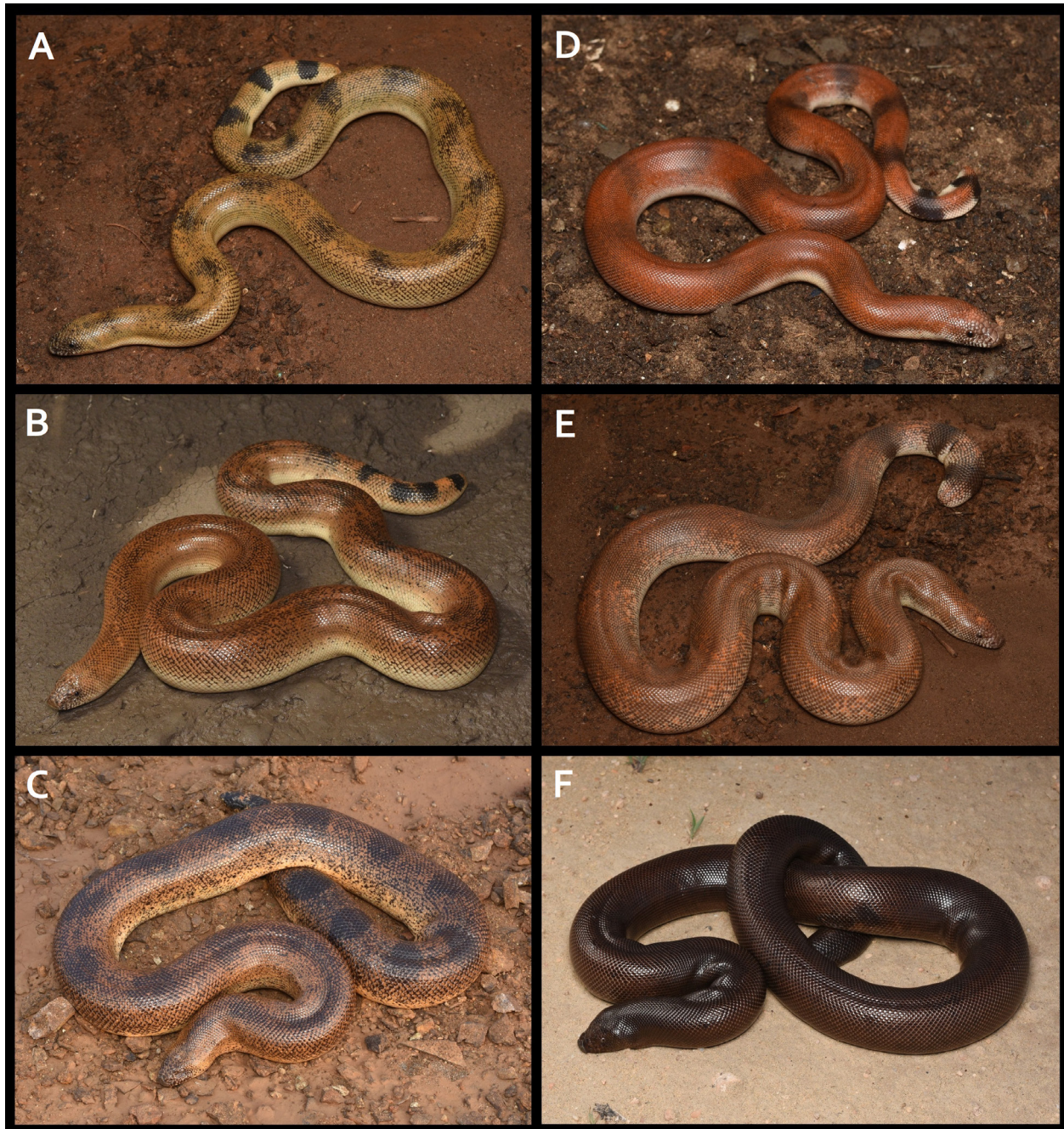


Image 2. Comparison of dorsal colour pattern of three different life stages of *Eryx sistanensis* (A–C): A—juvenile | B—subadult | C—adult, all from Sikar District. *Eryx johnii* (D–F): D—juvenile | E—subadult, both from Ajmer District | F—adult from Phalodi District. © Vivek Sharma.

than the ventral surface. Meristic and morphometric data is presented in Table 1.

In India, sightings of wild *E. sistanensis* were not from typical sand dune-laden part of Thar desert but from human-influenced desert lands like suburban gardens, farmlands and other plantations. The area has a mosaic of natural scrub patches, grasslands, crop fields, and fallow land. It is characterized by firm sandy plains rather

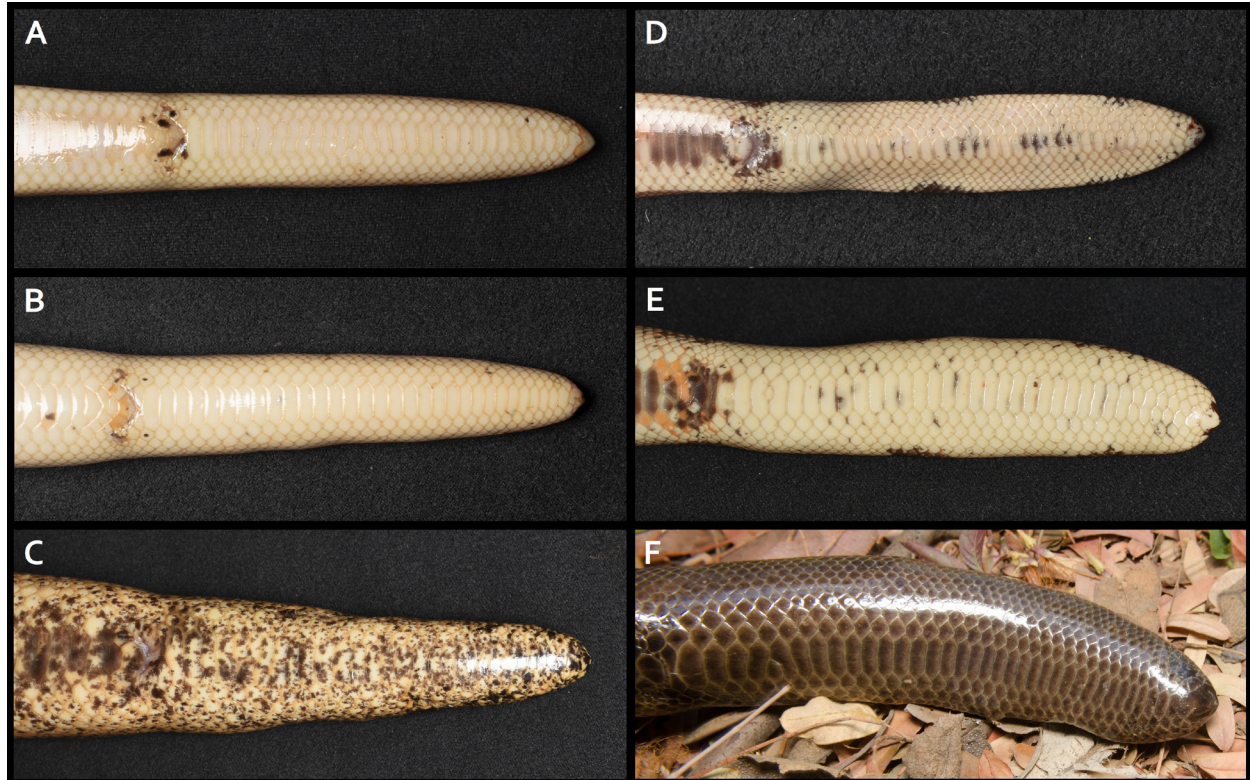
than loose dunes, with soils that are often a mix of sand and loam. These northern districts of Rajasthan form an important connectivity corridor between desert fauna of Rajasthan and the plains of Punjab-Haryana. The sand here is relatively compact and retains slight moisture, creating suitable conditions for many burrowing species. The region is also a prey-rich environment, with a high density of rodents. Notably, populations of the Desert

**Table 1.** Comparison of live individuals of *Eryx sistanensis* from India with previous works.

Characters	Eskandarzadeh et al. 2020 (Iran)	Hussain et al. 2024 (Pakistan)	This study (India)		
			Juvenile	Subadult	Adult
SVL (in cm)	22.0–85.5	*	39.3	55.1	95.0
TaL (in cm)	3.0–8.5	*	4.9	6.8	9.0
TL (in cm)	25.0–94.0	*	44.2	61.9	104.0
V	190–201	191–200	187	189	197
SC	26–31	11–12**	30	31	30
BE	6–7	6–7	8	8	8
SE	10–12	9–11	10, 10	9, 10	10, 10
SL	11–12	11–12	10, 11	11, 11	11, 10
PIN	2	–	2	2	2
NE	3	–	3, 3	3, 3	3, 3
IO/EM	1.2–1.4	–	1.3	1.2	1.3
DH	43–51	–	44	48	50
DM	43–56	44–55	52	57	56
DP	38–45	–	34	38	36
TR	–	–	27	28	25
TB/CB	–	–	0.9	0.8	0.7

\* Length data provided in table in cited work is mathematically suspicious. Also, there is no information on minimum and maximum lengths in studied specimens by those authors.

\*\* Possibly erroneous range data or typing error because overall subcaudal range is unusually low in large sample size claimed by authors.



**Image 3.** Comparison of subcaudal colour pattern and tail shape of three different life stages of *Eryx sistanensis* (A–C): A—juvenile | B—subadult | C—adult, all from Sikar District. *Eryx johnii* (D–F): D—juvenile | E—subadult, both from Ajmer District | F—adult from Jabalpur District. © Vivek Sharma.

Jird *Meriones hurrianae* are particularly abundant in this landscape. Subadult *E. sistanensis* was found at late night, whereas other two were found at day time, indicating this species can show activity at day and night both.

Dharmendra Khandal (author) photographed two undiagnosed subadults (Image 5A, B) from Churu District, first one approximately 50 cm in total length from Churu city outskirts (28.282° N, 74.984° E; 310 m) on 20 August 2003 and second one approximately 70 cm in total length from Leelki Beed (28.761° N, 75.201° E; 242 m) on 29 April 2006. We have documented one subadult (Image 5C) being demonstrated by a boy in regionally celebrated Goga Mela in Churu on 17 August 2025. In this annual event, dozens of live individuals of various locally collected snake species are carried and demonstrated by devotees of a deity Gogaji.

## DISCUSSION

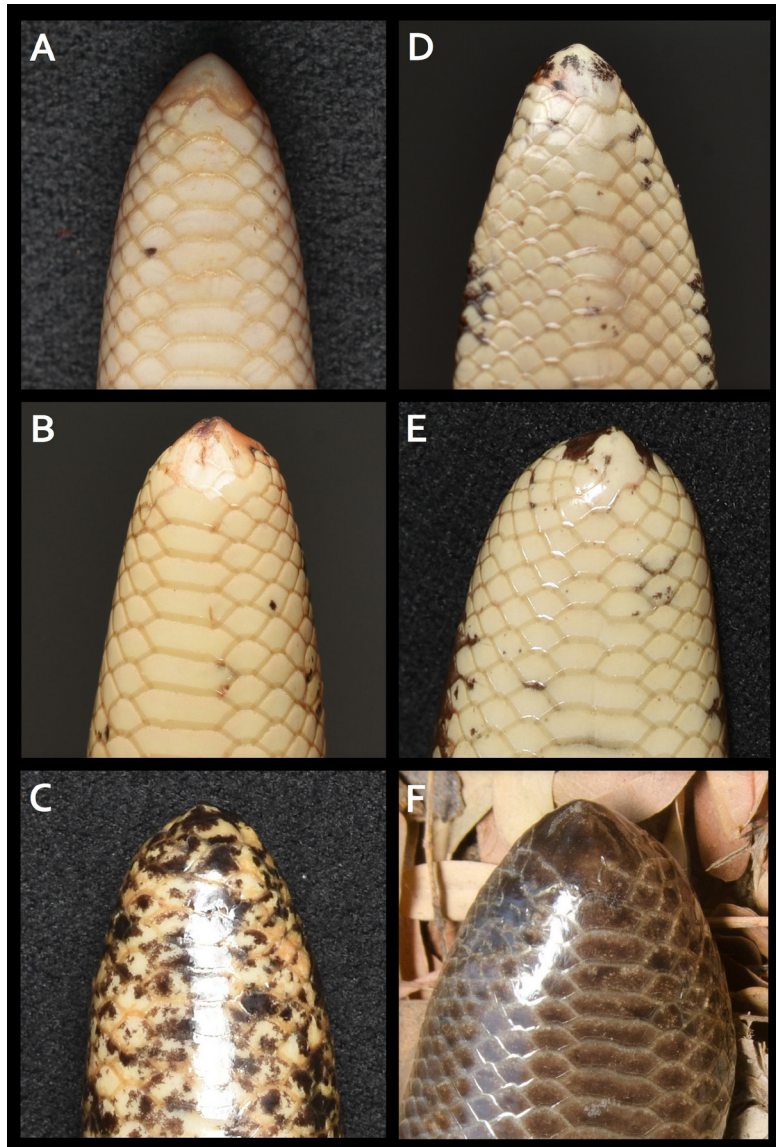
Individuals of *E. sistanensis* examined in the present study agree with the characters provided by Eskandarzadeh et al. 2020 and Hussain et al. 2024 with some minor extensions (see Table 1) in meristic and morphometric characters. Our observation on colour and patterns correspond with both of previous works where individuals in all life forms tend to maintain sooty blotches or bands on buff or tan dorsal body. However, subadult examined by us had obscure and difficult to count bands only on posterior half of body. Tail description provided by Eskandarzadeh et al. (2020) was observed in individuals examined by us where all individuals had obtusely pointed tail tip. However, we noticed tail tip of juvenile and subadult of the examined individuals did not show any noticeable difference from live individuals of *E. johnii* in similar length range. Unfortunately, both Eskandarzadeh et al. (2020) and Hussain et al. (2024) have not provided any photographic comparison of tail or tail tip, hence relying upon this character is currently not possible until larger sample size of related taxa is compared. However, we noticed tail from base gradually tapered until it ended in conical tip in *E. sistanensis* whereas in case of *E. johnii*, it maintained the same thickness on most of the length except its end. We have found TB/CB 0.7–0.9 in *E. sistanensis*, indicating the middle of tail was always thinner than base of the tail. Also, TB/CB was lowest in largest individual (0.7) which suggests adult's body gains more girth than tail and the latter remains thinner than body. In three individuals of *E. johnii*, TB/CB were found 1–1.1, indicating observed individuals maintained same thickness for at least half

of their tail lengths. This character appears to have taxonomic value if large sample size is analyzed.

After combining our data (of uncollected live individuals of both species; also check Image 2–5) with existing works on *E. sistanensis* (Eskandarzadeh et al. 2020; Hussain et al. 2024), we observed that *E. sistanensis* is different from *E. johnii* in having: 1) lower mid body rows (43–57) in former vs higher up to 66 (in our observation) or 53–67 (fide Whitaker & Captain 2004) in latter; 2) tan or tan brown dorsal body in most of the life stages in former vs reddish-brown or brick red in juveniles, reddish-brown, brown or chocolate brown in subadults and plain brown, dark chocolate brown or black in adults; 3) sooty black bands visible in all life forms in former vs blackish bands in juveniles (sometimes on whole body), present only on tail in subadults or can be entirely absent, and entirely absent in adults; and 4) tail gradually tapers till end in former vs tail maintains same thickness for most of the length in latter.

Our observations with live individuals match with some of past works where authors have been able to recognize “adult form with bands” in few *E. johnii* or recognized them as *E. j. persicus* and were able to describe such specimens. Wall (1911) noted three specimens of *E. johnii* from Duki and Hanna (Balochistan, Pakistan) had black bars throughout the body and tail, lower number of dorsal rows (47–53), lower number of ventral scales (190–200) and heavily mottled black underbody, fitting with the description of *E. sistanensis*. Constable (1949) reported a subadult female of *E. j. persicus* from “within 100 miles of Ambala”, in present day's northern India. This single specimen's pholidosis falls within range of data obtained by us from three individuals in Rajasthan. Minton (1966) mentioned two different colour forms of *E. johnii* in western Pakistan and noted both forms were sympatric. Without providing pholidosis, he was able to observe ontogenic trends in both forms where reddish coloured juveniles tend to grow darkest, whereas the other form fits with description of *E. sistanensis*. Our finding of three individuals of three different life stages confirms Minton's observation.

Our current records of *E. sistanensis* from Ramgarh Shekhawati in Sikar are approximately 290 km from the nearest published locality Haider Wali, Bahawalnagar District in Cholistan Desert of Pakistan (Hussain et al. 2024). Our most recent findings from Ramgarh Shekhawati are not the foremost sightings from India. Constable (1949) reported a subadult female of *E. j. persicus* (now *E. sistanensis*) from “within 100 miles of Ambala”, south-west of this locality broadly corresponds to present-day Haryana and Punjab states from where we have gathered

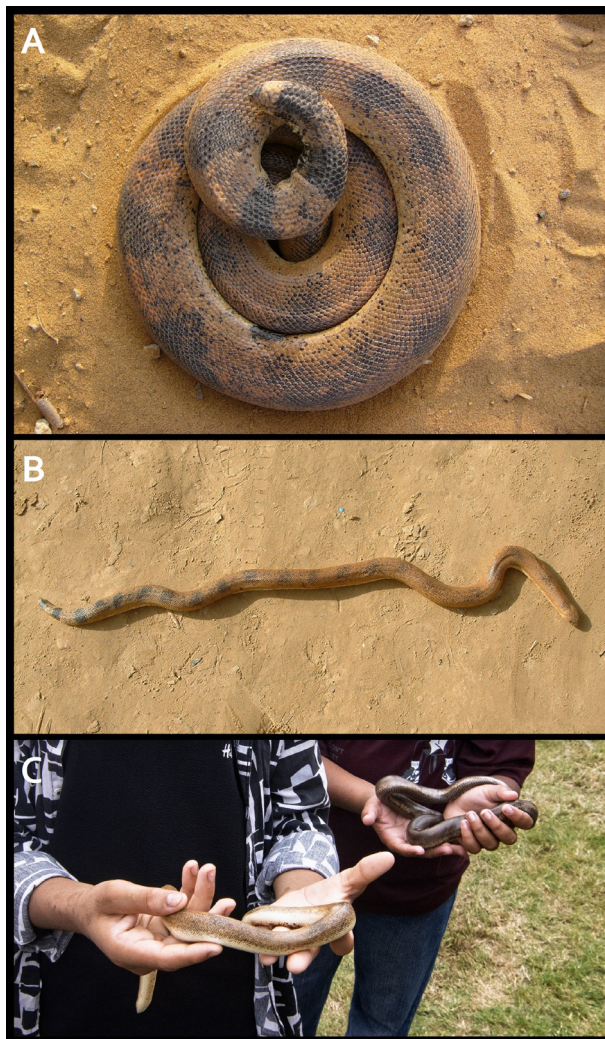


**Image 4.** Comparison of tail tip profiles of three different life stages of *Eryx sistanensis* (A–C): A—juvenile | B—subadult | C—adult, all from Sikar District. *Eryx johnii* (D–F): D—juvenile | E—subadult, both from Ajmer District | F—adult from Jabalpur District. © Vivek Sharma.

photographic records of locally rescued *E. sistanensis* from the outskirts of Fatehabad and Bathinda respectively. Both of these localities fall between Ambala (Punjab), and Sikar and Churu (Rajasthan), from where we have obtained total six personally observed live individuals. Apart from these above-mentioned observations, we have noticed presence of this species in the outskirts and the rural parts of Bikaner, Hanumangarh, and Jaisalmer District headquarters of Rajasthan. Despite being able to identify them as *E. sistanensis* on the basis of tan or buff coloured dorsal body marked with sooty bands, we refrain ourselves from drawing any conclusion with these sightings because we were unable to personally document and diagnose all such specimens from these

three states. We leave this task for future biologists to gather morphological data to report them formally. Nevertheless, all these photographic records hint wider presence of *E. sistanensis* in sandy plains of Thar region and its northern edges.

*Eryx johnii* is a conservation-significant species that is heavily targeted in illegal wildlife trade such as black magic and demonstration in snake charming (Vyas 2012; Parmar & Kaiser 2022; Wildlife Conservation Society, India 2023), and its inclusion in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 reflects the serious threats it faces. In our data collection, we have noticed at least three cases (one each from Hoshiarpur in Punjab State, Sarguja in Chhattisgarh State and Siliguri in West Bengal



**Image 5.** Observations of undiagnosed live individuals of *Eryx sistanensis* from Churu District of Rajasthan, India. A—from Churu City outskirts | B—from Leelki Beed | C—live subadult of *E. sistanensis* (left) and *E. johnii* (right) demonstrated by two boys in regionally celebrated Goga Mela from Churu City outskirts. © Dharmendra Khandal.

State) of *E. sistanensis* being used as two-headed snake or “Do-muh-wala saanp” (a popular Hindi name of *E. johnii* in snake charming practices) by snake charmers due to similar appearance and inoffensive nature. Also, live individual of *E. sistanensis* and *E. johnii* were used by local boys in Goga Mela in Churu for annual religious event. With such examples in our knowledge, we believe *E. sistanensis*, with much restricted distribution and sightings in India, may be at even greater risk of being exploited in various cultural and religious activities, also can face pressure of local population decline due to habitat alteration (Hussain et al. 2024). The lack of

data on its population and trade status further increases concern. As of now, it is ‘Not Evaluated’ (NE) according to IUCN and comes under Schedule-II of Indian Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act, 2022. Given this, there is an urgent need for precautionary assessment and possible elevation of its protection status, as such species may be facing greater threats than *E. johnii*, a species reckoned to face several anthropogenic direct threats. Also, live individual of *E. sistanensis* and *E. johnii* were used by local boys in Goga Mela in Churu for annual religious event, within a week before we started getting live individuals from Sikar District.

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NAAS rating (India) 5.64

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ISSN 0974-7907 (Online) | ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)

May 2026 | Vol. 18 | No. 5 | Pages: 28739–29002

Date of Publication: 26 May 2026 (Online & Print)

DOI: 10.11609/jott.2026.18.5.28739-29002

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– Rejuba Pongen & Pranay Punj Pankaj, Pp. 28957–28970

## Short Communications

**Preliminary observations on the breeding ecology and potential threats to Bonelli's Eagle *Aquila fasciata* in Sithagiri Malai, Tamil Nadu, India**  
– S. Naveenkumar, H. Byju & H. Maitreyi, Pp. 28971–28975

**A nesting attempt by Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* in an inland wetland in Kachch District, Gujarat, India**  
– Gaurav Sirola, Harindra Baraiya, Rajdeep Mitra, Anju Baroth & R. Suresh Kumar, Pp. 28976–28981

**First time in 110 years: sighting of *Gynacantha khasiaca* MacLachlan, 1896 (Odonata: Aeshnidae) in Arunachal Pradesh, India**  
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## Notes

**Evidence of Rusty-spotted Cat *Prionailurus rubiginosus* (I. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, 1831) (Mammalia: Carnivora: Felidae) in National Chambal Sanctuary, Uttar Pradesh, India**  
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**First photographic record of Naumann's Thrush *Turdus naumanni* Temminck, 1820 from Assam, India**  
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**New breeding record of Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* from Malappuram District, Kerala, India**  
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**From the heart of Urad: records of *Cyrtodactylus bapme* Kamei & Mahony, 2021 (Reptilia: Squamata: Gekkonidae) from Assam, India, with comments on the pre-loocal region in males**  
– Manmath Bharali, Pranjal Swargiary, Tejas Mariswamy, Madhurima Das, Jayaditya Purkayastha & Sanath Chandra Bohra, Pp. 28998–29002

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