

Assam Keeback Snake

July 13, 2020

The Assam keelback snake was **sighted by a team from the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, for the first time since 1869**. This snake was spotted in 2018 by zoologist Abhijit Das when he, along with a team, was **retracing the Abor expedition** – an iconic expedition that took place from 1911-1912 that had yielded a rich list of flora and fauna of the Assam region. After due identification, the find was described in a paper published recently in the journal Vertebrate Zoology.

Keelback Snake

The Assam keelback is so far **known only to inhabit Sivasagar in Upper Assam and Poba in Assam-Arunachal border**. So, as far as present knowledge goes, it is an **endemic snake of Upper Assam**. The snake's 'lost' status has a lot to do with the habitat it occupies – in this case, a lowland evergreen forest. These **forests have been selectively degraded** during the last 100 years: tea plantations have been made, selective logging has taken place, and many other activities such as oil exploration and coal mining. The **species is small – about 60 cm long, brownish, with a patterned belly**. The Poba RF, where the snake was found, is one of the last remaining patches of low elevation tropical wet forest in the upper Brahmaputra valley. It has the lowest available protection status.

However, one should not be quick to classify snake species as 'extinct'. **Snakes and other reptiles are cryptic creatures**, which basically means that they are not as easy to spot compared to say, a tiger. Further the **lack of surveys**, especially in the herpetological field, was a contributory factor. Very few people are doing work on it but that does not mean that the species is 'extinct' – it may just be because no proper survey has been done.

First known as *Hebius pealii* this snake was named after Edward Peal, a British tea planter who first collected two specimens of this snake from upper Assam, 129 years ago. When the British had discovered the snake, they had classified it as belonging to the larger keelback species. But through DNA studies, it was found that **this particular keelback does not belong to the generalised keelback snake of India but is rather a unique genus (*Herpetoreas*) belonging to a smaller group of four species, found in Eastern and Western Himalayas, South China and Northeast India.**