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NOTE

FIRST RECORD OF THE ASSAM LEAF TURTLE *CYCLEMYS GEMELI* (FRITZ ET AL. 2008) (REPTILIA: TESTUDINES: GEOEMYDIDAE) FROM THE DARJEELING-SIKKIM HIMALAYA, INDIA

Aditya Pradhan, Niran Chettri & Saibal Sengupta

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First record of the Assam Leaf Turtle *Cyclemys gemeli* (Fritz et al. 2008) (Reptilia: Testudines: Geoemydidae) from the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya, India

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In India, 30 species of tortoises and turtles have been recorded so far, out of which the northeastern region has 22 species (Das & Gupta 2015), including *Cyclemys gemeli*. This species, however, has never been reported to occur in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya, which comprise the state of Sikkim, and the hilly regions of Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts of West Bengal, India, which is an integral part of the eastern Himalaya. Historically, four species, namely, *Melanochelys tricarinata*, *M. trijuga*, *Indotestudo elongata*, and *Lissemys punctata* have been reported to occur here (Smith 1931), of which *Indotestudo elongata* and *Lissemys punctata andersoni* have been recorded in the present-day Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya (Jha 2009; Pradhan & Yonle 2019). *Cyclemys gemeli*, commonly known as the Assam Leaf Turtle is protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 in India, but has not been assessed by IUCN. It is currently listed in CITES under Appendix II. It was first described from Assam, and is the only species to be reported in India under *Cyclemys* (Ahmed & Das 2010). This species has been known to occur in Uttar

Pradesh (near the Nepal border), northeastern India (Fritz et al. 2008), including Nepal (Rai 2004), Bangladesh (Kabir et al. 2009), and southeastern Bhutan (Wangyal et al. 2012). This species prefers large rivers and its oxbows, fast flowing creeks, and leaf litter of evergreen forest (Praschag et al. 2009).

The current sighting of *Cyclemys gemeli* is the first record from the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya. The turtle was first sighted by the second author on 20 August 2020, crossing a motorable road approximately 230m from Riyang Khola (a perennial tributary of River Teesta), in the Government Cinchona Plantation, Sittong, Darjeeling, and was subsequently identified as *Cyclemys gemeli*. It was based on the descriptions in Ahmed & Das (2010) and Fritz et al. (2008). The photographs and video of the sighted individual were also sent to experts for the confirmation of its identity. The closest published locality record for this species is in Sershong, Sarpang District, Bhutan (Wangyal et al. 2012), about 210km from the current sighting area. The sighting took place at around 11.30h (26.948°N & 88.380°E) in an

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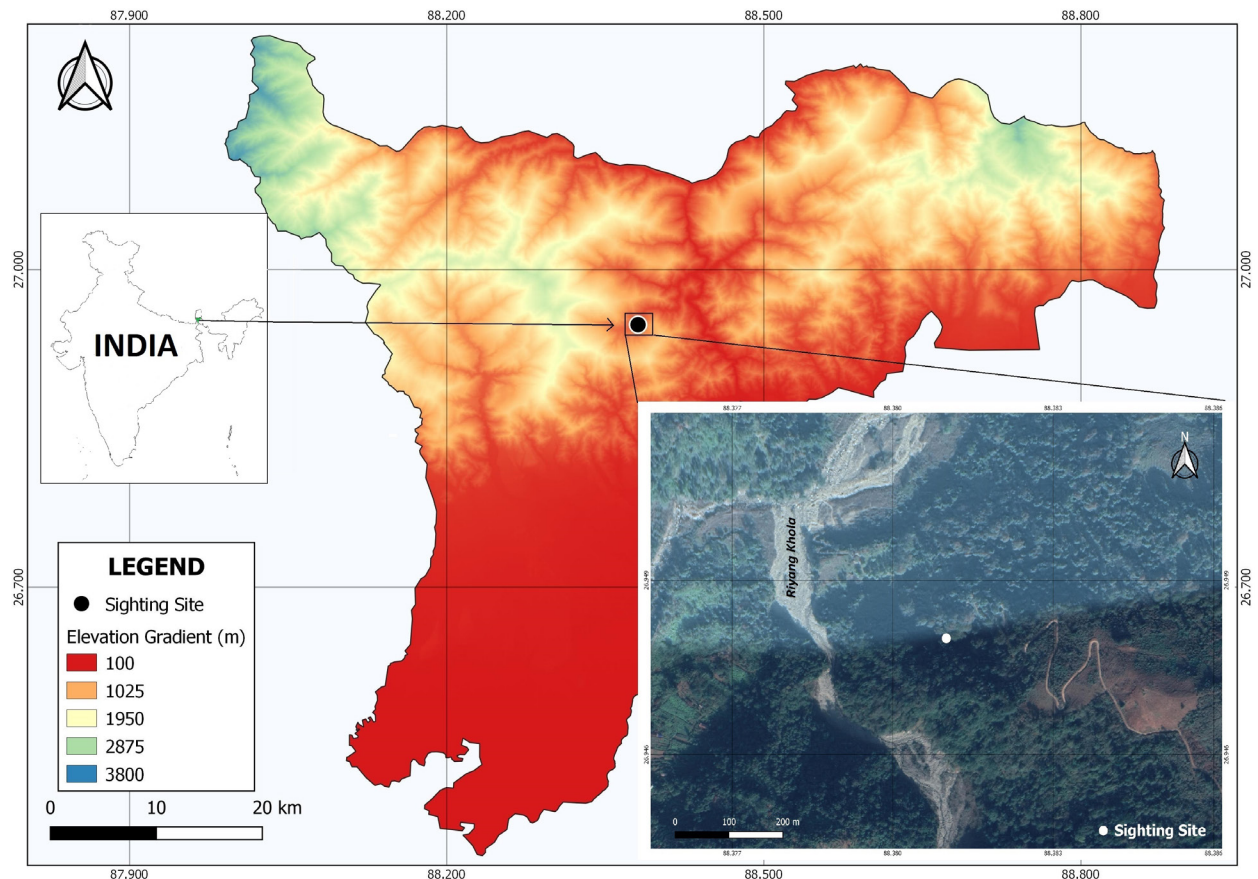


Image 1. The location and a satellite image of the sighting site in Darjeeling, India.

area, currently under rubber cultivation at an elevation of 580m, and approximately 20m from the nearest non-perennial stream (Image 1). The vegetation of the area is characterized by trees like *Terminalia* sp., *Schima walichii*, *Ailanthus grandis*, *Cinchona officinalis*, *Ficus elastica*, and ferns.

The sighted individual (Image 2) was a juvenile female, dark in color with prominent brown blotches on its carapace, while the plastral pattern was characterized by dark brown to black radiating lines. The carapace was raised and slightly elongated, with a distinct vertebral keel and two lateral keels. The digits were webbed, with fingernails. Eleven pairs of marginal scutes were present. The anal notch was wide and obtuse angled. The crown of the head and the throat was uniform dark brown in color. The individual weighed 450g. Morphometric measurements of the individual were as follows: carapace length = 15.2cm; carapace width = 11.9cm; plastron length = 14.1cm.

The individual was later handed over to the West Bengal Forest Department, and is currently at Latpanchor Range Office.

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Image 2. Carapace and plastron of the Assam Leaf Turtle *Cyclemys gemeli* sighted in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya, India. © Niran Chettri.

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Review

A history of primatology in India (In memory of Professor Sheo Dan Singh)

– Mewa Singh, Mridula Singh, Honnavalli N. Kumara, Dilip Chetry & Santanu Mahato, Pp. 16715–16735

Communications

University campuses can contribute to wildlife conservation in urbanizing regions: a case study from Nigeria

– Iliyasu Simon, Jennifer Che & Lynne R. Baker, Pp. 16736–16741

Killer Whale *Orcinus orca* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Mammalia: Cetartiodactyla: Delphinidae) predation on Sperm Whales *Physeter macrocephalus* Linnaeus, 1758 (Mammalia: Cetartiodactyla: Physeteridae) in the Gulf of Mannar, Sri Lanka

– Ranil P. Nanayakkara, Andrew Sutton, Philip Hoare & Thomas A. Jefferson, Pp. 16742–16751

The Critically Endangered White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* in Sigur Plateau, Western Ghats, India: Population, breeding ecology, and threats

– Arockianathan Samson & Balasundaram Ramakrishnan, Pp. 16752–16763

Avifauna of Saurashtra University Campus, Rajkot, Gujarat, India

– Varsha Trivedi & Sanjay Vaghela, Pp. 16764–16774

Five new species of trap-door spiders (Araneae: Mygalomorphae: Idiopidae) from India

– Manju Siliwal, Rajshekhar Hippargi, Archana Yadav & Dolly Kumar, Pp. 16775–16794

Rapid multi-taxa assessment around Dhamapur Lake (Sindhudurg, Maharashtra, India) using citizen science reveals significant odonate records

– Neha Mujumdar, Dattaprasad Sawant, Amila Sumanapala, Parag Rangnekar & Pankaj Koparde, Pp. 16795–16818

Commercially and medicinally significant aquatic macrophytes: potential for improving livelihood security of indigenous communities in northern Bihar, India

– Shailendra Raut, Nishikant Gupta, Mark Everard & Indu Shekhar Singh, Pp. 16819–16830

Leaf nutrients of two *Cycas* L. species contrast among in situ and ex situ locations

– Thomas E. Marler & Anders J. Lindström, Pp. 16831–16839

Contribution to the Macromycetes of West Bengal, India: 69–73

– Diptosh Das, Prakash Pradhan, Debal Ray, Anirban Roy & Krishnendu Acharya, Pp. 16840–16853

Short Communications

A new species of *Platylestes* Selys (Odonata: Zygoptera: Lestidae) from the coastal area of Kannur District, Kerala, India

– K.G. Emiliyamma, Muhamed Jafer Palot & C. Chares, Pp. 16854–16860

A first complete documentation of the early stages of Hampson's Hedge Blue *Acytolepis lilacea lilacea* Hampson, 1889 (Lepidoptera: Lycaenidae) from Western Ghats, Kerala, India

– V.K. Chandrasekharan & Muhamed Jafer Palot, Pp. 16861–16867

A checklist of butterfly fauna of Bankura Town, West Bengal, India

– Ananya Nayak, Pp. 16868–16878

A diversity of spiders (Arachnida: Araneae) from a cashew ecosystem in Kerala, India

– Mampambath Subramanian Smitha & Ambalaparambil V. Sudhikumar, Pp. 16879–16884

Clinical and pathological findings in a Dwarf Red Brocket *Mazama rufina* (Mammalia: Cetartiodactyla: Cervidae) attacked by dogs

– Eduardo Alfonso Díaz, Gustavo Donoso, Carolina Sáenz, Ivette Dueñas & Francisco Cabrera, Pp. 16885–16890

Indigenous uses and traditional practices of endemic and threatened Chilgoza Pine *Pinus gerardiana* Wall. ex D.Don by tribal communities in Kinnaur District, Himachal Pradesh, northwestern Himalaya

– Swaran Lata, P.S. Negi, S.S. Samant, M.K. Seth & Varsha, Pp. 16891–16899

Notes

Range extension and first confirmed record of the Flightless Anomalure *Zenkerella insignis* (Matschie, 1898) (Mammalia: Rodentia: Anomaluridae) in Nigeria

– Dolapo Oluwafemi Adejumo, Taiye Adeniyi Adeyanju & Temidayo Esther Adeyanju, Pp. 16900–16903

Power lines as a threat to a canopy predator: electrocuted Harpy Eagle in southwestern Brazilian Amazon

– Almerio Câmara Gusmão, Danilo Degra, Odair Diogo da Silva, Lucas Simão de Souza, Angélica Vilas Boas da Frota, Carlos Augusto Tuyama, Maria Cristina Tuyama, Thatiane Martins da Costa, Ana Paula Dalbem, Adrian A. Barnett, Francisca Helena Aguiar-Silva & Manoel dos Santos Filho, Pp. 16904–16908

First record of the Assam Leaf Turtle *Cyclemys gemeli* (Fritz et al. 2008) (Reptilia: Testudines: Geoemydidae) from the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya, India

– Aditya Pradhan, Niranjana Chettri & Saibal Sengupta, Pp. 16909–16911

Breeding biology of Malabar Tree Toad *Pedostibes tuberculosus* (Anura: Bufonidae) from Castle Rock, Karnataka, India

– Deepak Deshpande & Nikhil Gaitonde, Pp. 16912–16915

First record of *Ourapteryx dierli* Inoue, 1994 (Lepidoptera: Geometridae: Ennominae) from India

– Sanjay Sondhi, Dipendra Nath Basu & Krushnamegh Kunte, Pp. 16916–16919

Notes on a communal roosting of two oakblues (Lepidoptera: Lycaenidae: *Arhopala*) and the Common Emigrant (Pieridae: *Catopsilia pomona*) butterflies in Uttarakhand, India

– Sohom Seal, Debanjan Sarkar, Agnish Kumar Das & Ankush Chowdhury, Pp. 16920–16923

First report of mango leaf gall midge *Procontarinia robusta* Li, Bu & Zhang (Diptera: Cecidomyiidae) from India

– Duraikannu Vasanthakumar, Senthilkumar Palanisamy & Radheshyam Murlidhar Sharma, Pp. 16924–16926

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