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THE TAXONOMIC STATUS OF THE MONITOR LIZARD, VARANUS DUMERILII HETEROPHOLIS BOULENGER, 1892 (REPTILIA: VARANIDAE)

Robert George Sprackland

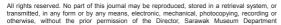
(University College London, UK.)

ABSTRACT

The taxonomy of Varanus dumerilii heteropholis is reevaluated by examination of living and preserved lizards, including the holotypes of V. heteropholis Boulenger, 1892, and V. dumerilii (Schlegel, 1839). Characters studied included dorsal, cranial, and ventral lepidosis, nostril position, color and dorsal pattern. No morphological criteria can be found to justify the subspecies Varanus dumerilii heteropholis, which is placed in junior synonomy of Varanus dumerilii.

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Varanus dumerilii (Schlegel, 1839) is a large semi-aquatic, semi-arboreal lizard found throughout southeast Asia, from southern Thailand through Malaya, Sumatra, Java, and Borneo (fig. 1). Though described over 150 years ago, it remains rare in museum collections. In spite of this, *V. dumerilii* has been readily available through animal dealers since about 1976, and most of our information on the biology of the species comes from observations on captives (Sprackland, 1976, 1992; Krebs, 1977; Davis et al., 1986; Radford & Paine, 1989; Visser & Horn, 1989).

Varanus dumerilii is a specialized species, having the following characters that are unique within the genus Varanus: 1) nasal valves, 2) a nearly completely roofed supratemporal fossa, 3) heterogeneous, round dorsal scales, and 4) a distinct dorsal pattern of broad, solid saddles. Nasal valves may be present in Varanus mertensi and V. mitchelli (pers. obs.), two other semi-aquatic monitors, but this can only be confirmed by observation of live animals. In adults of Varanus exanthematicus, the supratemporal fossa is also largely roofed by bone, though not nearly to the degree seen in V. dumerilii. In the former, the skull itself is high in the temporal region, while in the latter it is distinctly depressed.

Varanus dumerilii has frequently been confused with V. rudicollis (e.g., Coborn, 1987), because of the large nuchal scales in both species. Among museum specimens of V. dumerilii that were labelled "V. rudicollis" are NMW 12463 (old number 3655) and NMW 21255, the former listed under Varanus rudicollis by Mertens (1942: 361). However, the dorsal pattern in V. dumerilii is unique, consisting of a yellowish-tan dorsum with broad, dark brown saddle markings, that do not reach the venter. In contrast, V. olivaceus may have distinct bands, but these are narrow and touch the venter. The broad bands of the "belli" phase of V. varius are unique in having almost equally broad light and dark components, but neither form saddles.