

# *Platyceps largeni* (Schätti, 2001) — sixth specimen and a distribution extension

Erez Maza<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Anat Feldman<sup>1</sup>, Lev Fishelson<sup>1</sup> and Shai Meiri<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tel Aviv University, Department of Zoology, 6997801, Tel Aviv, Israel

<sup>2</sup> The Steinhardt Museum of Natural History and National Research Center, Tel Aviv University, 6997801, Tel Aviv, Israel

\* Corresponding author. E-mail: [mazaerez@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:mazaerez@post.tau.ac.il)

**Abstract:** We describe the finding, in a museum jar, of the sixth known specimen of the Eritrean snake *Platyceps largeni* (Schätti, 2001) (synonym, *Coluber largeni*). The specimen is from Museri Island, Dahlak Archipelago in the Red Sea. This record is the first one for this island and it represents a ca. 50 km range extension of this species, hitherto known from five specimens in a tight cluster of three other islands. This find verifies Schätti's (2001) prediction that the species might be found in the nearby archipelago islands.

**Key words:** Dahlak Archipelago, Eritrea, Tel Aviv University Zoological Museum

During the early 1960s Tel Aviv University sent several expeditions to study the biodiversity of the Red Sea coast of Eritrea and Somalia (Fishelson 2009). One of the first of these expeditions, the Israel South Red Sea Expedition (ISRSE/62; Hoofien and Yaron 1964), was held in spring 1962. The main site of the expedition was the Dahlak Archipelago, located in the southern part of the Red Sea, near the shore of Eritrea (Figure 1). A second expedition to the area was held in 1965 (The Second Israeli South Red Sea Expedition, ISRSE/65; Lewinsohn and Fishelson 1967).

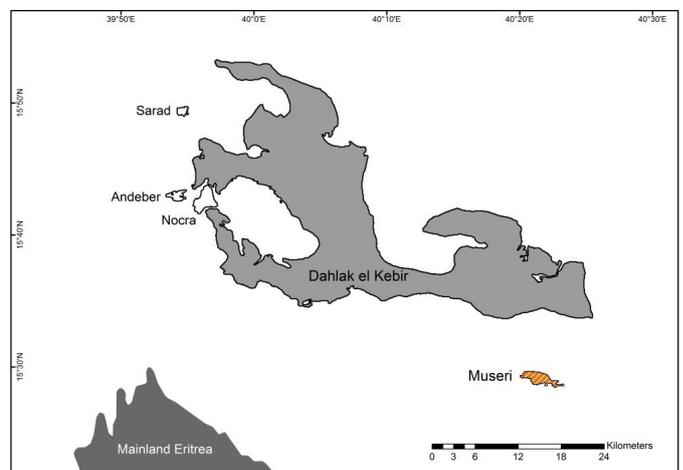
During the 1962 expedition, the researchers collected (among other things) two snake specimens from Entedebir (Andeber) Island (Figure 1). One of them was found while it was climbing a cliff face near a body of brackish water and the other was found while it was climbing a bush in a brackish water well. Both snakes were identified as "*Coluber florulentus* (?)" (the question mark in the original report, indicated an uncertain identification), and were deposited at the Natural History Collections at Tel Aviv University (TAU - R.8091 [Originally E62/2345] and TAU - R.8092 [Originally E62/2393]) (Hoofien and Yaron 1964).

Subsequently, in December 1969, Malcolm J. Largen visited the Dahlak Archipelago and collected reptiles on the islands of Dahlak al-Kebir, Dehel, Dissei, Nocra, and Sarad (Largen 1997; Figure. 1). All specimens were deposited at the Natural History Museum, London. One of the specimens, from Sarad Island (BMNH: Sarad Island, 1973.3211 [(♀) Msr 21, V 192, A 2, C 54+]), was later identified as *Coluber sp.*, and was claimed to resemble *Coluber florulentus* Geoffroy, 1827 (Largen and

Rasmussen 1993). This was despite the observation that it "... has fewer ventrals and a strikingly different color pattern" (Largen and Rasmussen 1993). The final conclusion was that the specimen may represent a new taxon (Largen and Rasmussen 1993; Largen 1997).

In 2001 Beat Schätti re-examined the two above mentioned specimens from TAU and the one from BMNH. He also examined two unreported specimens from Nocra Islet that are held in the Zoological Institute, St. Petersburg (Z.I.S.P 20553, Nocra, ♂, March 4, 1979, no collector given, and Z.I.S.P 20554, same origin, juvenile, ♂, February 10, 1979). Based on these five specimens Schätti (2001) described a new snake species and named it *Coluber largeni*, in honor of Malcolm J. Largen. The BMNH specimen (1973.3211) was designated as the holotype, and the other four were designated paratypes. These five were the only *Platyceps largeni* specimens ever recorded, and since then no other *Platyceps largeni* has been found (Largen and Spawls 2010).

In the spring of 2012 we serendipitously found a jar at the Natural History Collections at Tel Aviv University, with an unidentified snake in it. The attached note indicated that the snake was collected by one of us (LF) in Museri Island (Dahlak Archipelago) on 20 October 1965, during the second Israel south Red Sea expedition to the Dahlak Archipelago



**Figure 1.** Location of Museri Island (stripped orange) and surroundings: the islands from which *P. largeni* was hitherto known (white), Dahlak el Kebir (light grey) and mainland Eritrea (dark grey).

(Lewinsohn and Fishelson 1967). The snake was previously identified as *Coluber florulentus* (Lewinsohn and Fishelson 1967), but no further attention was paid to it. The specimen had been forgotten and was never officially catalogued.

We counted scales on the specimen and measured it, then identified it (Figure 2; now TAU - R16164.) using the dichotomic keys provided in Largen and Spawls (2010). The specimen is a female (snout-vent length 492 mm, tail length 150 mm, 21 dorsal scales at midbody, 92 subcaudal scales, and 197 ventral scales). All these measurements and scale counts agree with the description of *P. largeni* (Schätti 2001; Largen and Spawls 2010). Both its color pattern and head-shield shape are more similar to those of *P. largeni* than to those of its close ally, *P. florulentus*. Thus we contend that this specimen, TAU - R16164., is the sixth known specimen of this enigmatic species. To verify our diagnosis we sent pictures of the snake to Beat Schätti, together with the measurement and scale counts. His conclusion (pers. comm.) was sharp and clear: “This is *Platyceps largeni*”. He further claimed that: “it (i.e., our specimen) could be the best candidate to the species holotype”.

This identification also expands the known distribution of *P. largeni*. So far it is known from only three small islands in the Dahlak Archipelago: Sarad (1 km<sup>2</sup>), Nocra (6.8 km<sup>2</sup>) and Andeber (1.5 km<sup>2</sup>). All three of these islands are located west of Dahlak El Kebir Island, the main island of the Dahlak Archipelago, on which *P. largeni* is yet to be found. This species is now known also from Museri Island, (15.487° N, 40.357° E; 5.8 km<sup>2</sup>), southeast of Dahlak el Kebir, which represents a range extension of ca. 50 km. Besides the expansion of the distribution, this stream of events reveals the importance of scientific collections to the research of biodiversity and species' documentation. Without doubt, many more unidentified or uncatalogued specimens are awaiting discovery in museum collections worldwide.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Lev Fishelson passed away as this paper was being prepared for submission. Lev clearly remembered catching this snake, nearly 50 years after the event. He is sorely missed. We thank Arie Landsman, Kesem Kazes and Stanislav Volynchik for helping with the museum specimens, and Maria Novosolov for help with identification of the details on the note attached to the specimen jar.

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**Figure 2.** TAU – R.16164, *Platyceps largeni*, from Museri Island, Dahlak Archipelago, Eritrea.

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**Authors' contribution statement:** LF collected the specimen and provided data on the circumstances of the collection, EM, SM and AF identified the specimen, EM, AF and SM wrote the paper.

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