

## Short Communication

## An Additional Locality Record of the Blotched Rat Snake, *Elaphe sauromates* (Pallas, 1814) (Reptilia: Colubridae) in Syria

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**Abstract:** The present note provides an additional locality record of the rare Blotched Rat Snake, *Elaphe sauromates* (Pallas, 1814) from Syria. An updated map of its current distribution across Syria and Lebanon is presented.

**Keywords:** Syria, *Elaphe sauromates*, locality record.

The range of the distribution of the Blotched Rat Snake, *Elaphe sauromates* (Pallas, 1814), extends from southeastern Europe (Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania), Moldova, southern Russia, the Ukraine, Turkmenistan, western Turkey, Syria and Lebanon (Sindaco *et al.*, 2013; Jablonski *et al.*, 2019). The first record of this species is from Majdal Shams, on the southern slope of Mt. Hermon. One further specimen was collected in 1978 from Camp Fauar near Al-Quneitra (Tiedemann and Häupl, 1978; Berger-Dell'mour, 1986). In addition, it was reported by Esterbauer (1992) between 4 Km W Hadar and 2 Km S Halas.

On May 22, 2020, at 15:20, an adult *Elaphe sauromates* with a total length of approximately 150 cm was observed and photographed by a group of hikers led by Ahmad Qawi at a mountainous area in the countryside near Halboun (altitude 2200 m a.s.l.), about 30 km NW Damascus (Figure 1).

Its habitat consisted of rocky hills of eroded soil with a very sparse typical Sub-Alpine steppe vegetation of short grass (*Bromus* sp. and *Geranium* sp.) perennials (*Ferula hermonis*, *Nepeta* sp. and *Cousinia* sp.) and cushioned-form shrubs (mostly *Acantholimon ulicinum*, *Astragalus hermoneus*, *Cerithe minor* and *Marrubium libanoticum*), in addition to a few scattered bushes of Greek Juniper (*Juniperus excelsa*). Two other species of reptiles (*Stellagama stellio* and *Phoenicolacerta kulzeri*) were also reported in the area.

The specimen is characterized by intense dark pigmentation on the top of the head and body. Upper 1-7 and all lower labials are covered with light yellow coloration. Dorsal scales keeled arranged in longitudinal rows and separated by yellow-white background. Ventral scales are light yellow (Figure 2). A specimen at the Natural History Museum at Vienna (NMW 23472), collected from near Al-Quneitra, has the following measurements: Snout-Vent length 117 cm, Tail length 26 cm. Mid-body scales 26, ventral scales 208, caudal scales 70 (Tiedemann and Häupl, 1978). Although work on the herpetofauna of Syria is fragmentary (Disi and Böhme, 1996; Lymberakis and Kalionzopoulou, 2003; Sindaco *et al.*, 2006), the Blotched Rat Snake appears to be extremely rare from the few existing studies. The current work represents the fourth record of this species in Syria over the past forty years.

This species reaches its most southern range of distribution in southwestern Syria

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**Figure 1.** Habitat of *Elaphe sauromates* in Halboun area.



**Figure 2.** *Elaphe sauromates* from Halboun, Syria (Photo by Omar Sanadiki).

and the western mountains of Lebanon (Figure 3). It was reported from the southern slopes of Mt. Hermon (In Den Bosch *et al.*, 1998) and from the cedar forests of Barouk and Niha cedar of grove (Hraoui-Bloquet *et al.*, 2002). Its distribution along the coastal mountains of Syria is highly probable since it represents a continuation to the southwestern population of this snake in Turkey.

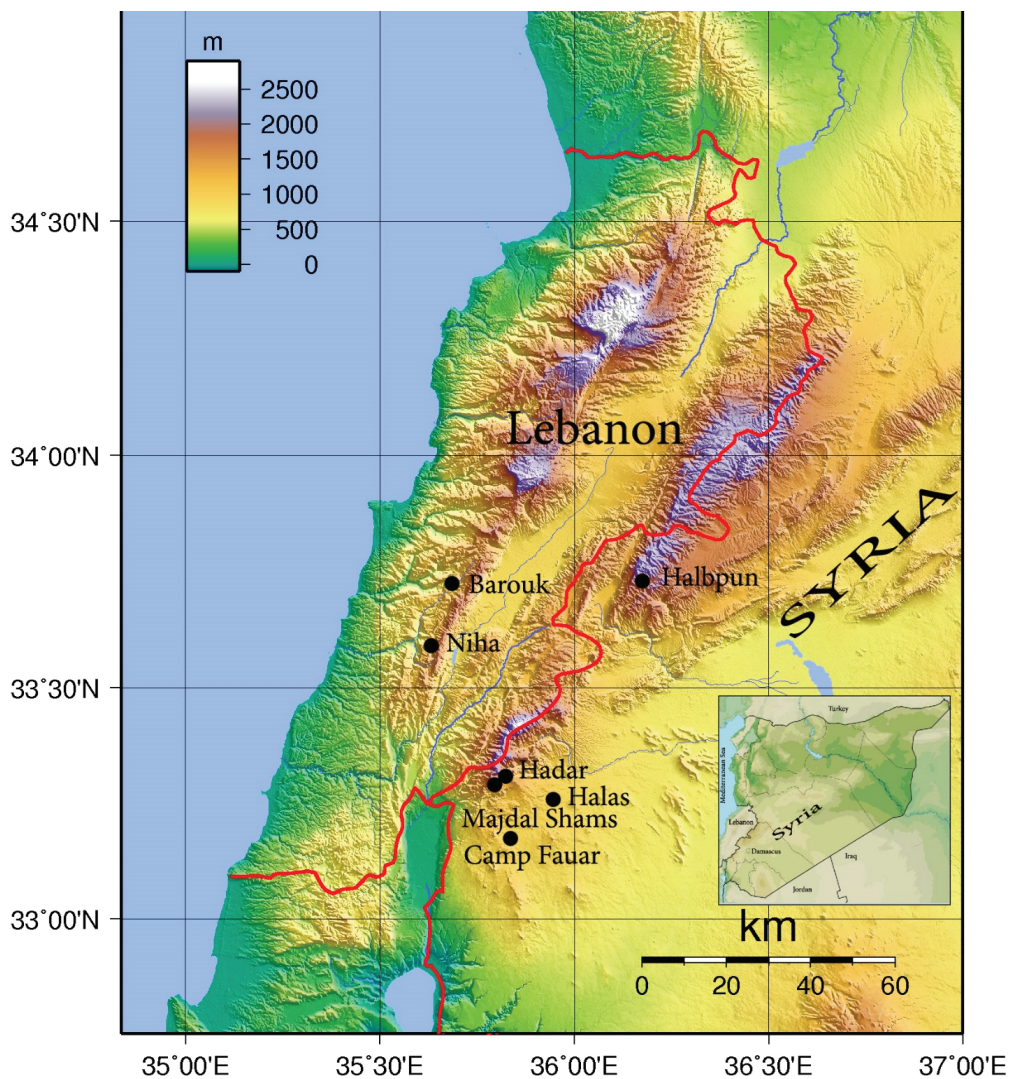
The southern distribution of *Elaphe sauromates* in Syria shows that it represents a relict species. The populations of this species are located in certain areas similar to their original habitat and are separated from each other by some distances. These separated populations are sensitive to ecological changes including mainly their habitat destruction (Disi, 2002). The cryptic species, *Elaphe urartica*, has been recently

described in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, northern Iran, and eastern Turkey (Jablonski *et al.*, 2019); thus, the previous range of the distribution of *Elaphe sauromates* should be reconsidered.

Further studies on this rare species in Syria need be conducted, specifically in relation to its biology, distribution, and phylogenetic relationship with other populations within its range of distribution.

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**Figure 3.** Distribution of *Elaphe sauromates* in Syria and Lebanon.

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