



## A review of East and Central African species of *Letheobia* Cope, revived from the synonymy of *Rhinotyphlops* Fitzinger, with descriptions of five new species (Serpentes: Typhlopidae)

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### Table of contents

Abstract .....	32
Introduction .....	32
Materials and methods .....	32
Character analysis .....	33
Systematic account .....	38
<i>Letheobia</i> Cope 1869 .....	38
<i>Letheobia obtusa</i> (Peters) .....	39
<i>Letheobia decorosa</i> (Buchholz & Peters) .....	44
<i>Letheobia jubana</i> <b>sp. nov.</b> .....	44
<i>Letheobia pembana</i> <b>sp. nov.</b> .....	45
<i>Letheobia pallida</i> Cope .....	45
<i>Letheobia swahilica</i> <b>sp. nov.</b> .....	46
<i>Letheobia toritensis</i> <b>sp. nov.</b> .....	47
<i>Letheobia largeni</i> <b>sp. nov.</b> .....	48
<i>Letheobia wittei</i> (Roux-Estève) .....	48
<i>Letheobia rufescens</i> (Chabanaud) .....	49
<i>Letheobia debilis</i> (Joger) .....	50
<i>Letheobia kibarae</i> (Witte) .....	50
<i>Letheobia graueri</i> (Sternfeld) .....	52
<i>Letheobia gracilis</i> (Sternfeld) .....	52
<i>Letheobia sudanensis</i> (Schmidt) .....	53
<i>Letheobia lumbriciformis</i> (Peters) .....	54
<i>Letheobia unitaeniata</i> (Peters) .....	55
<i>Letheobia ataeniata</i> (Boulenger) .....	56
<i>Letheobia scorteccii</i> (Gans & Laurent) .....	57
<i>Letheobia uluguruensis</i> (Barbour & Loveridge).....	58
<i>Letheobia somalica</i> (Boulenger) .....	58
<i>Letheobia erythraea</i> (Scortecci) .....	61
Key to East and Central African species of <i>Letheobia</i> based on external characters .....	62
Acknowledgements .....	64
Literature cited .....	64

## Abstract

The genus *Letheobia* Cope 1869 is revived for the “worm-like blind-snakes” which were assigned to the genus *Rhinotyphlops* Fitzinger 1843 by Roux-Estève in 1974 (her Groups IV to VII). *Letheobia pallida* is restricted to Zanzibar, and the specimens from Pemba Island, the East African coast, southern Sudan and southwestern Ethiopia are described as four new species. Three species included by Roux-Estève (1974) in the polyphyletic genus *Typhlops* Oppel, *T. uluguruensis* Barbour & Loveridge (Group II), *T. obtusus* Peters and *T. decorosus* Buchholz & Peters (Group V) are considered basal forms in the genus *Letheobia* and a related species, *L. jubana* **sp. nov.**, is described from southern Somalia.

**Key words:** *Letheobia*, *Rhinotyphlops*, *Typhlops*, taxonomy, Africa

## Introduction

The genus *Letheobia* was erected by Cope in 1869, based upon two species, *L. pallida* Cope being represented by two specimens from Zanzibar, with *L. caeca* (Duméril) of Gabon also included in the genus. *Letheobia* was recognised as a subgenus by Peters when he described *Onychocephalus (Letheobia) lumbriciformis* from the Zanzibar coast (1874) and *Typhlops (Letheobia) unitaeniatus* from Kenya (1878). Peters (1881) selected *L. caeca* (Duméril) as the type species of the genus. *Letheobia* was placed in the synonymy of *Typhlops* Oppel by Boulenger (1893) and transferred to the synonymy of *Rhinotyphlops* Fitzinger by Roux-Estève (1974).

Recent work on the African Typhlopidae has indicated that *Rhinotyphlops* of Roux-Estève (1974) is polyphyletic. Her Groups I and III are closely related to her *Typhlops* Group VI, while her “espèces aveugles” (Groups IV, V and VI) belong in *Letheobia*, although the *L. caeca* complex may show affinities with *Xenotyphlops* Wallach & Ineich of Madagascar (Young & Wallach, 1998). Her Group VII, containing strongly pigmented species with visible eyes, may eventually be assigned to another genus, but is provisionally also included in *Letheobia*. There appear to be about 36 species of *Letheobia* and we deal with 23 in this preliminary paper. Those excluded are four western species from Roux-Estève’s groups *Typhlops* II (*L. leucostictus*, *L. manni*) and *Rhinotyphlops* V (*L. praeocularis*, *L. stejneri*); six species of the *Rhinotyphlops* (= *Letheobia*) *simoni* group (incorporating Roux-Estève’s *Rhinotyphlops* Group IV) inhabiting islands in the Gulf of Guinea (*L. newtoni*, *L. feae*), Nigeria (*L. crossi* + **sp. nov.**), and the Middle East (*L. simoni*, *L. episcopus*) (Franzen & Wallach 2002); and at least three species of the *Rhinotyphlops* (= *Letheobia*) *caecus* complex of the Congo basin, including *L. caecus*, *L. acutirostratus*, and *L. pauwelsi* (Young & Wallach 1999; Wallach, 2005).

## Materials and methods

This study is based on most of the material available in American and African museums, with additional data and figures gleaned from the publications of Roux-Estève (1974), Largen (1978), and Joger (1990).

In the nomenclature of head shields we follow Roux-Estève (1974, 1975) in the appellation “frontal” for the median shield bordering the rostral posteriorly (= “prefrontal” of Witte, 1966, and others). However, the shield that she called a second postocular (PO2) we consider to be the ocular, while the lower shield bordering the labials, which she called “ocular,” we call “subocular,” thus reverting to the nomenclature of Boulenger (1893) in respect of *Letheobia pallida* and *L. lumbriciformis*. The nomenclature of supralabial imbrication patterns (SIP) follows Wallach (1993a), except that “X” indicates no supralabial overlaps a superior head shield, II–P and II–O indicate second supralabial overlapping preocular and ocular, respectively, and S and PO represent the subocular and postocular, respectively.

Scale rows were counted as follows: mid-dorsals (MD) between the rostral shield and the apical spine; longitudinal scale rows (SR) at three points: first (A) at level of 20th midventral scale caudad of mental; sec-