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A new species of *Atheris* (Serpentes: Viperidae) from northern Mozambique

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Abstract

A new species of forest viper (*Atheris* Serpentes: Viperidae) is described from Mount Mabu and Mount Namuli, northern Mozambique. This is the most southerly record of the genus, and the first record from Mozambique. Features of scalation, colour, body form and behaviour distinguish the new species from all other African *Atheris*, particularly its small size (maximum total length 384mm), retention of juvenile colouration in adults, and relatively low ventral, subcaudal and labial scale counts. It appears to be a dwarf, possibly paedomorphic, species that feeds among leaf litter on small frogs and geckos. The discovery of the new species in isolated populations in mid-altitude forest remnants on Mount Mabu and Mount Namuli, emphasizes the high conservation importance of the region.

Keywords: Viperidae, *Atheris*, new species, Mount Mabu, Mount Namuli, Mozambique

Introduction

Due to the loss of infrastructure and social upheaval caused by the protracted civil war, much of northern Mozambique has been inaccessible to field research for many years. As a result, much of the country's biodiversity, particularly the herpetofauna, remains one of the most poorly documented in Africa (Branch *et al*., 2005). The herpetofauna of the southern provinces of Mozambique (i.e. those south of the Zambezi River) have traditionally been incorporated into monographic reviews of southern African focus (e.g. Branch, 1998; Broadley, 1990). However, provinces north of the Zambezi River, including those of Zambezia, Nampula, Niassa and Cabo Delgado, remain difficult to access and many regions lack even preliminary herpetofaunal surveys. Even as late as 1990 only a single locality for any amphibian collection was known from Mozambique north of latitude 14˚, an area of over 150 000 km^2. (Poynton and Broadley, 1991).

Central and northern Mozambique contains a series of montane inselbergs that have rarely been studied, and their biogeographic affinities to the Afromontane archipelago of Eastern and southern Africa remain unknown. Branch *et al.* (2005a) recorded the highest reptile and amphibian diversity in Mozambique on Serra Mecula in the Niassa Game Reserve, extreme northern Mozambique. This included a new species of girdled lizard (Branch *et al.*, 2005b), and they noted the presence of many elements shared with both Tanzanian components of the Afromontane archipelago, as well as with the south, particularly Mount Mulanje in southern Malawi (Branch *et al.*, 2005a). The lack of formal surveys highlighting the biological richness in these montane isolates, and the burgeoning human population and its attendant habitat threats, indicate that unique biodiversity may be lost before its presence is even scientifically known.

To meet this challenge the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew Darwin Initiative (Award 15/036) instituted a project '*Monitoring and Managing Biodiversity Loss in South-East Africa's Montane Ecosystems*' working together with the Mozambique Agricultural Research Institute (IIAM). As part of this project, formal

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