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New data on the morphology and distribution of the enigmatic Schouteden's sun snake, *Helophis schoutedeni* (de Witte, 1922) from the Congo Basin

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The Schouteden's sun snake is the sole representative of its genus, and was originally described by the Belgian herpetologist Gaston-François de Witte as a colubrid, *Pelophis schoutedeni* (de Witte 1922). Twenty years later, the new generic name *Helophis* was established by de Witte & Laurent (1942) because the generic name *Pelophis* was preoccupied by *Pelophis* Fitzinger, 1843 [type species: *Brachyorrhos* (now *Enhydris*) *alternans* Reuss, 1834]. De Witte (1922) and de Witte & Laurent (1942) gave data on two syntypes (Fig. 1), which are preserved in the herpetological collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. One, RMCA R.2468, was found in Tondou (at Lac Tumba, Équateur Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo = DRC), while the other, RMCA R.2469, was collected in Kwamouth ("Moyen-Congo", now Bandundu Province, DRC). Both were collected by Henri Schouteden in 1921. In the original description, no information was given about the sex of the syntypes. De Witte & Laurent (1942) reported a third specimen (RMCA R.11551) from Léopoldville (today Kinshasa), which was collected in 1937 by Henrard. Since then, this snake species was almost forgotten, and the genus has remained monotypic. To our knowledge, no photographs of living specimens of this species have been published so far. In general, very little is known about the distribution, biology, conservation status or even the phylogenetic relationships of this vividly colored snake species. Although several works listed *Helophis schoutedeni* as being part of the Congo Basin (DRC) snake fauna (e.g. Kusamba 1990; Meirte 1992; Trape & Roux-Estève 1995; Broadley 1998) sometimes including a basic identification key, no new information was given. Moreover, no recent field guides of the Central African region (e.g., Chippaux 2006) include this snake species. Regarding its classification, Broadley (1998) considered it as a natricine species (Natricinae) while in The Reptile Database (Uetz & Hošek 2013) it is listed as Colubridae *incertae sedis*, similarly like in Pyron *et al.* (2013), where *Helophis* was missing from their phylogenetic meta-analysis.

During a field expedition to the DRC in June–July 2012, we obtained a single specimen of this snake in Kinshasa, in the proximity of the Congo River. When handled, it behaved calmly and did not display any clear antipredatory behavior, just tried to escape by crawling off. We were able to take photographs (Fig. 2) and investigate scalation. The specimen is now in the collection of Marcel Collet. Herein we present a morphological description of this specimen, which will add relevant and new information to the original description and diagnosis of the species [in brackets we give the information as is in the original description].

Body stout, cylindrical, head barely distinct from neck. Tail short, cylindrical, progressively tapering to a pointed tip. Eye small, pupil round. Rostral small, rounded, wider than high, narrowly visible from above. Two internasals, right-angled triangular, very narrow. Suture between the internasals slightly lower than suture between prefrontals. Prefrontals wider than long. Frontal distinctly longer than wide, slightly longer than its distance from the snout tip and slightly shorter than the suture between parietals. Parietals long and wide, shorter than their combined width. Nasals divided into pre- and postnasal, the prenasal longer than the postnasal. Nostrils directed upwards, located on the suture between pre- and postnasal. Supralabials 11/11 [10–11 in syntypes], 9th and 10th largest; on each side 6th and 7th supralabials in contact with orbit [5th and 6th as well as 6th and 7th in syntypes]. Loreals 1/1, longer than high. Left loreal surrounded by postnasal,

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APPENDIX

List of additional specimens (all from the Democratic Republic of the Congo) deposited in the herpetological collection of the RMCA, grouped by locality (see also Fig. 3):

Bamania: RMCA R.16676;

Boende: RMCA R.29324;

Bokoro: RMCA R.16490;

Boteka: RMCA 83-24-R-38, RMCA 83-24-R-39, RMCA 83-24-R-40, RMCA 83-24-R-41, RMCA 83-24-R-104, RMCA 83-24-R-105, RMCA 83-24-R-106, RMCA 83-24-R-107, RMCA 83-24-R-108, RMCA 83-24-R-109, RMCA 83-24-R-110, RMCA 83-24-R-111, RMCA 83-24-R-112, RMCA 83-24-R-113, RMCA 83-24-R-114, RMCA 83-24-R-115, RMCA 83-24-R-116, RMCA 83-24-R-117, RMCA 83-24-R-118, RMCA 84-25-R-33, RMCA 84-25-R-34, RMCA 84-25-R-35, RMCA 85-21-R-20, RMCA 85-30-R-22;

Bumba: RMCA R.19578;

Wafanya: RMCA 88-33-R-96, RMCA 88-33-R-97, RMCA 88-33-R-98, RMCA 88-33-R-99, RMCA 89-20-R-83, RMCA 89-20-R-84, RMCA 89-20-R-85, RMCA 89-20-R-150.