

A Bark Gecko

(*Hemidactylus leschenaultii*)



Fig. 1 *Hemidactylus leschenaultii*. Photo by Chris Mattison

Preying on a Wolf Snake

(*Lycodon striatus sinhaleyus*)

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Introduction

In Sri Lanka, the gecko genus *Hemidactylus* comprises seven species. These are *Hemidactylus frenatus* Schlegel, 1836; *Hemidactylus leschenaultii* Dumeril & Bibron, 1836; *Hemidactylus maculatus hunae* Deraniyagala, 1937; *Hemidactylus scabriceps* (Annandale, 1906); *Hemidactylus brookii parvimaclulatus*

Deraniyagala, 1953; *Hemidactylus depressus* Gray, 1842 and *Hemidactylus triedrus lankae* Deraniyagala, 1953. Of these, the latter three taxa are endemic to the island (De Silva, 2001).

The Bark Gecko (*Hemidactylus leschenaultii*) is an arboreal species found on trees and in anthropogenic habitats in the dry and intermediate zones of the country. It is the most heavily built Sri Lankan gecko (Deraniyagala, 1953) and attains snout-vent lengths (SVL's) of over 80 mm. Although it is primarily nocturnal by habit, individuals can be observed from around 5.00 p.m. to around 8.00 a.m.

Observation

At 8.20 a.m. on 4th January 2004, during a field visit to Menikdena Archaeological Reserve

and Arboretum in the low country intermediate zone of Sri Lanka (long. 80° 37'—80° 45' E.; lat. 07° 28'—07° 57' N), a fully grown, pale colored *H. leschenaultii* was observed about two meters above ground level on a wooden bar in the underside of the roof of a hut. This hut was in close proximity to the adjacent dry-mixed evergreen forest. The gecko was making frantic thrashing movements and upon closer observation it was noted to be holding a juvenile Wolf Snake (*Lycodon* sp.) in its mouth. The whole of the head of the snake and the furthest forward part of the body, nearly 2.5 cm of its total length, were completely engulfed. The posterior part of the body was oriented lateral side up and hanging limply. The gecko kept on trouncing the snake on the wooden bar. Whilst climbing on to a desk to photograph the incident the gecko dropped the snake. The gecko remained alert, not moving from its position and was immediately captured. The juvenile snake was very frail and several scars from the teeth of the gecko were visible on the head, although none of them were bleeding. It died after approximately five minutes and was subsequently preserved in formalin. The snake (Fig. 2) is maintained in my personal collection. The gecko (Fig. 3) was measured, photographed and then released.

Notes

The dimensions of the fully grown adult male gecko were; head length 21.4 mm, SVL 97.8 mm, tail length 86.0 mm, (total length 183.80 mm), arm 39.2 mm, leg 43.7 mm. The snake was identified to be a Shaw's Wolf Snake (*Lycodon striatus*

sinhaleyus) [8 supralabials, 40 subcaudals], a common, endemic snake near human settlements. Its dimensions were, head length 10.5 mm, SVL 112.3 mm and tail length 27.0 mm (total length 139.30 mm).

Although a nocturnal, terrestrial species, *Lycodon striatus sinhaleyus* is a proficient climber, and it is frequently found in anthropogenic habitats. Due to this it is one of the most widely killed snakes in Sri Lanka. This non-venomous snake is not as fierce as the other *Lycodon* species, and when disturbed it flattens its body and hides its head inside its coil. Although *Lycodon* species frequently feed on geckos, and they comprise a major portion of its diet, this incident cannot be considered as a self-defense behavior by the gecko due to the relative sizes of the two individuals. It can be assumed that the gecko must have kept the snake detained for a considerable time as, when found, the snake was very weak and died in a few minutes, despite the fact that it is known as a 'tough' species.

Smith (1935) states that the pugnacious Tokay gecko (*Gekko gekko*) feeds on snakes, as well as other lizards, birds, mice and anything



Fig. 2. The juvenile Wolf Snake, *Lycodon striatus sinhaleyus*. Photo by author.



Fig. 3. The fully grown Bark Gecko, *Hemidactylus leschenaultii*. Photo by author.

else it can overcome, but recorded instances of geckos, especially *Hemidactylus* species, feeding on snakes are very rare. *H. leschenaultii* is primarily insectivorous but there are a few records of the species preying on vertebrates. These include a mouse (*Mus musculus*) [Sumithran, 1982] and a common house gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*) [Dattatri, 1984]. There is a third record of a gecko, tentatively identified as *H. leschenaultii*, consuming the shed tail of a skink (*Mabuya carinata*) after a struggle between the animals [Kannan & Krishnaraj, 1988]. All these records are from India. The observation presented here suggests that *H. leschenaultii* is quite prepared to tackle a small snake if the opportunity arises.

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