

Spotted: Snake not seen here in 172 years

Reptile enthusiast says species seldom sighted even in Malaysia

Clement Yong

A snake not seen in Singapore for 172 years was spotted in Bukit Timah Nature Reserve in September, according to a report filed on Thursday.

Dr John van Wyhe, a senior lecturer from the National University of Singapore (NUS), found the lined blind snake, also known by its scientific name *Ramphotyphlops lineatus*, dead on a bike trail at the nature reserve on Sept 16.

Striped and worm-like, and more than 50cm in length, the black snake's discovery changes its previous status of "indeterminate" – or in need of verification – to "extant", now that its existence has been definitively recorded here in modern times.

"It was quite unexpected to find it in Singapore since it is an uncommonly seen species even in Malaysia," said Mr Law Ing Sind, who helped identify the snake. "We still don't know the current population size or how that population is distributed in Singapore."

The 23-year-old co-founder of the Herpetological Society of Singapore, an enthusiasts' group for the

study of reptiles and amphibians, said the features and habits of the lined blind snake could explain its elusiveness.

"The (snake) tends to burrow into the soft tropical soil in search of invertebrate prey, and so spends its entire life underground," he explained.

"They also have a great deal of superficial similarity with worms, so the public may just dismiss this as another worm when they encounter one."

Last seen in 1847, the lined blind snake has been so difficult to find that a 2015 National Parks Board (NParks) survey for reptiles and amphibians at Bukit Timah failed to detect it.

The recent rediscovery of the snake was documented in a report on Thursday by Mr Law, Dr van Wyhe, and Ms Rachel Seah in the Singapore Biodiversity Records, which is hosted by the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum.

Ms Seah, 23, is an NUS life sciences student who alerted Mr Law to Dr van Wyhe's sighting of the snake.

The trio noted in the report that the specimen found was the longest one recorded for the species.

They wrote: "The featured specimen is also of interest in that it is about 4cm longer than the maximum total length recorded for the species, which is 48cm total length."

Due to its long 172-year absence



from official records, "the featured specimen would, therefore, represent a significant rediscovery in Singapore", they added.

Following Dr van Wyhe's discovery of the snake in September, the dead reptile was moved to the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum with NParks' permission.

Taking an animal from the wild without permits or permission by NParks is an offence here.

In May, NParks said it found more

than 40 species that could potentially turn out to be new to Singapore, following a multi-year survey of the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve between 2014 and last year.

The lined blind snake, however, was not detected then.

Mr Law said this was not surprising, as there are about 55 terrestrial species of snakes in Singapore.

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POTENTIAL FOR MORE DISCOVERIES

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MR LAW ING SIND, co-founder of the Herpetological Society of Singapore, comprising enthusiasts who study reptiles and amphibians.

This lined blind snake, found dead in Bukit Timah Nature Reserve on Sept 16, was the first of its species to be seen in Singapore since 1847.

PHOTO: JOHN VAN WYHE

to discover more surprising records and even potentially new species in the area," he said.

Several animals have been rediscovered in Singapore in the past few years. For instance, two species of flower flies were sighted again after they were last seen in Singapore almost 200 years ago – in Pulau Ubin this year and in Bukit Timah Nature Reserve in 2017.

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