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COVER PHOTOGRAPH: *Lamprophis guttatus*, 12,5 km west of Mokhotlong, Lesotho. Photo: W. R. Branch.

DESCRIPTIONS OF BLACK BOOMSLANG (*Dispholidus typus* “nigra”)
IN THE LITERATURE

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“Authority” is often appealed to in support of a particular taxonomic position, but “authority” in the form of Robert Mertens - in his day widely regarded as Europe’s leading herpetologist committed a *faux pas* when describing *Thrasops jacksonii mossambicus* (SMF 22246) as a new race of this harmless species when it proved to be a misidentified Boomslang (Loveridge 1944: 137, Mertens 1937: 13, 1967: 98), possessor of the most toxic venom of any African snake (Christensen 1955: 10, Meyer 1974: 224)! On the other hand, specimens of *Thrasops jacksoni* from Mt Elgon, Uganda (NMW 26054.1) and Beni, Democratic Republic of the Congo (NMW 26054.2) were first listed as *Dispholidus typus* var. *nigra* (pers. obs.) but this name did not get into print.

Science is democratic in that anyone, with or without adequate training, can participate; authority has no recognised veto but an editor does have. What should be recognised as of value is experience and in as far as Mertens had familiarity with a wide range of living ‘herps’ he was an authority. But his familiarity with *Thrasops* and *Dispholidus* would not have been as great as an otherwise ignorant, “unqualified” field collector in Africa who may have handled many more live specimens.

Arthur Loveridge was another “authority”, meticulous in his methods, well-seasoned in the field in East Africa, yet examination of black specimens of *Dispholidus typus* in Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) where he worked for decades, revealed two specimens from Buta (MCZ 25954-5), ex-Belgian Congo) to be mis-identified *Thrasops jacksoni*. In other major museums this discovery of error was repeated: In Berlin (ZMB) three “*Dispholidus typus*” from Bukoba, Tanzania (ZMB 11929, 13261, 13345) proved to be *Thrasops jacksoni*; in Leiden (RMNH) at least one of two “*D. typus*” from Ofoubou, Gabon (Waardenburg & Guisherit 1991: Table 1) has proved to be a *Thrasops aethiopissa* (RMNH 26853), the other not being available (July 2012) for confirmation. And lastly I am indebted to Olivier Pauwels and Jean Pierre Vande weghe (2008: 171) who have corrected my misidentification of a “*Dispholidus typus*” from Gabon (Knoepffler, 1966: 15) as *Thrasops jacksoni* to being a *Rhamnophis a. aethiopissa*: this is of some satisfaction to me as my re-identification (1983: 317) was made without seeing the specimen but on the basis of my conviction that a black snake (“noire-bleuté”) with the meristics provided was most unlikely to be a *Dispholidus* and from being black unlikely to be *R. aethiopissa*.

Published accounts of *Dispholidus typus* by experienced herpetologists often refer to “black” specimens from different parts of Africa [Table 1]: in East Africa Loveridge (1918: 326 claimed to have green, brown and black varieties from Morogoro, Tanzania; Ionides (in Loveridge 1955: 187) claimed that black Boomslangs of both sexes occurred at Liwale, Tanzania where he was resident; and Spawls *et al.* (2002: 387) claim a variety

of colour patterns, including, “uniform black”, echoing an earlier opinion by Spawls & Branch (1995: 21) that “...males may be uniform brown to black . . .”. From Southern Africa, Broadley (1983: 253) wrote, “...uniformly black above and greyish black below” (for some specimens) and Alexander & Marais (2007: 138) say, “In some areas, males are dark brown to black with a bright yellow or dark grey belly.” A semantic difficulty here is that specimens are often described as black when that is the predominant colour without meaning that they are uniformly black, not even above and exclusive of the belly colour. Spawls *et al* (2002: 388) and Gower *et al* (2012: 134) provide a colour photograph of a Botswana specimen which is dark grey above, off-white with black scale edging below – but not black.

The writer’s moment of truth came, when in Ghana on 14th February, 1967, he shook the frond of a palm to dislodge a large black snake which then slithered down the frond and he had but a moment to decide if it was a *Thrasops* or a black *Dispholidus*, to grab it or risk its escape: he decided it could not be a Boomslang as black ones were (and still are) unknown from West Africa and that he was right to make a grab is evidenced by the snake now being in his collection (as bh C34P16) and this being written!

For these reasons the writer remains sceptical of claims for the existence of black boomslang and has so far encountered only the following museum specimens which appeared to be black but with the reservations here provided:

1. Peter’s (1882: 132) old Sena specimen (ZMB 10020) is in poor condition, darkened post-mortem and was originally identified as *Bucephalus typus* var. *viridis* which suggests that it was once green and has discoloured with preservation and age.

2. A Liwale specimen (NMK 1208) is claimed to come from outside the vicinity of the Usambaras, but as Liwale was the collector’s operational base, it is possible that this is an attributed, not the true source, of the specimen. The blackness of these two specimens is comparable to that found in the *Thrasops* spp. with which others have sometimes been confused.

3. A third male, from Derema (BMNH 1971.210) in the Usambaras appears to have been black in life.

4. Another male, from Tendaguru (ZMB 24168) appears black but was originally named *D. t. viridis*, again suggesting that it was green in life; it has blotches of blue on the body, perhaps arising from its poor state of preservation.

5. A female from Mlalo (MCZ 23357) is black and is likely to have been black in life.

6. A second female, from Amani (ZMB 20340), has lighter patches before and behind the eye and in places on the body where it would seem to be a partially melanised brown specimen.

7. A third female, from Mazumbai (ZMB 48154) has a light patch under the chin but is otherwise black and correctly identified.

8. A fifth male, from Kolah (ZMB 21647) in Namibia, at first sight appears to be black but on closer inspection is more accurately described as dark grey.

9. Boulenger (1896:189) details a specimen (Fa) from “Ushambola, Zanzibar” as “uniformly black” and having looked carefully at the specimen I cannot disagree with him. However, it is possible that in life it was green and has been darkened post-mortem

although Boulenger was writing his description no more than 20 years after registration of the specimen. I have not been able to find “Ushambola” on maps or in gazetteers but according to Parker *et al.* (1940: 313) this is an archaic spelling of Usambara!

Of those listed above and in Table 1 I accept only nos 2, 3, 5, 7 and 9 (in bold) as likely to have been as uniformly black in life as are adults of *Thrasops flavigularis*, *jacksoni* and *occidentalis* – except for a straw-coloured throat, the others showing signs of discolouration post mortem. If “Ushambola” is rightly attributed then all come from the Usambara Mts in Tanzania except for the Liwale specimen (here no. 2). The ventral scale numbers are very similar (3 m, 2 f, 180-190) and all come from within the area which Laurent (1955: 128, 1956: 220, 358, 1958c: 124, 1960: 53) has recognised to be the province of *D. t. viridis*: they may be regarded as variants of that subspecies. The Namibian specimen (no. 8), Laurent would have assigned to *D. t. punctatus*.

On present evidence it is likely that uniformly black specimens are found only in the area of the Usambara Mountains, Tanzania.

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Table 1: Black *Dispholidus typus*.

Text No:	Country:	Sex:	s-v (mm):	Tail (mm):	Tail % s-v:	Ventrals:	Sub-caudals:	Prefang teeth:
1	Mz	m	c. 1000	295+		?	75+	5
2	Tz	m	1025	330+		182	92+	4/5
3	Tz	m	?	555+		180	126+	6
4	Tz	m	1360	515	37.9	186	124	4
5	Tz	f	1320	345+		183	107+	?
6	Tz	f	1200	460	31.9	190	126	4
7	Tz	f	1275	487+		184	124	4/3
8	Na	m	1170	330+		169	92+	5
9	Tz	m	1325	500		179	126	5

Table 2: Published claims of black *Dispholidus typus*.

Author:	Year: Page:	Country:	Locality:
Loveridge	1918: 326	Tanzania	Morogoro
Stevenson-Hamilton	1929: 122	S Africa*	
Pringle	1954: 24	S Africa	
Ionides, in Loveridge	1955: 187	Tanzania	Liwale
Loveridge	1957: 273	Tanzania	
Hoesch	1960: 342	Namibia	
Pike	1964: 40	Zimbabwe	
Wakeman	1966: 102	Uganda	
Broadley	1983: 253	S Africa	
MacKay & MacKay	1985: 19	Kenya	
Hinkel & Fischer	1988: 17	Rwanda	
Fischer & Hinkel	1993: 267	Rwanda	
Spawls & Branch	1995: 21	E Africa	
Alexander & Marais	2007: 138	S Africa	
