

## First Record for the Genus *Antaresia* (Squamata: Pythonidae) from Papua New Guinea

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On 11 August 2000, during the filming of a documentary in Western Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG), the authors flew from Daru Island to the disused airstrip at Weam (141°07'E, 08°37'S), ca. 33 km E of the Indonesian border (Fig. 1). While searching among discarded metal sheeting on the edge of the Weam runway, we found a small *Antaresia* and two skin sloughs, likely to have come from the same snake, between two upright layers of corrugated sheeting (Fig. 2). The specimen is the first representative of the genus to be found in New Guinea and the first recorded outside Australia.

We tentatively identify this specimen as *Antaresia maculosa* (Fig. 3). It is a female measuring 480 mm snout–vent length, 525 mm total length. Characters of scalation were recorded according to Smith (1985) (Table 1). There are 253 ventrals, 48 subcaudals, and dorsal scale rows are 33–41–25. The scalation of the head is as follows: there are 10/10 supralabials with the fifth and sixth in contact with the lower margin of the orbit; 12/12 infralabials; two pairs of prefrontals with one smaller azygous scale on the midline; 4/5 loreals; 1/1 preocular; 3/3 postoculars; and 2/2 anterior temporals. The scale counts fall within the ranges reported for *A. maculosa* (Smith 1985). Barker

and Barker (1994) report an average ventral+subcaudal count of 317.5 in northern Australian populations and an average of 301.3 in southern populations. The ventral+subcaudal count for the Weam specimen is 301, which unexpectedly associates it with the more southern populations in Australia. According to David Barker (pers. comm.), the pattern of the specimen discovered at Weam resembles the inheritable appearance seen in some captive-bred spotted pythons known as the “granite phase.” We are not aware that this pattern type occurs in natural Australian populations of *A. maculosa*.

The presence of *Antaresia* in southwestern PNG provides further proof of the strong herpetofaunal links that exist between the southern Trans-Fly region of New Guinea and northern Australia. As recently as 10,000 years b.p. the two land masses were broadly joined by land, the Sahul Shelf, now submerged under the Torres Strait, allowing considerable interchange of floras and faunas. The overlap in reptile species has been well documented (Cogger 2000; De Rooij 1915; O'Shea 1996). Although the new specimen superficially differs in appearance from wild Australian *Antaresia maculosa*, presently there is insufficient reason to describe it as a new taxon because a) only one specimen was found and b) there

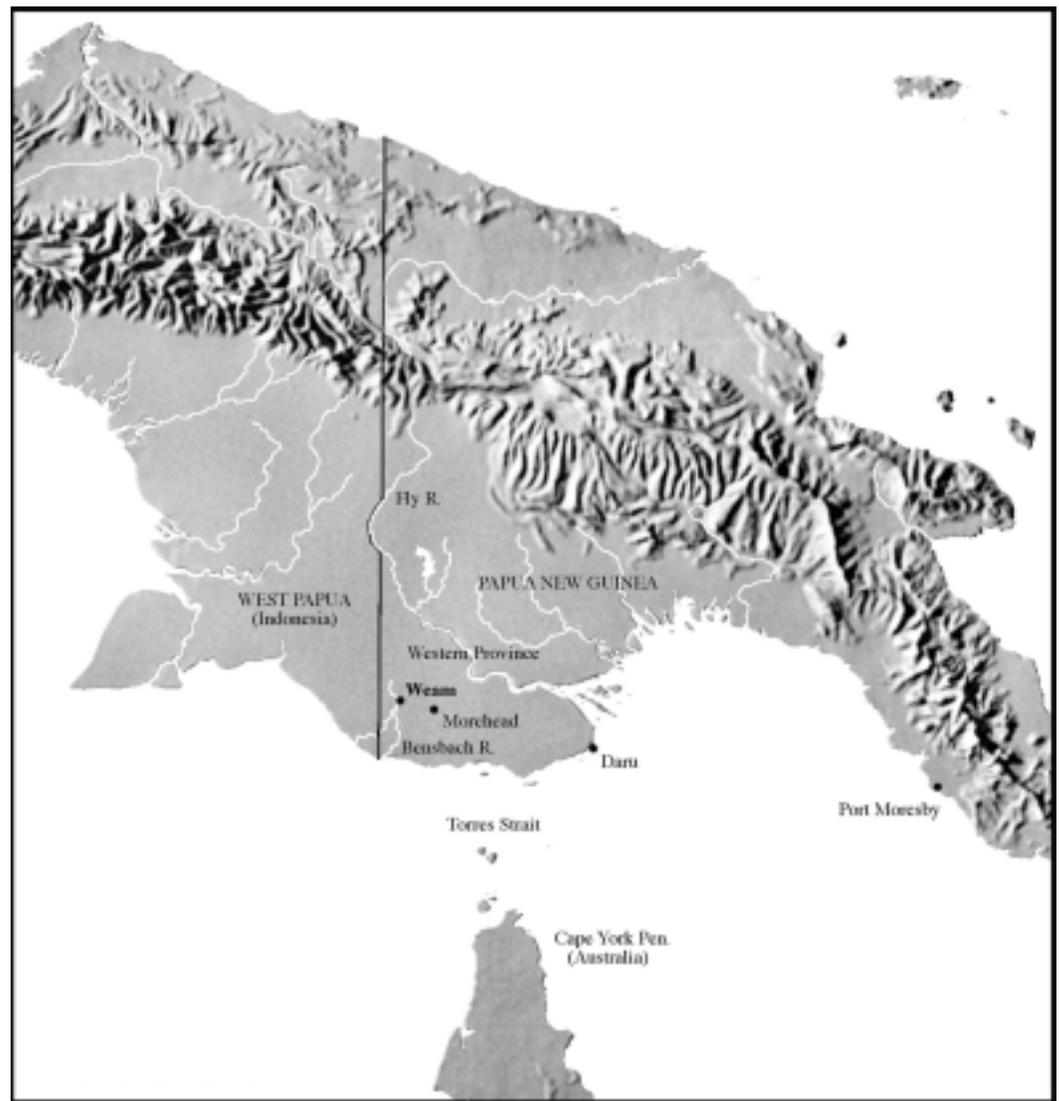


FIG. 1. Map of Papua New Guinea showing Weam (in bold) located in Western Province.



FIG. 2. Collection site of *Antaresia maculosa* at Weam Airstrip, Weam, Morehead District, Western Province, Papua New Guinea.

are strong zoogeographic links between Western Province, PNG and far northern Queensland. However this does not rule out the possibility that this New Guinea snake might represent a new species. Further fieldwork and DNA comparisons are needed to determine relationships of our specimen to those occurring in Queensland.

Many of the more remote areas of the Western Province of PNG remain poorly explored. The terrain is flat, heavily forested, and largely swampland or floodplain with numerous termite mounds, which makes fieldwork difficult. Weam is along the far western border of Papua New Guinea, near the Indonesian border and on the Bensbach River (Fig. 1). We were told that the airstrip has been closed for 10 years and had only been opened to facilitate our arrival and departure. Though August is generally dry season

FIG. 3. Specimen of *Antaresia maculosa* (PNGM 25085) from Weam, Western Province, Papua New Guinea. Top: dorsal view of head; lower: whole body view. Photos by Mark O'Shea.

TABLE 1. Comparison of features of *Antaresia maculosa* (based on Smith 1985) with the specimen of *A. cf. maculosa* from Weam, PNG.

Character	Australian <i>A. maculosa</i>	Weam specimen
Dorsal scales at neck	28–35	33
Dorsal scales at midbody	35–44	41
Dorsal scales at vent	22–28	25
Ventrals	246–287	253
Subcaudals	37–48	48
Ventrals + subcaudals	288–332	301
Supralabials	10–11 (11–12)	10
S/L contacting orbit	5th & 6th	5th & 6th
Infralabials	12–14	12
Pairs of prefrontals	2	2
Azygous scale present	variable	yes
Loreals	3–10	4–5
Preoculars	1	1
Postoculars	3–4 (2–5)	3
Anterior temporals	3–4 (3–5)	2
Dorsal coloration	yellow-brown to dark brown	olive brown
Dorsal pattern	irregular rough-edged spots	dark irregular, rough-edged spots arranged in transverse rows
Scale iridescence present	yes	yes
Ventral color	immaculate off-white	immaculate off-white merging to light yellow
Head coloration	brown with spotted markings posteriorly	as body with single or fused dark spots on every scute, dark canthal and temporal stripe and off-white labials below
Color of iris	brown to orange or gold	dark orange

in Western Province, the 2000 wet season lasted well into July. Nevertheless, humidity levels were moderate (50–60%), and the environment was generally dry and warm (29–31°C). Though we have no direct evidence of the diet of this python in PNG, there were numerous geckos (*Hemidactylus frenatus*) between the same metal sheets.

The live specimen was left in the live collection at the Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery under the care of Ilaiah Bigilale. It has subsequently died and been accessioned into the museum collection (PNGM 25085).

*Acknowledgments.*—The finding of this python was recorded at the moment of capture during the filming of an episode of “O’Shea’s Big Adventure” for Animal Planet. The episode, entitled “Tree Crocodile,” was first transmitted in the USA on 10 December 2000. We gratefully thank David Barker and Gerry Swan for their advice, the film crew from Yorkshire/Associated Producers, the owners and employees of Bensbach Lodge for support in the field, Central Air Transport, and the Tondo Wildlife Committee and Councillor Lucas Mahuse of Weam village for permission to carry out filming and fieldwork within the Tondo Wildlife Reserve area.

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