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Rediscovery of skink after a century

A STAFF REPORTER

Barak Valley



A four-keeled skink
 most diverse group of lizards, in the Barail hill range of Cachar.

Oct. 30: You may have spent many a lazy afternoon gazing at the antics of lizards or turned your face away in disgust watching them feast on their prey. But did you know there are more lizard species in this world than one can count?

Herpetologists are now going all out to discover more about the four-keeled skink (*Mabuya quadricarinata*), the

Nelson Annandale spotted the skink for the first time in Cachar in 1905. After more than a century, the first extensive herpetofaunal exploration to discover more about the species is under way in these parts.

The project — Diversity and Distribution of Herpetofauna and Evaluation of Conservation Status in Barail Hill Range — has been undertaken by Abhijit Das of Aaranyak. Rufford Foundation of the UK is funding the project while the Assam forest department and villagers residing on the fringes of the Barail Wildlife Sanctuary are providing logistical support.

Skinks are part of the scincidae family. The survey has recorded 57 species of reptiles and amphibians in the area comprising 19 species of snakes, 15 species of lizards, 20 species of frogs and three species of turtles and tortoises.

Skinks dwell in forest streams. "Since they are rare, little or no information is available on the natural habitat of this species," Das said.

"Most of Assam's lowland forests are on the verge of extinction. Hence this species is under grave threat of extinction. Saving these indicator species will mean saving the last remaining biological treasure trove of Assam much of which is yet to be explored and understood," he added.

The study has covered the lower elevation of the Barail Wildlife Sanctuary, fringe villages and tea gardens of the northernmost areas of Cachar. "More species of reptiles will be discovered once new ranges are covered," Das said.

Herpetologists have also found the Assamese water skink (*Tropidophorus assamensis*) for the first time in Assam after a gap of 90 years.

The trickle frog, a species of the genus *Occidozyga*, has also been sighted in the region. "The species has derived its name from its favoured habitat, near or on rocks from where water trickles down," Das said.

The survey found two species enlisted in the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species — Asian giant tortoise (*Manouria emys*) and keeled box turtle (*Pyxidea mouhotii*) — during field trips.



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