

Taxonomic status of the Yellow-Headed Agama, *Laudakia nupta fusca* (Blanford, 1876) (Sauria: Agamidae)

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Abstract. The taxonomic status of *Laudakia nupta fusca* (Blanford, 1876) is reevaluated using metric, meristic and qualitative characters of adults and juveniles of the Iranian populations and comparative material of *L. nupta nupta* (de Filippi, 1843). Two juveniles of *fusca*, and two adults and one juvenile of *nupta*, were collected from Kuh-e Bang, east of Bandar-e Genave, Bushehr province, southern Iran, which proved to be the contact zone of *fusca* and *nupta*. Morphological analyses show rigorous separation in the distinguishing meristic features, position of the nostril openings, the tail length and most details of the colouration of these subspecies in their contact zone as well as in other parts of their range. Several diagnostic differences are also shown. Based on the co-occurrence of these subspecies in Kuh-e Bang and morphological clues for their reproductive isolation at this site, they are recognised as full species.

Key words. Taxonomy, systematics, evolution, contact zones, zoogeography, Middle East.

Introduction

The Yellow-Headed Agama, *Laudakia nupta fusca* (Blanford, 1876), is one of the most controversially discussed taxa of the genus *Laudakia*. In spite of the noteworthy amount of work that has been done on the biogeography and taxonomy of this taxon, it still is one of the least known lizards of the Iranian Plateau, apparently because it is a very shy and rare lizard. For many years, the distribution of *L. n. fusca* was thought to be limited to its type localities in the vicinity of Jalq and near Kalagan, Baluchistan, until MINTON (1966) reported the occurrence of this lizard in the northern hills of Karachi. Subsequent studies showed that this taxon occurs throughout the whole of Baluchistan (KHAN & MIRZA 1977) and resulted in the hypothesis that it is endemic to this area (KHAN 1980). However, additional investigations extended the range of the taxon to Kalabag in northwestern Punjab (KHAN 2002), which is still its northernmost occurrence. Within Iranian borders, it has been collected in several sites in Baluchistan (near Jalq, near Kalagan, Jamchin Valley and Murtians Valley) and on the coastal plain of the Persian Gulf, such as Lavar Jahvash and near the Mond protected area (MAHJOORAZAD et al. 2005).

The taxonomic status of this taxon has also been changed several times since 1876, when BLANFORD described two specimens from eastern Baluchistan, Iran. These specimens differed from all other specimens of *L. n. nupta* (de Filippi, 1843) in their very dark colouration, lack of the nuchal fold, and the scales of this area which are not quite as minute as in the typical form. He was dubious about the specific status of this form and mentioned that the dark colouration and the absence of the cutaneous fold across the nape could be due to seasonal and environmental changes, and so he described this form as a subspecies of *L. nupta* (Blanford, 1876). Subsequently, BOULENGER (1885) validated the subspecific status of