New snake found in Western Ghats

Bhupathy’s shieldtail has been observed only in the Anaikatty Hills of Tamil Nadu
Just 40 cm long and iridescent brown, Bhupathy’s shieldtail is the latest addition to the snake fauna of the Western Ghats.
The snake, currently observed only in the forests of the Anaikatty hills in Tamil Nadu’s Coimbatore district, has been named Uropeltis bhupathyi, after the late herpetologist S. Bhupathy, for his contributions to the field.
The reptile belongs to a family of snakes found only in peninsular India and Sri Lanka. They are non-venomous, burrowing and mostly earthworm-eating, and are called shieldtails after the large, flat tips of their tails, which make them appear almost sliced off.
Researchers had seen this snake earlier during surveys, but it was wrongly identified as another more commonly-seen shieldtail, says researcher Jins V.J., who discovered the snake.
Mr. Jins, who was formerly with the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Coimbatore, had collected specimens of the snake, and in the course of examining its morphology, he counted the minute body scales on its ventral or belly side — which is usually how such snakes are identified — and compared them to other similar-looking shieldtails across India. “The new species had more than 200 scales,” he said. “This was its most characteristic distinguishing feature.”
During a discussion with shieldtail taxonomy experts at London’s Museum of Natural History in 2016, Mr. Jins realised he could be looking at a new species. He and his colleagues then compared their specimens with those in museums and collections across both Europe and India, and analysed the new shieldtail’s DNA, which confirmed that it was a hitherto unknown species.
A study announcing the discovery was published in Zootaxa. The discovery takes the number of known species of shieldtails in India to 41. The country is home to more than 300 snake species. Varad Giri, a herpetologist who has a snake species named after him, says, “The advent of molecular phylogenetics [DNA-based studies] and dedicated field surveys have played a huge role in these discoveries.”