

Reptilia, Amphisbaenidae, *Monopeltis schoutedeni* de Witte, 1933: First record from Gabon, with an updated key to Gabonese worm lizards

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Abstract. The amphisbaenian *Monopeltis schoutedeni* is reported for the first time from Gabon, here from a single individual from the extreme southwestern part of the country. The species was formerly known only from the Congo (de Witte) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (L). In the 4th amphisbaenian and the 123rd reptile species recorded from Gabon, an identification key to Gabonese amphisbaenians is provided.

The amphisbaenian fauna of Gabon is so far known to include three species belonging to the Amphisbaenidae: the endemic *Gerrhonotus* *Agassizii* (Boulenger, 1906) and *G. Anjo* (Mocquard, 1904), and the non-endemic *Monopeltis gabana* (Hallowell, 1852) (Pavesza and Vande weghe 2005). All three species occur in the coastal lowland rainforests of Gabon, *Monopeltis gabana* being also known from coastal (eastern Equatorial Guinea and Congo) island (Gans and Kuhn 1973). While *Monopeltis gabana* is relatively common in western Gabon, having been found near sea level in the provinces of Estuaire, Moyen-Océan and Ogooué-Maritime provinces, *Gerrhonotus* *Agassizii* is still known only from its holotype, as was *G. Anjo* until its recent rediscovery, a century after its original description (Brazner et al. 2009). The two latter *Gerrhonotus* species are known only from Moyen-Océan and Ogooué-Maritime provinces, respectively (Pavesza and Vande weghe 2005). *Monopeltis schoutedeni* (Witte, 1933) was erroneously cited from Gabon and subsequently deleted from the national reptile list (see Pauwels and Vande weghe 2008), but its presence in Gabon is actually biogeographically possible.

No amphisbaenian was thus recorded from the interior of Gabon until one of us (JLA) collected on January 25th, 2009 one individual 31 km north-east of Libreville (also spelled *Liboré*), Département des Plateaux, Haut-Ogooué Province, in extreme northwestern Gabon. It was found while it was rapidly crawling on a sandy road at around 03:00 p. m. in sunny conditions in a savanna area. The specimen was preserved in 70% ethanol and integrated in the herpetological collections of the Institut Royal des Etudes Supérieures de Biologie, under the number RSNB 17948. It shows a depressed snout with a sharp horizontal edge, nostrils placed in small nasal scales on the lower snout surface, and longitudinally enlarged leg scales on the ventral region, as is typical for the genus *Monopeltis*.

The dorsal head surface is heavily keratinized and shows two large, broad shields and a pair of outcrops (Figure 1). The rostral scale is small, the eye is

indistinguishable (Figure 2). The ventral surface of the snout and borders the nostrils; the nostrils are elongate but do not reach the prenostrals (Figure 3). There are three supraorbital, the second of which is the longest and the third the highest. The mental scale is small, the postmental is large, in contact with the first and second suborbitals.



Figure 1. Dorsal view of head of *Monopeltis schoutedeni* (RSNB 17948) from near Liboré, Gabon.



Figure 2. Ventral view of head of *Monopeltis schoutedeni* (RSNB 17948) from near Liboré, Gabon.

There are 2 *trifurcatis* on each side, the posterior one being much larger than the two anterior ones. There are 1 *quadriclatis*, the outer ones in contact with the second and third *trifurcatis*. There are 6 parallel peroral plates. The two median ventral segments are about two and a half times as broad as long. The snout-vent length is 215 mm, the tail length 94 mm, and the tail thin represents 12% of the total length of 309 mm. The snout body diameter is 18 mm. There are 209 body annuli from the first one following the peroral plates to the pre-bearing annulus, the latter excluded is the extent (ventrally to the first annulus) of the anal opening (Figure 4). There are substantially 0 lateral annular areas bordering the peroral plates, i.e. a total number of body annuli of 277. There is a total of 12 preanal pores, arranged in a continuous left series of 6 separated by two rings, another series from a central to the right series of 6 (Figure 5). There are 20 tail annuli (terminal one not retained) (Figure 6). All these characters adequately fit the description of *Mesaspis schweileri* de Wit, 1933 by de Wit (1933), Loveridge (1941) and Gans and Lichten (1973).

The new specimen is easily distinguished from *Mesaspis gabrieli* and *M. papillata* (see Table 5) by Gans and Lichten (1973) by its high number of body and caudal annuli, and its high number of preanal pores (pores absent in *M. papillata*), its high number of body and tail annuli, and of preanal pores also (precludes an identification as *Mesaspis gabrieli*: Boulenger, 1895, a closely related and sympatric species).



FIGURE 3. Snout head view of *Mesaspis schweileri* (BMNH 19948) from near Gabon, Gabon.



FIGURE 4. Side of ventral body of *Mesaspis schweileri* (BMNH 19948) from near Gabon, Gabon.



FIGURE 5. Close-up view of *Mesaspis schweileri* (BMNH 19948) from near Gabon, Gabon.

The closest locality from where *Mesaspis schweileri* is known is '2432' (see Gans and Lichten 1973), situated at 01°48'56" N, 10°45'27" E in the Casamance Region of the Republic of Congo, at ca. 50 km east of the new Gabonese locality. The type locality of the species, 'Wassanga' (located in Gans and Lichten 1973), in Democratic Republic of Congo, is ca. 250 km east – southeast of the Gabonese locality.

Updated identification key to Gabon Amphibians (modified from Broadley 2008; body annuli numbers for *Mesaspis* following Gans and Lichten (1973) counting method, thus including the anterior lateral annuli bordering the peroral plates):

- 2a. Snout rounded, without a sharp horizontal edge; nasal pores laterally; segments of the preanal region not differentiated; tail annuli 25–27 2 (*Cyrtopogon*)
 2b. Snout depressed with a sharp horizontal edge; nasal pores on a small basal or lateral surface of snout; segments of the preanal region longitudinally enlarged; tail annuli 35–26 5 (*Mesaspis*)
- 2c. Occular shield strongly 225–240; body annuli 4–10; preanal pores anterior side at 11° caudal vertebrae *Uroeca* 10 (*Pentadactylus*)
 2d. Occular shield fused to labials; preanal and prefrontal 281; body annuli on preanal pores anterior side at 7° caudal vertebrae *Cyrtopogon*
- 2e. Body annuli 218–232; preanal pores 0 (ventral) / 2, rarely 3 (subventral); caudal annuli 15–20
 *Mesaspis gabrieli*
 2f. Body annuli 273–289; preanal pores 0–15; caudal annuli 25–29
 *Mesaspis schweileri*

The photographs presented here are the first of a live individual of *Mesaspis schweileri*. It is to be noted here that due to an editorial mistake, the photograph shown in Essau (2005), taken by the French ichthyologist Sébastien Lavrenç in Lake M'Poko (Ogooué-M'Poko Province, Gabon) and used to represent a *Cyrtopogon* (from which name it derives) is in fact of *Mesaspis gabrieli* (both species live in same locality at that locality). Sébastien's Worm lizard is the 120th reptile species documented to date from Gabon (Péron and Vences 2008).

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