

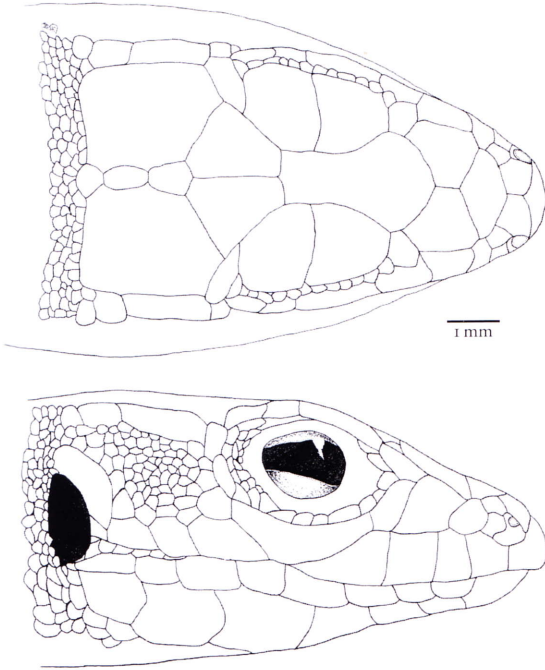
Ophisops elegans MÉNÉTRIÉS, 1832
Snake-eyed Lizard

Grk. – Αλιζάβρα (Alizávra), Σιελεντρούνα (Sielentroúna)

Trk. – Tarla Kertenkelesi, Yılan Gözlü Kertenkele

Taxonomy. As with *Acanthodactylus*, GÜNTHER (1879) was the first to mention *Ophisops* for Cyprus. He designated the Cyprus form as *Ophisops elegans*. One year later, BÖTTGER (1880) described the snake-eyed lizard of the neighbourhood of “Beyrut in Syrien und [von] der Insel Cypern” (p. 178) [Beirut in Syria and from the island of Cyprus] as a new species: *Ophisops Schlueteri*, named after the natural produce trader (“Naturalienhändler”) WILHELM SCHLÜTER (Halle an der Saale), who donated 165 Syrian and Cyprus reptiles to OSKAR BÖTTGER. BÖTTGER did not explicitly designate a holotype for his new species. At first glance, it is not clear whether his description was primarily based on Cyprus or Syrian specimens. However, in his Latin diagnosis of the new species the biometric values of his specimen No. 1 (SMF 13841) are given, which, consequently, represents the lectotype. The terra typica of BÖTTGER’s new species can be restricted to its original locality: Cyprus (cp. MERTENS & WERMUTH 1960). BOULENGER (1888) regarded *Ophisops schlueteri* merely as a subspecies of *Ophisops elegans*, since the characters by which it was described (scale rows around midbody, number of femoral pores) varied too much in his opinion. DAREWSKIJ & BEUTLER (1981) and OSENEGG (1989) considered *Ophisops elegans schlueteri* BÖTTGER, 1880 to be a valid subspecies endemic to Cyprus.

Diagnosis. BÖTTGER (1880: 176) diagnosed “*Ophisops Schlueteri*” in contrast to *Ophisops elegans* as follows (translated from Latin): Dorsals twice smaller; head broader; snout duller; throat furrow discrete; collar “subperfecto”; 13–14 femoral pores; rather long occipital scale, equally broad anteriorly and posteriorly; olive grey; two green lateral stripes and a greenish dotted body; greenish-white underside; total length 112.5 mm; length of head 9.5 mm; length of carcass 27.5 mm; length of tail 75.5 mm; length of the biggest toe of the foot [i. e., length of the fourth toe] 10 mm. According to DAREWSKIJ & BEUTLER (1981), *Ophisops elegans schlueteri* can be diagnosed and separated from *O. e. elegans* (Caucasus, far eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northern and central Iran), *O. e. ehrenbergii* (southeastern Europe, western Turkey, locally also southern Turkey, Turkish-Syrian border area, Levant), *O. e. basoglui* (area of Alanya, Turkey), *O. e. centralanatoliae* (central and partially eastern and southern Turkey), and *O. e. blanfordi* (southeastern Iraq, southwestern Iran) with the following characteristics: two post-nasals on both sides, vertebral stripe usually absent, about 43 (38–49) scales around midbody, 12–14 femoral pores, about 75 (50–104) temporal scales.



Figs. 121–122:
 Head scalation of a
 snake-eyed lizard
 (*Ophisops elegans schlueteri*).
 Specimen collected in “Cyprus”
 (lectotype SMF 13841).
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Description. This is a small lizard growing up to a total length of 150–160 mm. Males have a snout-vent length of 40 to 50.2 mm, females of 37 to app. 47 mm (occasionally even up to 50 mm). Its two transparent eyelids are fused together so the lizard cannot blink or close its eyes. This morphological structure explains the lizard’s common name.

The pileus scales are smooth, except for the frontal which has a median furrow. There are usually two more or less square supratemporals which can be easily distinguished from the 45 to 116 considerably smaller temporals. Single supratemporals sometimes occur (BOULENGER 1920). There are 9 to 18 supraciliar granula. The subocular is in very narrow contact with the mouth. *Ophisops elegans schlueteri* has a comparatively well developed collar. The number of scale rows around the midbody is 38 to 49, with 31 to 44 longitudinal rows of dorsals. The dorsals are separated from the lateral and ventral scales by marginal scale rows. There are about 10 to 15 femoral pores. The fourth toe has 22 to 26 subdigital lamellae.

Two yellow dorsolateral stripes run along the body (Figs. 124 and 127). During the mating season the male develops an intense yellow colouration along the chin, throat, and under-body (Figs. 123, 125 and 128) and a very bright lateral blueish stripe. The under-body is generally pale greyish to whitish. The centre of the back is greenish to brownish.



Fig. 123: Snake-eyed lizard (*Ophisops elegans schlueteri*), male in breeding colours, Paralimni, March.

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Fig. 124: Female snake-eyed lizard (*Ophisops elegans schlueteri*), Snake George Reptile Park, Pegoia, October.

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Fig. 125: Throat of a male snake-eyed lizard (*Ophisops elegans schlueteri*), near Agros, May.

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Distribution. This species is encountered widely in Cyprus. WERNER (1936) reported that it can be found at altitudes up to 4,000 ft. (ca. 1,220 m) (cp. BIRKENMEIER 1953). CLARK (1973) mentioned that he found a single specimen at 5,300 ft. (ca. 1,615 m). The lizards are also found on the highest peaks of the Keryneia Range, i.e. on the Kyparissovouno near Lapta (1,025 m asl.) (pers. obs.). DAREWSKIJ & BEUTLER (1981) reported that European and western Anatolian populations (including the southern Anatolian subspecies *O. e. basoglui*) are restricted to lower altitudes while this species is supposed to reach heights of 3,000 m in Iran. The distribution of *Ophisops elegans schlueteri* in Cyprus is shown in Fig. 126.

Biogeographic classification. Palaearctic: East Mediterranean to Irano-Turanian.

Ecology. *Ophisops elegans* is "ohne Zweifel ... das weitverbreitetste und häufigste Reptil" (SCHÄTTI & SIGG 1989b: 20) [without any doubt the most widespread and abundant reptile] of Cyprus. SCHÄTTI & SIGG (1989b) observed this species everywhere except in the alpine zone above 1,800 m and in dense forest areas. In general, however, it is noticeable that the snake-eyed lizard lives in rather drier habitats (cp. "prefers steppes", ATATÜR & GÖÇMEN 2001: 43). Its peculiar eye morphology may be an adaptation to the dusty and sandy conditions in the lizard's preferred habitat. *Ophisops elegans* can be found on stony, terraced hillsides vegetated with spiny bushes and Rosaceae (pers. obs.). It lives at the edge of the salt lake in Larnaka where the lizards find shelter in fields of *Salicornia* sp. and halophilous grasses (OSENEGG 1989). OSENEGG had the im-

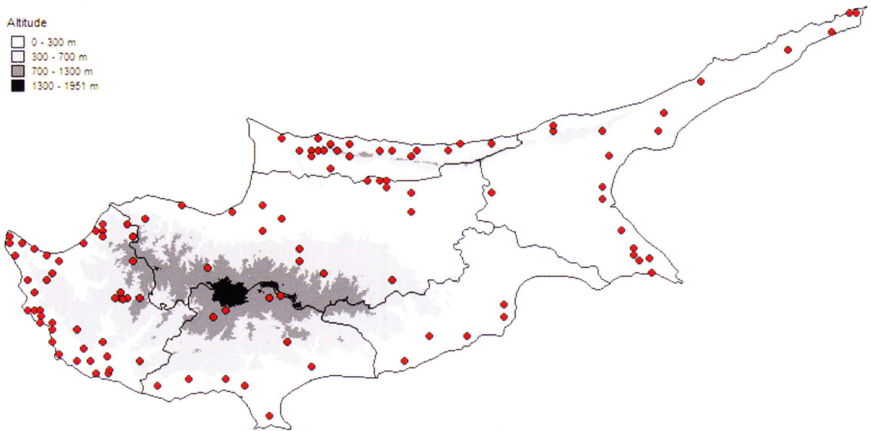


Fig. 126: Distribution of the snake-eyed lizard (*Ophisops elegans schlueteri*) in Cyprus.



Fig. 127: Female snake-eyed lizard (*Ophisops elegans schlueteri*), Chlorakas, April.

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Fig. 128: Male snake-eyed lizard (*Ophisops elegans schlueteri*), May, for habitat see Fig. 130.

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Fig. 129: Newborn snake-eyed lizard (*Ophisops elegans schlueteri*), Kioneli, June. F. BAIER

pression that the lizards use a mosaic of single structures (small thornbushes, clumps of grass, stones, ...) for shelter and will thus also occur in pine Macchia, goat-grazed Trachiotis, and vineyards. ZIEGLER & MERTEN (1997a) observed the animals mainly in well covered, dry areas. The lizards often bask on sandy path edges, similar to *Acanthodactylus schreiberi* (OSENEGG 1989, cp. GÖÇMEN *et al.* 1996b). BÖRNER in OSENEGG (1989) found *Ophisops elegans* at vegetated dams and similar semiarid habitats but never in moister habitats. Our own observations confirm that these lizards also occur in the vicinity of moist habitats, e.g. streams and small water accumulations (see also OSENEGG 1989), though, of course, dry habitats are clearly preferred. CLARK (1973) mentioned finding an *Ophisops elegans* in the area next to a stream in open coniferous forest at 1,615 m asl. Like OSENEGG (1989), we have only rarely seen snake-eyed lizards at the base of stone walls. Our personal observations further suggest that *Ophisops elegans*, when occurring sympatrically with *Phoenicolacerta troodica*, prefers open, exposed sites while the Troodos lizard stays in more covered, hidden places.

Ophisops elegans schlueteri mainly feeds on spiders, flies, beetles and ants (pers. obs.). For example, we disturbed a snake-eyed lizard devouring its prey near a Troodos stream, and eventually found it to be a queen of *Lasius umbratus* (Hymenoptera: Formicidae) (det. RAQUÉ, pers. comm.).



Fig. 130: Habitat of the snake-eyed lizard (*Ophisops elegans schlueteri*), Agios Ilarion castle, south of Keryneia.
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Fig. 131: Habitat of the snake-eyed lizard (*Ophisops elegans schlueteri*), around Agros.
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The mating season starts in February/March (BÖRNER in OSENEGG 1989). Cited after SCHÄTTI & SIGG (1989b), BÖRNER reported finding a gravid female of *Ophisops elegans schlueteri* during winter time. A seasonally independent reproduction cycle, however, is improbable, though of course the Mediterranean winter does not last long and some lizards are also active during winter time (BÖRNER in OSENEGG 1989, pers. obs.). BÖRNER's observation would thus have to be explained by a heavily delayed development and hibernation of the eggs in the body cavity of the female. OSENEGG (1989) concluded that the lizards hibernate only when the weather is cold locally, and should otherwise be considered as being active circaannually. LAMBERT (1987) found a semi-adult lizard in the Troodos Mountains in 1,500 m asl. in mid November during the early afternoon in the bright sun though it had snowed the week before and it was cool.

Typical clutch size is two to six eggs (ATATÜR & GÖÇMEN 2001), and normally three or occasionally four clutches are laid per year (pers. obs.).

Ophisops elegans schlueteri occurs in sympatry with e.g. *Acanthodactylus schreiberi*, *Phoenicolacerta troodica* and *Laudakia stellio*. At Agros dam, the lizards occur in syntopy with *A. schreiberi*.

Hierophis cypriensis has been confirmed as a predator (BÖHME & WIEDL 1994). We found four tail fragments (10, 18, 20 and 35 mm in length) of *O. e. schlueteri* in the cast (40 to 50 mm in length) of a bird of prey (central Troodos Mountains), besides the remains of a *Mus musculus praetextus*.

The snake-eyed lizard is not listed in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN 2007).

Behaviour. Although WERNER (1936) reported that the lizards can be easily caught, snake-eyed lizards are lively and versatile animals carefully observing their environment. They are always ready to flee. If disturbed they will first flee short distances, only taking shelter if further disturbed.

Where the animals occur, they are present in very large numbers (EWALD 1984a). OSENEGG (1989) counted the autotomised tails of Cyprus specimens of *Ophisops elegans* preserved in the Zoologisches Forschungsmuseum Koenig (ZFMK), Bonn. Out of 33 specimens, 17 (51.5%) had a complete and nine (27.3%) a regenerated tail. Six animals (18.2%) lacked a part of their tail. Intraspecific quarrels are probably solved by ritualised behavioural patterns so that autotomy rarely occurs (BISCHOFF 1974).

A male that is willing to mate will shake its head up and down, just above the ground. If the female shows interest, the male will carefully approach with many pauses, and finally the female may allow fertilisation by the male. *Ophisops elegans* is a thermophilous lizard. We often observed this lizard even at midday during high temperatures, when most other reptiles stayed in the shade.