

Reptiles of Tripura, Northeastern India: A Review of Diversity, Distribution, Taxonomic Advances, and Conservation Status

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Abstract

Tripura, India's smallest northeastern state (10,491 km²), is part of the globally important Indo-Burma hotspot of biodiversity (Jenkins et al. 2013) and, in spite of its small size and having few, generally small hills ranging in altitude from 30-100m (Purkayastha et al. 2020) has a reptile fauna which seems disproportionately large to its size, largely due to its river networks and patches of semi-evergreen and moist-deciduous forest remaining within the state. This review summarizes the existing literature on reptile fauna of Tripura from the first account compiled for the state up to latest reported taxonomic records. Early state-wide surveys reported 38 reptile species from fresh fieldwork alone (18 snakes, 17 lizards and 3 turtles), with 26 taxa recognised as new state records at the time (Majumder et al. 2012), while a later, spatially restricted survey of the 0.86 km² Rowa Wildlife Sanctuary alone recorded 33 reptile species across nine families (Purkayastha et al. 2020) — a discrepancy that points to substantial historical undersampling of the state. Taxonomic work between 2015 and 2026 has meaningfully revised this picture: molecular-assisted description of two endemic bent-toed geckos, *Cyrtodactylus tripuraensis* (Agarwal et al. 2018) and the micro-endemic *Cyrtodactylus jayadityai* (Bohra et al. 2026), together with a run of new state or district records for snakes — *Calotes emma* (Majumder & Agarwala 2015), *Boiga gocool* (Nath et al. 2021), *Ferania sieboldii* (Deb et al. 2023), *Trimeresurus salazar* (Chowdhury et al. 2024), *Sinomicrurus gorei* and *Pareas monticola* (Deb et al. 2024a, b) — has added at least eight taxa to the known fauna within a single decade. Freshwater turtles, several of which are assessed by the IUCN as Endangered or Vulnerable and are listed under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, nonetheless face an open and largely unregulated meat trade in Agartala's urban markets. This review synthesizes taxonomic composition, the herpetofaunal significance of Tripura's protected areas (Sepahijala, Trishna, Gumti and Rowa Wildlife Sanctuaries), principal anthropogenic threats, and priority directions for future survey and conservation effort, and argues that Tripura remains among the least herpetologically surveyed states of northeastern India.

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1. Introduction

The state of Tripura occupies a geographic area of 10,486 km², approximately 0.31% of India's total land area, and is bordered by Bangladesh on the north, west, south and southeast, and shares its remaining boundary with the Indian states of Assam and Mizoram (Purkayastha et al. 2020). Together with the other six states of India's northeastern region, Tripura forms part of the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot, an area recognised for exceptionally high species richness and endemism across vertebrate groups, including reptiles, and for the severity of ongoing habitat loss within it (CEPF 2025). Hilly terrain arranged in a series of roughly north–south trending ranges, interspersed with cultivated valleys, seasonal wetlands and

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remnant patches of semi-evergreen and moist-deciduous forest, gives the state a heterogeneous mosaic of habitats capable of supporting a rich, though historically poorly documented, herpetofauna (Purkayastha et al. 2020).

Herpetological exploration of Tripura has lagged well behind that of neighbouring Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram. The first substantial, consolidated documentation of the state's amphibians and reptiles was published only in 2012, when a state-wide field survey combined with a review of scattered literature yielded 55 species of herpetofauna, including 38 reptiles (18 snakes, 17 lizards and 3 turtles), of which 26 taxa were recorded as new to the state (Majumder et al. 2012). In the years since, a combination of protected-area-specific inventories, opportunistic natural-history notes, and, increasingly, integrative taxonomic studies employing molecular data has begun to reveal a reptile fauna considerably richer, and taxonomically more complex, than these early figures suggested. This review draws together this scattered body of work — spanning state checklists, protected-area surveys, new species descriptions, and new distributional records published through 2026 — into a single synthesis of the taxonomic composition, protected-area context, and conservation status of the reptiles of Tripura, and identifies the gaps that continued undersampling has left in our understanding of this fauna.

2. Approach and Sources

This review is based on a synthesis of the peer-reviewed and grey literature dealing specifically with the reptile fauna of Tripura and, where directly relevant, with adjoining parts of northeastern India and the wider Indo-Burma hotspot. Sources include state-wide faunal documentation (Majumder et al. 2012), protected-area checklists (Purkayastha et al. 2020), taxonomic descriptions of new species (Agarwal et al. 2018; Bohra et al. 2026), short natural-history notes reporting new state or district records (Majumder & Agarwala 2015; Nath et al. 2021; Deb et al. 2023, 2024a, b; Chowdhury et al. 2024), regional checklists that synthesise distributional records across northeastern India (Basfore et al. 2024), and conservation-status information drawn from IUCN Red List species accounts and investigative reporting on the wildlife trade. Scientific names and higher classification generally follow the source publications cited; where a species has been referred to by more than one generic combination in the literature reviewed (for example, *Nilssonia hurum*, previously placed in *Aspideretes*), the currently accepted combination is used and the synonymy is noted where relevant.

3. Taxonomic Composition

3.1 Order Testudines — Turtles and Terrapins

Turtles form a small but disproportionately threatened component of Tripura's reptile fauna. Majumder et al. (2012) recorded three turtle species during their state-wide survey. Subsequent work at Rowa Wildlife Sanctuary and in Agartala's fish markets identified the Indian peacock softshell turtle, *Nilssonia hurum*, and the Indian flapshell turtle, *Lissemys punctata andersoni*, as the two species most heavily represented in the region's flesh trade (Purkayastha et al. 2020). Both taxa are listed under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, according the highest level of legal protection available under Indian law, and both are assessed by the IUCN as threatened at the global level — *N. hurum* as Endangered and *L. punctata* as Vulnerable (IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group 2010; IUCN 2024). Additional freshwater turtle species occurring more broadly in the Ganges–Brahmaputra floodplain and adjoining hill systems, such as *Nilssonia gangetica* and *Chitra indica*, are similarly targeted across the wider region for meat and for the calipee (cartilaginous shell-rim) trade (Krishnakumar et al. 2009),

although species-specific confirmation for Tripura itself is limited in the reviewed literature and would benefit from targeted survey.

3.2 Order Squamata, Suborder Sauria — Lizards

Lizards recorded from Tripura span several families, including Gekkonidae, Agamidae, Scincidae and Varanidae, among others; Majumder et al. (2012) documented 17 lizard species during their state-wide survey, and the Rowa Wildlife Sanctuary checklist alone recorded 33 reptile species across nine families, with the Bengal monitor, *Varanus bengalensis*, noted as the largest lizard encountered during that survey (Purkayastha et al. 2020). The known lizard fauna has continued to grow through new distributional and taxonomic work. Majumder & Agarwala (2015) reported *Calotes emma* for the first time from Tripura, based on specimens from Srirampur and Homnapui, extending the known Southeast Asian range of the species. More significantly, integrative taxonomic studies combining morphology with mitochondrial DNA sequence data have revealed that Tripura harbours at least two micro-endemic bent-toed geckos of the genus *Cyrtodactylus*. *Cyrtodactylus tripuraensis* was described by Agarwal et al. (2018) on the basis of specimens collected chiefly from the Gomati and Sepahijala districts, and — alongside subsequent country records from Bangladesh — remains one of relatively few reptile species currently regarded as substantially restricted to Tripura and its immediate cross-border surroundings. A second, genetically distinct species, *Cyrtodactylus jayadityai*, was described by Bohra et al. (2026) from lowland forest patches in North Tripura district; it differs from its sister species *C. tripuraensis* by a mitochondrial genetic divergence of roughly 4.7–5.2%, occupies an estimated range of only 8–12 km², is nocturnal, and is currently assessed as Data Deficient owing to its very recent description and narrow known distribution.

3.3 Order Squamata, Suborder Serpentes — Snakes

Snakes constitute the most speciose and most actively documented group within Tripura's reptile fauna. Majumder et al. (2012) reported 18 snake species during their state-wide survey, a figure that has since been substantially supplemented by a series of new state and district records published between 2020 and 2024. Nath et al. (2021) documented the Eastern (Arrowback) Cat Snake, *Boiga gocool*, for the first time in Tripura, based on a specimen observed near the Khowai river bridge in Khowai district. Deb et al. (2023) recorded Siebold's Watersnake, *Ferania sieboldii*, from the bank of the River Gomati in Udaipur town, where the snake was observed preying on a bata fish (*Labeo bata*). Chowdhury et al. (2024) confirmed the presence of Salazar's Pitviper, *Trimeresurus salazar* — a species first described from Arunachal Pradesh in 2020 and since recorded across much of northeastern India — in Tripura. Deb, Basfore & Purkayastha reported the first confirmed state record of Gore's Coral Snake, *Sinomicrurus gorei* (2024a), and a new district record for the Assam Snail-eater, *Pareas monticola*, from Dhalai district (2024b). A regional synthesis of snake distribution across northeastern India estimates the region as a whole to hold approximately 126 snake species across 46 genera and 12 families, and notes that, following the confirmation of *Boiga cyanea* from Manipur, Tripura remains the only northeastern state from which that species has yet to be recorded — itself an indication of how much basic distributional work remains outstanding for the state (Basfore et al. 2024).

3.4 Order Crocodylia

No confirmed, currently extant wild population of any crocodilian has been documented from Tripura in the literature reviewed for this synthesis. The mugger crocodile, *Crocodylus palustris*, is recognised as

part of India's broader reptile fauna and Schedule I protected species list (Zoological Survey of India 2023), and historical or anecdotal occurrence in Tripura's larger river systems cannot be ruled out, but a dedicated, verifiable record for the state was not located during this review. This represents a specific and readily testable gap that future survey work in Tripura's larger riverine and wetland systems could usefully address.

4. Synthesis of Documented Reptile Records

Table 1 summarises the principal published sources of reptile records for Tripura reviewed in this paper, illustrating both the cumulative growth of the known fauna and the markedly uneven spatial and temporal coverage of survey effort across the state.

Table 1. Principal published sources documenting the reptile fauna of Tripura.

Study / Source	Area covered	Reptile taxa reported	Notes
Majumder, Bhattacharjee, Majumdar, Debnath & Agarwala (2012)	State-wide (literature + field survey)	38 reptile species from new fieldwork (18 snakes, 17 lizards, 3 turtles); a further literature-based checklist section of the same paper lists larger cumulative totals for the state	26 species reported as new state records; 55 total herpetofauna species (with amphibians) recorded during the survey
Purkayastha, Khan & Roychoudhury (2020)	Rowa Wildlife Sanctuary (0.86 km ²)	33 reptile species, 9 families	Smallest of Tripura's four wildlife sanctuaries; open turtle-meat trade documented in Agartala markets during the survey
Majumder & Agarwala (2015)	Srirampur & Homnapui localities	1 species (<i>Calotes emma</i>)	First state record; range extension for the species in Southeast Asia
Agarwal, Mahony, Giri, Chaitanya & Bauer (2018)	Gomati & Sepahijala districts	1 species (<i>Cyrtodactylus tripuraensis</i> , described new)	First endemic gecko described specifically from Tripura
Nath, Singh, Debnath & Majumder (2021)	Khowai river, Khowai district	1 species (<i>Boiga gocoool</i>)	First state record of the Eastern/Arrowback Cat Snake
Deb, Karmakar & Purkayastha (2023)	Udaipur town, Gomati river	1 species (<i>Ferania sieboldii</i>)	First state record of Siebold's Watersnake
Chowdhury, Deb & Purkayastha (2024)	Tripura (locality per original report)	1 species (<i>Trimeresurus salazar</i>)	First state record of Salazar's Pitviper
Deb, Basfore & Purkayastha (2024a)	Tripura	1 species (<i>Sinomicrurus gorei</i>)	First confirmed state record of Gore's Coral Snake
Deb, Basfore & Purkayastha (2024b)	Dhalai district	1 species (<i>Pareas monticola</i>)	New district/state record of the Assam Snail-eater
Bohra, Deb, Thongni, Bhattacharjee, Biakzuala, Lalremsanga, Swargiary & Roy (2026)	Lowland forests, North Tripura district	1 species (<i>Cyrtodactylus jayadityai</i> , described new)	Micro-endemic; restricted range of ~8–12 km ² ; currently Data Deficient

5. Protected Areas and Their Herpetofaunal Significance

There are 4 wildlife sanctuaries in Tripura- Sepahijala, Trishna, Gumti, and Rowa- only one of them, Rowa, is very small at only 0.86 sq km (Purkayastha et al. 2020). Notwithstanding the fact that it is so small, Rowa Wildlife Sanctuary is the source of the only known systematic, published checklist for reptiles of any state-protected area and a single study showed 33 species belonging to nine families alongside evidence of illicit turtle-meat trafficking taking place in close proximity to the sanctuary (Purkayastha et al. 2020); the geographic type locality of this endemic gecko, *Cyrtodactylus tripuraensis*, includes Sepahijala and Gomati districts (Agarwal et al. 2018). Trishna Wildlife Sanctuary is known to harbour surviving populations of several threatened mammals, including gaur, capped langur and slow loris, within a matrix of mixed moist-deciduous forest, regenerating secondary forest, degraded forest and open grassland with artificial lakes (Majumder et al. 2013); however, a dedicated, published reptile inventory for Trishna comparable to that available for Rowa was not located during this review, and represents a clear survey priority. Similarly, the Gumti Wildlife Sanctuary and its associated Dumboor reservoir wetland complex is likely to be of considerable importance for turtle and other aquatic reptile species, but published, species-level reptile data specific to this site are limited in the literature currently available. Systematic, multi-season herpetofaunal surveys of Trishna and Gumti, following the methodology established at Rowa, would substantially improve the completeness of the state's protected-area reptile inventories.

6. Conservation Status and Threats

6.1 Legal protection framework

Several reptile species known from Tripura receive the highest level of protection available under Indian wildlife law. *Nilssonia hurum* and *Lissemys punctata andersoni* are both listed under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (Purkayastha et al. 2020), a status that in principle prohibits their hunting, possession and trade without special permission.

6.2 The freshwater turtle trade

Despite this legal status, Purkayastha et al. (2020) documented open turtle-meat trade in Agartala's Gol Bazar and Battala fish markets, involving primarily *N. hurum* and *L. p. andersoni*, with informants suggesting that turtles were being brought into Tripura from Bangladesh; a further trade site was identified in Manu village, Dhalai district. An independent investigation carried out in February 2020 corroborated this pattern, describing turtle carcasses — chiefly of peacock-marked softshell turtles — being openly chopped and sold in Battala market within sight of a forest department signboard warning against the illegal sale of turtle meat, and noting live individuals held in poor conditions awaiting sale (RoundGlass Sustain, reporting on the 2020 investigation). This pattern is consistent with broader documentation of a pervasive, cross-border "calipee" and turtle-meat trade affecting softshell turtle genera such as *Nilssonia* and *Chitra* across South Asia, much of which is thought to go undetected by formal seizure records (Krishnakumar et al. 2009).

6.3 Habitat loss and land-use change

At the landscape scale, the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot as a whole is recognised as facing severe and ongoing habitat loss, with reptiles comprising a substantial share — alongside fish, mammals and

birds — of the globally threatened species prioritised for conservation action across the hotspot (CEPF 2025). Within Tripura specifically, the conversion of forest to agriculture and settlement, and the resulting fragmentation of the hill-and-valley habitat mosaic described above, can reasonably be expected to affect reptile populations, though quantitative, species-specific data on habitat loss impacts within the state were not identified during this review and represent an important research gap.

6.4 Narrow-range endemics and Data Deficiency

The recent description of *Cyrtodactylus jayadityai*, with an estimated range of only 8–12 km² in lowland North Tripura and a current IUCN status of Data Deficient (Bohra et al. 2026), illustrates a broader conservation concern: newly discovered, narrow-range endemic reptiles can be intrinsically vulnerable to habitat disturbance even before sufficient data exist to formally assess their threat status. This pattern, already well documented among *Cyrtodactylus* species described elsewhere in northeastern India (Agarwal et al. 2018), argues for precautionary habitat protection at newly reported localities pending fuller assessment.

7. Research Gaps and Future Directions

- Tripura currently lacks a single, comprehensive, regularly updated state-wide reptile checklist; the most complete state-level effort remains Majumder et al. (2012), now well over a decade old, while the most detailed protected-area-level checklist (Purkayastha et al. 2020) covers less than 0.01% of the state's land area.
- Trishna and Gumti Wildlife Sanctuaries, unlike Rowa, lack published, species-level reptile inventories and should be prioritised for systematic multi-season herpetofaunal survey.
- Integrative taxonomic work — combining morphology with mitochondrial and, where possible, nuclear DNA sequence data — has already revealed cryptic endemic diversity within *Cyrtodactylus* in Tripura (Agarwal et al. 2018; Bohra et al. 2026) and is likely to reveal further cryptic diversity within snake genera such as *Trimeresurus* and *Boiga*, which are known to be morphologically conservative across northeastern India (Basfore et al. 2024).
- Quantitative assessment of the scale of the freshwater turtle trade passing through Agartala's markets, and its cross-border dimension with Bangladesh, is needed to inform enforcement of existing Schedule I protections (Purkayastha et al. 2020).
- No confirmed, current record of any crocodilian was located for Tripura during this review; a targeted survey of the state's larger river systems would help resolve this basic distributional question.
- Community-engagement and awareness-based conservation models, of the kind applied to herpetofauna elsewhere in the Indo-Burma hotspot, may offer a practical complement to legal enforcement in addressing the turtle trade documented in Agartala's markets.

8. Conclusion

To the contrary, the relatively poorly documented reptile fauna of Tripura has proven to be a rather large and distinctly interesting fauna for a state that is rather small in geographical extent. A baseline state wide checklist (Majumder et al 2012) has been gradually built upon over the last one-and-a-half decades, adding studies documenting faunal composition within state protected areas (Purkayastha et al. 2020), descriptions of two new endemic micro-endemic bent-toed geckos (Agarwal et al 2018; Bohra et al 2026), new species records for a continuous flow of snakes up to 2024 (Nath et al. 2021; Deb et al 2023, 2024 a,

b; Chowdhury et al. 2024) and so forth. However, consistent research lacunae - such as the continued absence of dedicated reptile surveys from two of the four wildlife sanctuaries in the state, the lack of even a single current comprehensive checklist, and the very overt, largely unimpeded trade in freshwater turtles in the state capital-and the extremely high status legally afforded by protection orders for all freshwater turtles are clues that it is difficult to argue against Tripura as one of the two most critically underserved herpetological surveys states, in already world-noted region regarding reptile diversity and endemism. Research to this end is continually required across all taxonomic, geographic and conservation aspects of herpetology.

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