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Early record of the elusive Atlas  
Dwarf Viper *Vipera monticola*  
SAINT GIRONS, 1953, in the  
Moroccan High Atlas

*Vipera monticola* SAINT GIRONS, 1953 is a small-sized viper endemic to the Atlas Mountains in Morocco (BONS & GENIEZ 1996). The taxonomic affinity of this species is still under debate; recent results, however, support the view that this taxon should be treated as a subspecies of *Vipera latastei* BOSCÁ, 1878 (BRITO et al. 2006). *Vipera monticola* is confined to high elevations reaching altitudes as high as 3900 m (SAINT GIRONS 1953a, 1953b; BONS & GENIEZ 1996) where it has adapted to extreme climatic conditions with large temperature gradients.

Despite its description in 1953, relatively few published records are available, which is why this snake is considered a rare species (BONS & GENIEZ 1996). Due to the very limited accounts dealing with the biology of this viper, its habits are poorly known (SAINT GIRONS 1953b; HERRMANN 1993; PILLET 1994).

During a visit to the Atlas Mountains, a medium sized male *V. monticola* (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1: *Vipera monticola* SAINT GIRONS, 1953 from the Jbel Aguelzim ridge, Moroccan High Atlas.

was encountered on the slope below the mountain ridge of Jbel Aguelzim ( $31^{\circ}5' 6.63''N$ ,  $7^{\circ}55'34.96''W$ ) on the 6th of March, 2007. The snake was found basking in sunny weather conditions around 11 a. m. in between two stones, near a small bush of *Onobrychis cornuta*, at 2895 m above sea level. The habitat is characterized as a dry stony slope with sporadic vegetation in the form of pads of *O. cornuta*. Running water, snow patches, sleet and grass vegetation were also present at the time of observation.

*Atlantolacerta andreanszkyi* (WERNER, 1929) reportedly occurring sympatric with *V. monticola* (SAINT GIRONS 1953a, 1953b), was not observed with certainty on this occasion; *Quedenfeldtia trachyblepharus* (BOETTGER, 1874) and *Podarcis hispanicus* (STEINDACHNER, 1870) were found at lower elevations in the same area.

This observation of an Atlas Dwarf Viper constitutes an exceptionally early record given the high altitude. HERRMANN (1993) reported *V. monticola* in the same general area from Araoud (Around), six km SSE of Imlil (Imlil:  $31^{\circ}8'6.90''N$ ,  $7^{\circ}55'8.27''W$ ) on the 22nd of March, but did not specify the altitude. The present record (located about five km from the latter) predates HERRMANN's (1993) record by sixteen days, and given the snow cover present four days earlier suggests that the specimen may have emerged for the first time from hibernation, thereby establishing a tentative boundary of the onset of the activity period.

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KEYWORDS: *Vipera monticola*, High Atlas, Morocco, activity period, ecology

SUBMITTED: February 1, 2010

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