

Snakes Underground – Shield-tails of India



Pied Bellied Shieldtail
(*Melanophidium punctatum*)

Restricted to the hilly regions of Western Ghats, members of this genus are famous for their highly iridescent scales which is produced by microscopic structures on the scales that diffract light.



Canara Shieldtail
(*Pseudoplectrurus canaricus*)

Reported only from the peaks of Kudremukh National park in Karnataka, this Shieldtail is the only member this genus making *Pseudoplectrurus* a monotypic genus.

Gunther's Shieldtail
(*Plectrurus guntheri*)

Confined to the high elevation regions of the Nilgiri Hills, *Plectrurus guntheri* is one of the three currently recognized snakes of the genus *Plectrurus*.



Three-lined Shieldtail
(*Platyplectrurus trilineatus*)

With only two known species representing the genus, *Platyplectrurus* are poorly known shieldtail snakes restricted to the high elevation regions of Palni hills south of the Palghat gap.



Western Shieldtail
(*Teretrurus sanguineus*)

The genus *Teretrurus* is currently considered as a monotypic genus of shieldtail and is found throughout southern Western Ghats which has a characteristic red coloured belly.



Madurai Shieldtail
(*Uropeltis madurensis*)

Uropeltis is the most diverse and widespread genus of shieldtail snakes distributed throughout peninsular India with 23 recognised species.

Rosy-bellied Shieldtail
(*Rhinophis cf. sanguineus*)

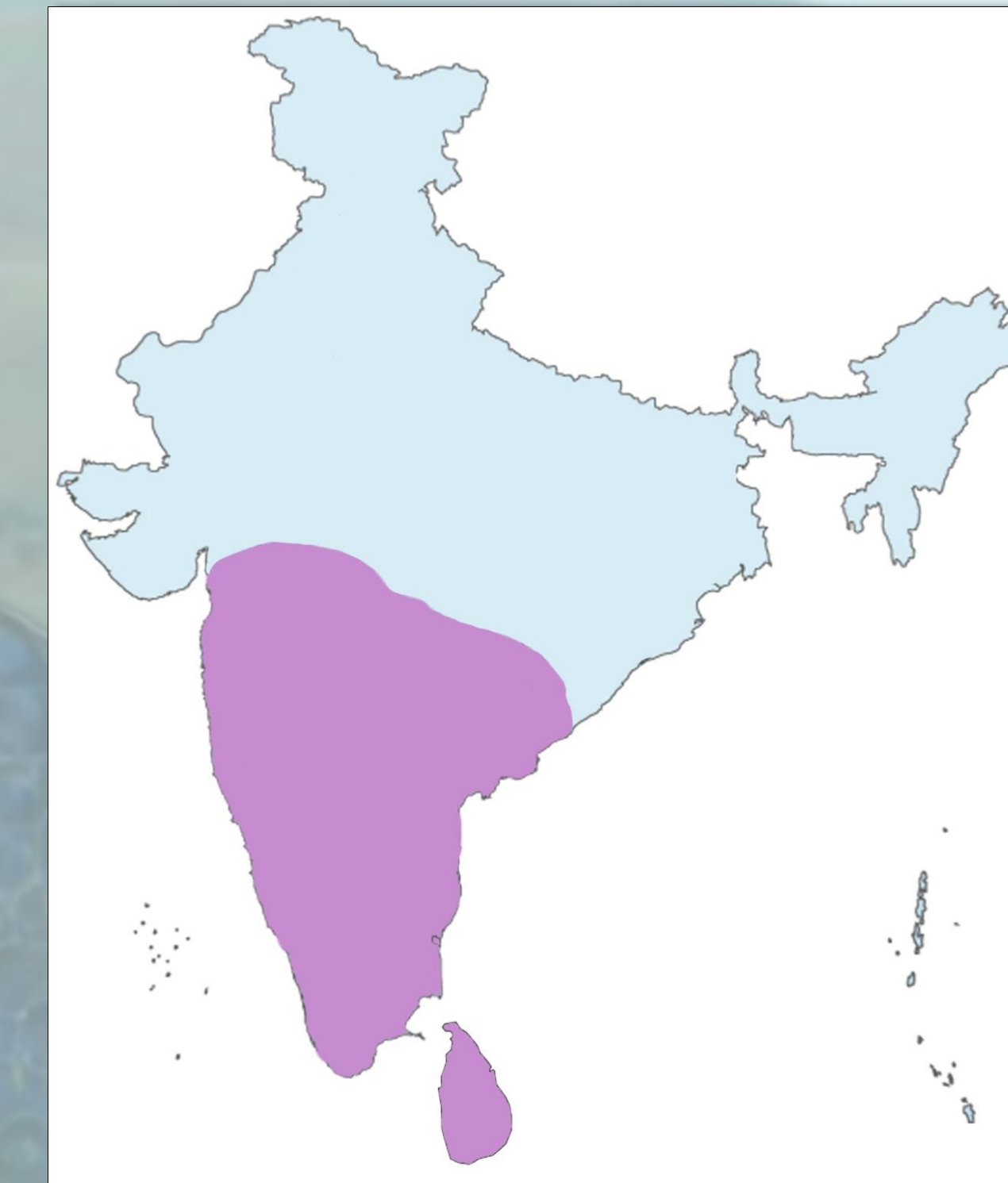
Rhinophis, characterized by their pointed rostrum and elongated body, are often restricted to the dry regions of south India with greater species richness in Sri Lanka.



Wall's Shieldtail
(*Brachiophidium rhodogaster*)

Known for its red colored belly, *Brachiophidium* is a monotypic genus found only in the Palani hills. Although they look very similar to *Teretrurus*, they are presently classified as a separate genus

Shieldtail snakes, belonging to the family Uropeltidae, are a diverse and ancient lineage of non-venomous snakes specialized to living underground. The entire family is distributed throughout peninsular India and Sri Lanka. India has about 55 known species belonging to 8 genera. In India, they are generally found in the high elevation forests of the Western Ghats, although some species can be found in drier regions of the Indian peninsula. Shieldtail snakes are well adapted to their subterranean lifestyle and possess a suite of morphological, physiological and behavioral adaptations that allow some species to burrow in dry soil. The name 'Shieldtail', has been derived from their distinct obliquely cut tails that have hard keratinized scales which they expose to predators while hiding the head beneath their coils.



Shield-tails have extremely restricted distributions within the various hill clusters of the Western Ghats and are highly vulnerable to environmental fluctuations. Increasing human activity, habitat loss and raising global temperature all show an unexciting picture for the survival of these species.