



Psamophis flagelliformis.

Sera, pinx.

P.S. Duval, del.

PSAMMOPHIS.—*Boie.*

GENUS PSAMMOPHIS.—CHARACTERS. Head much elongated, sub-oval; snout prominent, but rounded; loral plate single, long, and large; superior orbital greatly projecting; posterior orbital plates, two; anterior, one; nostrils lateral, near the snout; eyes very large; body long, slender; tail very long.

PSAMMOPHIS FLAGELLIFORMIS.—*Catesby.**Plate II.*

CHARACTERS. Head elongated; superior-orbital plate projecting over the eye; body very long and slender; the anterior part shining black, both above and below; the middle mixed brown and white; the posterior part and tail whitish or tawny-colour. Tail one-fourth of total length. Pl. 203. Sc. 109.

SYNONYMES. *Anguis flagelliformis*, Coach-whip Snake, *Catesby*, Carolina, &c., vol. ii. tab. 54.

Coach-whip Snake, *Bartram*, Travels in Carolina and Florida, &c., p. 219.

Coluber flagellum, *Shaw*, Gen. Zool., vol. iii. p. 475.

Coach-whip Snake, *Vulgo.*

DESCRIPTION. The head is elongated and narrow, the upper jaw projecting; the vertical plate is pentagonal, larger in front, long and narrow, presenting an acute angle backwards; the occipital plates are triangular, large, covering nearly the whole of the posterior part of the head; the superior-orbital are large, somewhat quadrilateral, and projecting greatly over the eye; the posterior orbital are two in

number, the superior one extending upwards on the supra-orbital projection; and immediately behind these are several scales, taking the place of a temporal plate; the anterior orbital are two in number, the lower very small, the upper also small and expanding on the supra-orbital projection; the loreal is short and wide; the frontal plates are quadrilateral; the nasal nearly of the same form; the rostral plate is very small, triangular, and rounded in front.

The nostrils are lateral, large, placed at the junction of two plates, and very near the snout; the eyes are very large, but appear sunken in consequence of the projection of the superior-orbital plate; the pupil is black, the iris dark grey.

The neck is small, the body very long; the tail is long, attenuated like a whip-chord, which it further resembles in the braided appearance produced by the large scales and their dusky margins. The scales are all destitute of a carina, and in general have two points at the apex; those on the upper part of the neck are quite small; on the fore part of the body they are rhomboidal, narrow, and elongated, and on the tail and lower part of the body they are short, broad and sub-rhomboidal.

COLOUR. The superior surface of the head and neck, and nearly one-third of the body, is glossy raven-black, gradually becoming paler on approaching the tail, which is of a very light brown or tawny-colour; the scales on the tail are rendered conspicuous by their dark margins. The inferior surface of the neck and anterior part of the abdomen is bluish slate-colour; the posterior part white, clouded with brown; some parts of the abdomen are white and shining, as well as the inferior surface of the tail. This snake varies however in colour, or rather in shade; Bartram has seen them of a cream-colour, clay-coloured, and sometimes almost white, but always raven-black near the head.

DIMENSIONS. Length of the head, to the small scales, $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches; of the head and body, 45 inches; of the tail, 16 inches: circumference, $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches: total length, 5 feet 1 inch. Abdominal plates in the specimen figured, 203, and 109 pairs of

sub-caudal scales. This is the measurement of the specimen from which the accompanying plate was taken; it is said they sometimes reach the length of seven feet.

HABITS. This beautiful animal is remarkable for the swiftness of its motions, "seeming almost to fly over the surface of the ground."* It feeds on young birds, but only destroys for food. It is inoffensive in its manners, but defends itself with great dexterity when attacked, by twining its long body round the enemy. Bartram gives the following account of it:—"I observed a large hawk on the ground in the middle of the road; when coming up near him, I found him bound up by a very long Coach-whip Snake, that had wreathed itself several times round the hawk's body, who had but one of his wings at liberty. Beholding their struggles awhile, I alighted off my horse with the intention of parting them; when, on coming up, they mutually agreed to separate, each seeking his own safety, probably considering me as their common enemy."

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION. The Coach-whip Snake is found in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, but is rare. During a seven years' search I have never seen but one living specimen, which was sent me by Dr. Hay, of Barnwell district, South Carolina.

GENERAL REMARKS. Of all the species found east of the Mississippi, the Black Snake (*Coluber constrictor*) is the only one hitherto known that can be compared with the Coach-whip, in the scales, the disposition of the plates on the head, and in its general form.

There is great confusion in the works of European naturalists with regard to this snake. Catesby first made it known under the name "Coach-whip Snake," and gave an excellent figure of it—one of the best in his work; yet it has been

* Bartram, *Travels in Carolina, &c.*, p. 219.

confounded with the Chicken Snake, the Black Snake, the Green Snake, and by some herpetologists has been overlooked altogether.

Linnaeus describes a *Coluber filiformis*,* which some naturalists have considered as our Coach-whip Snake, but it agrees with it neither in colour, the number of its plates, nor in its geographical distribution.

Laurenti next gave a *Natrix flagelliformis*;† this cannot be the Coach-whip Snake, for he refers to tab. 47 of Catesby, which is the Bluish-green Snake, (*Dryinus mycterizans*,) and is not an inhabitant of the United States.

Daudin, under his *Coluber flagelliformis*,‡ adds still more to the confusion; for he refers to the *mycterizans*, and to tab. 57 of Catesby, which is the Green Snake, that he says is “called by the Anglo-Americans Coach-whip Snake;”—his description, then, of the Coach-whip is taken from the Green Snake! During all this time the plate and description of Catesby were overlooked, till Shaw called the attention of naturalists to them in his *General Zoology*.

Merrem§ gives a *Coluber flagelliformis*, but refers to the *filiformis* of Linnaeus and the *Natrix filiformis* of Laurenti as synonymes; here we find a second reference to Catesby’s animal, but it is given doubtfully.

Even that excellent ophidiologist Schlegel has fallen into a similar error with respect to the common name *flagelliformis*, by supposing it applicable to the animal represented in Catesby’s 47th table,|| which is the Bluish-green Snake, and he applies to the Coach-whip Snake of Catesby what he (Catesby) says of the Bluish-green Snake:—“Ce voyageur dit que le Coach-whip Snake est aussi agile qu’innocent, qu’il habite les arbres et qu’il vit d’insectes,” &c.

* *Syst. Nat.*, vol. i. p. 383.

† *Synop. Rept.*, p. 79.

‡ *Hist. Nat. des Rept.*, vol. vi. p. 380.

§ *Versuch eines Syst. der Amphib.*, p. 116.

|| *Dryophis Catesbyi*, Schlegel, *Phys. des Serp.*, tom. ii. p. 252.

Foreign naturalists have all been deceived in supposing the application of the term of Coach-whip Snake to be much more extended than it really is. Thus Schlegel says that it is applied, without distinction, to several long and slender snakes, which is certainly not the case, for no term is more restricted among our common names of serpents, not even the Black Snake, and has been in common and universal use since the time of Catesby. It is not called Coach-whip Snake from the extreme tenuity of its body, but from the form of the tail, and the manner in which the scales upon it are arranged; these are very large, rhomboidal, slightly imbricated, so as to appear only juxta-posed, which give it precisely the appearance of a whip-cord, and from this is the common name derived.

We have other serpents equally attenuated as the Black Snake, but that is called a Racer, or the *Leptophis æstivus*, and that is called Green Snake.

It seems, then, that the *Coluber flagelliformis* has not been described, or even referred to properly, by any systematic writer on natural history, except Shaw; and even his name must yield in priority to that of Catesby.



Holbrook, John Edwards. 1842. "Psammophis flagelliformis – Catesby." *North American herpetology; or, A description of the reptiles inhabiting the United States* 4, 11–15. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.326823>.

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