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NOTE

FIRST RECORD OF THE ASSAM LEAF TURTLE *CYCLEMYS GEMELI* (FRITZ ET AL. 2008) (REPTILIA: TESTUDINES: GEOEMYDIDAE) FROM THE DARJEELING-SIKKIM HIMALAYA, INDIA

Aditya Pradhan, Niran Chettri & Saibal Sengupta

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First record of the Assam Leaf Turtle *Cyclemys gemeli* (Fritz et al. 2008) (Reptilia: Testudines: Geoemydidae) from the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya, India

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In India, 30 species of tortoises and turtles have been recorded so far, out of which the northeastern region has 22 species (Das & Gupta 2015), including *Cyclemys gemeli*. This species, however, has never been reported to occur in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya, which comprise the state of Sikkim, and the hilly regions of Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts of West Bengal, India, which is an integral part of the eastern Himalaya. Historically, four species, namely, *Melanochelys tricarinata*, *M. trijuga*, *Indotestudo elongata*, and *Lissemys punctata* have been reported to occur here (Smith 1931), of which *Indotestudo elongata* and *Lissemys punctata andersoni* have been recorded in the present-day Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya (Jha 2009; Pradhan & Yonle 2019). *Cyclemys gemeli*, commonly known as the Assam Leaf Turtle is protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 in India, but has not been assessed by IUCN. It is currently listed in CITES under Appendix II. It was first described from Assam, and is the only species to be reported in India under *Cyclemys* (Ahmed & Das 2010). This species has been known to occur in Uttar

Pradesh (near the Nepal border), northeastern India (Fritz et al. 2008), including Nepal (Rai 2004), Bangladesh (Kabir et al. 2009), and southeastern Bhutan (Wangyal et al. 2012). This species prefers large rivers and its oxbows, fast flowing creeks, and leaf litter of evergreen forest (Praschag et al. 2009).

The current sighting of *Cyclemys gemeli* is the first record from the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya. The turtle was first sighted by the second author on 20 August 2020, crossing a motorable road approximately 230m from Riyang Khola (a perennial tributary of River Teesta), in the Government Cinchona Plantation, Sittong, Darjeeling, and was subsequently identified as *Cyclemys gemeli*. It was based on the descriptions in Ahmed & Das (2010) and Fritz et al. (2008). The photographs and video of the sighted individual were also sent to experts for the confirmation of its identity. The closest published locality record for this species is in Sershong, Sarpang District, Bhutan (Wangyal et al. 2012), about 210km from the current sighting area. The sighting took place at around 11.30h (26.948°N & 88.380°E) in an

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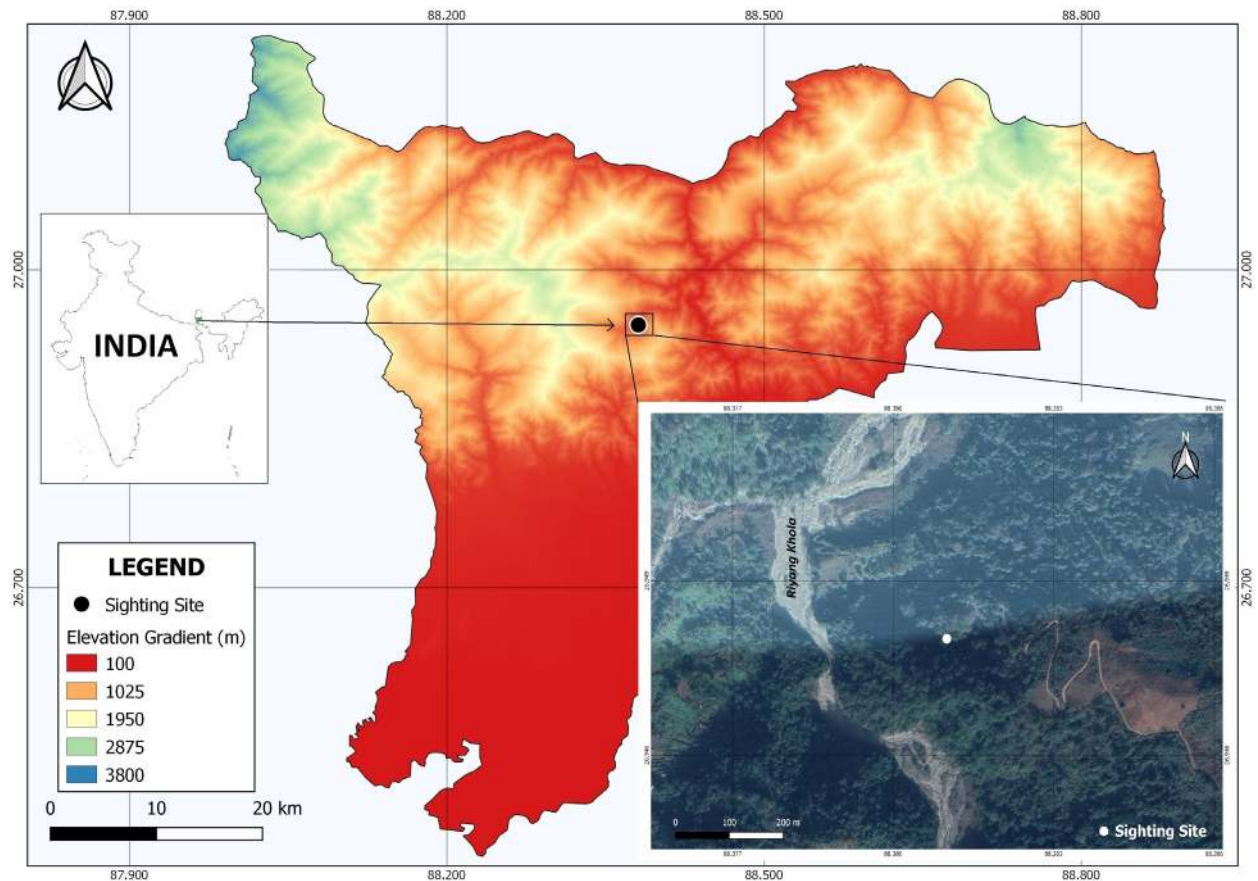


Image 1. The location and a satellite image of the sighting site in Darjeeling, India.

area, currently under rubber cultivation at an elevation of 580m, and approximately 20m from the nearest non-perennial stream (Image 1). The vegetation of the area is characterized by trees like *Terminalia* sp., *Schima walichii*, *Ailanthus grandis*, *Cinchona officinalis*, *Ficus elastica*, and ferns.

The sighted individual (Image 2) was a juvenile female, dark in color with prominent brown blotches on its carapace, while the plastral pattern was characterized by dark brown to black radiating lines. The carapace was raised and slightly elongated, with a distinct vertebral keel and two lateral keels. The digits were webbed, with fingernails. Eleven pairs of marginal scutes were present. The anal notch was wide and obtuse angled. The crown of the head and the throat was uniform dark brown in color. The individual weighed 450g. Morphometric measurements of the individual were as follows: carapace length = 15.2cm; carapace width = 11.9cm; plastron length = 14.1cm.

The individual was later handed over to the West Bengal Forest Department, and is currently at Latpanchor Range Office.

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Image 2. Carapace and plastron of the Assam Leaf Turtle *Cyclemys gemeli* sighted in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya, India. © Niran Chettri.

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