



E-ISSN: 2320-7078

P-ISSN: 2349-6800

Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.83

www.entomoljournal.com

JEZS 2025; 13(5): 01-07

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Received: 05-06-2025

Accepted: 07-07-2025

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Copper-headed trinket snake, *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie, 1827) (Serpentes: Colubridae) behavior: Two cases of death-feigning (Thanatosis) in Dibrugarh city, Assam (India) with a review of Death-feigning in Indian snakes

Tikendrajit GogoiDOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.22271/j.ento.2025.v13.i5a.9595>**Abstract**

Death-feigning (thanatosis) behaviour displayed by 13 species of Indian snakes under 10 genera is reviewed. The 13 Indian snake species with 37 documented cases of display of this behavior under review include *Coelognathus radiatus* (13 cases), *Lycodon aulicus* (6 cases), *Fowlea piscator* (3 cases), *Naja naja*. (2 cases), *Lycodon jara* (2 cases), *Pseudoxenodon macrops* (2 cases), *Python bivittatus* (2 cases), and *Daboia russelii* (2 cases). Other species with one case in each include *Lycodon flavicollis*, *Lycodon striatus*, *Eryx conicus*, *Oligodon woodmasoni* and *Platycephalus plinii*. All the thirteen known cases of death-feigning behavior in Copper-headed Trinket Snake *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie 1827) were documented from 3 countries viz. Thailand (8 cases), Malaysia (2 cases) and Nepal (3 cases). In the present communication two more cases of death-feigning in *C. radiatus* are reported from Dibrugarh, City, Assam (India). Photographic and video graphic documentation of the behavioral pattern was done in both the individuals rescued from Tulsigaon and Khaniagaon of the City. These two cases of in *C. radiatus* with a frequency of occurrence of 10.5 percent (n=21) are the 14th and 15th of this kind and recorded for the first time from Indian limits.

Keywords: Death-feigning, Indian species, review, *Coelognathus radiatus*, Assam, India**Introduction**

Death-feigning or thanatosis is a defensive behaviour displayed by several species of animals in which feigning death is attained as an ultimate defensive measure to avoid attention and subsequently preyed on when all other options of defense have failed. This behavior is also known as 'shamming death' [1]. 'Thanatosis' is another commonly used term to represent this behavior and is derived from the Greek word for 'death'. Other terms used include- 'tonic immobility', 'playing possum', catatonia, 'animal hypnosis' etc. [2]. It is characterized by catalepsy, immobility with a prone but stiff posture maintained by pronounced tonic muscular activity from a short period to a long time that may be more than 19 minutes or more. Such individuals remain unresponsive to external stimuli but are fully aware of the environment. Death-feigning is usually triggered in situations perceived to be of extreme danger, particularly when there is a possibility of predation. Its onset is rapid and termination is also generally rapid allowing the animal to do the activities with all its capacity [2, 3].

Death-feigning is reported as anti predator behavior in different Invertebrate and Vertebrate animal groups including the class Reptilia [4-7]. Among reptiles there are reports of death feigning in a large number of snake species under different families in different parts of the world [8-11]. There are cases of death-feigning reported from Asian countries including India with a number of Indian species [12-15].

In one species of snake it was found that larger individuals displayed more death-feigning and this tendency was different in different populations. It is opined that although risky this behavior may be a positive selection and in future studies elements that affect duration, intensity and success of death-feigning in defense against various predators need to be explored [16].

Death-feigning is said to be displayed by Copper-headed Trinket Snake in an article related to

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the snakes of Assam [17]. However, any documented case of death-feigning by Copper-headed Trinket Snake with photographic and videographic evidences is not available for Indian limits.

In the present communication cases of death-feigning behaviour in different Indian species of snakes including Copper-headed Trinket Snake, *Coelognathus radiatus* are reviewed. Two specific cases of death-feigning by this species are reported from Dibrugarh City, Assam (India).

Materials and Methods

The review of the reports of displaying death-feigning behavior documented in different Indian snake species from 1947 to 2025 are presented with corresponding authors, places and times of occurrence. The review is based on the available research articles published in different journals, reports and books besides related pictures and videos available through electronic media.

The two reports on death-feigning behavior of Copper-headed Trinket Snake are based on two individuals rescued by the author in Dibrugarh city, Assam (India), one at Tulsigaon and the other at Khaniagaon of the City.

Copper-headed Trinket Snake, *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie, 1827) also known as Radiated Rat Snake and Copper-headed Rat Snake is one of the three species and five kinds of snakes under the genus *Coelognathus* found in Indian. The other four kinds are Black-tailed Trinket Snake, *Coelognathus flavolineatus* (Schlegel, 1837), Common Trinket Snake, *C. helena helena* (Daudin, 1803), Montane Trinket Snake *C. h. monticollaris* (Schulz, 1992) and Arrow-headed Trinket Snake *C. h. nigriangularis* (Mahapatra, Schulz, Helfenberger, Hofman & Dutta, 2016) [18]. This species is distributed in most of the Southeast Asian countries including India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and China [19, 20]. In India this species is distributed in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chattishgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Odisha, Sikkim, Tripura, Uttarkhand & West Bengal and also in Eastern Ghats [19-23]. *C. radiatus* is

a non-venomous snake species measuring up to 2300 mm in length. A primarily terrestrial snake that can climb and swim well. It lives in open areas near forests and in grasslands, paddy fields, tea gardens, and forests up to 1,400 meters (Whitaker and Captain, 2008, Das and Das, 2025) [21, 24]. *C. radiatus* is a diurnal, active rat snake that eats mice, rats and other small mammals, young birds, lizards and sometimes frogs (Whitaker & Captain, 2008, Ahmed *et al.* 2009) [21, 25]. Found in human habitations of urban, sub urban and rural areas besides institutional and industrial complexes where mice and rats are available *C. radiatus* is locally known as 'Dhunduli Gom' or 'Nilaji Gom' in Assamese language due to its characteristic black strips on the anterior part of the body that resembles the strips of the fruits of Snake gourd (*Trichosanthes cucumerina*), a locally cultivated vine. This species of snake is also called 'Dhunduli Phenti' in Assamese language due to its display of the erected forebody with 'S' shaped laterally compress neck forming a pouch. In Assamese one of the meanings of 'Phent' is 'to be bent upward'. A perfect rat eater in habit this snake species is also popularly described as 'Bharal Rakhia' (Grain Storage Keeper) in Assamese language. A snake species usually defensive in nature and difficult to catch and control, have individual differences in temperament. A very gentle individual was also handled by the present author during rescue work. Generally a very active snake when threatened or cornered erects forebody compressing its neck and forming an 'S' shaped pouch and strike [25, 26]. Although adults in captivity do not seem to be accustomed to being handled young ones are gentle and soon becomes tame [27].

In the present communication two cases of death-feigning in *C. radiatus* are reported from Indian limits. In case study 1., an adult individual with a total length of 161.3 cm rescued from a living room of Mr. Bijay Paswan's house, Tulsigaon ('T') (27.45848435⁰, 94.911743⁰) in Dibrugarh City, Assam (India) on 05.12.2024 at 12.35 PM GMT (Fig.1. 'T'). The second individual was one measuring 143 cm. was from a house of Mrs. Anjali Hazarika of Ghanashyam Hazarika Path, Khaniagaon ('K') (27.461618⁰, 94.922080) on 12th July, 2025 at 09.56 in Dibrugarh City, Assam, India. (Fig.1. 'K').

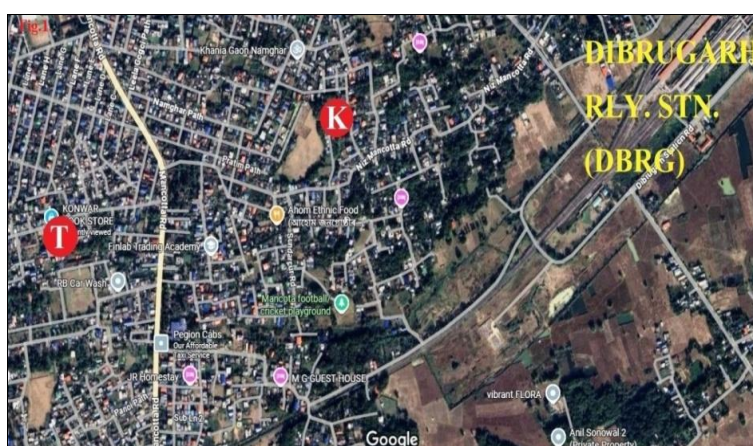


Fig 1: Google Map of Dibrugarh City (part), Assam (India) showing the rescue sites of the Copper-headed Trinket Snake, *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie 1827). Tulsigaon ('T') in Case study 1. and Khaniagaon ('K') in case study 2.

Dibrugarh City is located in the eastern part of Assam on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. Geographical coordinate of the district administrative headquarter is 27.467609⁰, 94.911816⁰. It is situated on the alluvial flood plain of the Brahmaputra River at an altitude of 104.24 meters above the mean sea level (MSL) [28]. The City is situated in a place of

subtropical monsoon climate with mild winter, warm and humid summer and high rainfall. Average rainfall and rainy days in Dibrugarh City were recorded 260.9 mm. and 128. 5 days respectively. Annual minimum and maximum temperature were recorded 18.8 and 28.1 respectively. Relative humidity in rainy season is about 88%. [29] [30].

Residential areas of the City with gardens and road side vegetations are interspersed by small forest pockets, tea gardens and some bamboo plantation besides a few vanishing wetlands and open areas. Peripheral regions of the city are dominated by human habitation, forest areas, tea gardens and some riverside low land vegetations.

Observations and Results

Review of some reports of occurrence of death-feigning behavior in Indian snakes

The review of the reports of displaying death-feigning behavior documented in Indian snakes since 1927 to 2025 are presented with corresponding authors, places and times of occurrence.

There was a report of 'shamming death' by Checkered Keelback, *Fowlea piscator* (Schneider, 1799) from an unspecified place and time ^[1]. Death-feigning in *F. piscator* is also reported from Sola crossing in Ahmadabad City, Gujarat on 01.5.2007 ^[12]. An individual of *F. piscator* (formerly described as Andaman Keelback or Tytler's Keelback *Fowlea tytleri* (Blyth, 183) was found to display death -feigning in Port Blair, South Andaman of Anadaman and Nicobar Islands ^[31].

Common Wolf Snake *Lycodon aulicus* (Linnaeus, 178) was found to display this behavioural pattern in six places in India. These include - an individual at Aarey Milk Colony, Mumbai, Maharastra (India) in two occasions and in Hong Kong Island on 18.5.2009 ^[32], at the Vikram University campus, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh on 10.12.2014 ^[33], another individual from a

place near Sai Temple, Brahmani, Kamaleswar, Nagpur, Maharastra on 21.11.2018 ^[34], and one individual at Tilpath Valley Biodiversity Park, Delhi ^[35]. Yellow Collared Wolf Snake *Lycodon flavicollis* Mukherjee & Bhupathy, 2007 was also found feigning death in a place in the vicinity of Bannerghatta Biological Park, Bengaluru on 25.3.2015 ^[36]. There were two reports of death feigning by Twin-spotted Wolf Snake *Lycodon jara* (Shaw, 1802) - a juvenile male from Aklabad Village, Egra, West Bengal on 24.7.2019 ^[37], and another juvenile at Parsa National Park Office complex, Nepal on 03.5.2022 (Luitel and Devkota 2023^[38]). An individual of Barred Wolf Snake *Lycodon striatus* (Shaw, 1802) was found to exhibit this behavior in Tilpath Valley Biodiversity Park, Delhi ^[35].

There were 13 earlier reports of death-feigning in Copper-headed Trinket Snake, *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie, 1827) from various places of world, all from outside India. These include individuals from (a.) Tak Province, Thailand on 18.4.2007, (b) Grik (Gerik), Perak State, Peninsular Malaysia on 18.8.2007 and (c) Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 03.02.2008. (Vogal and Han-Yung, 2010) ^[12]. Death- feigning was displayed by 7 individuals (d,e,f,g,h,i, j) of *C. radiatus* in Sakaerat Biosphere Reserve, Thailand during 2015-2018 (Nadolski *et al.*2020) ^[39]. In Nepal there were 3 cases of death feigning by *C. radiatus*, (k) at Siddhartha Rajmarga, Pokhara, Kaski, Nepal on 10.6.2019- (l.) Khahare, Lakeside, Nepal on 22.9.2019 and (m) from Furse Khola Bridge, Chhorepatan, Nepal on 04.3.2020 (Giri *et al.* 2020 ^[40]). (Fig. 2.)

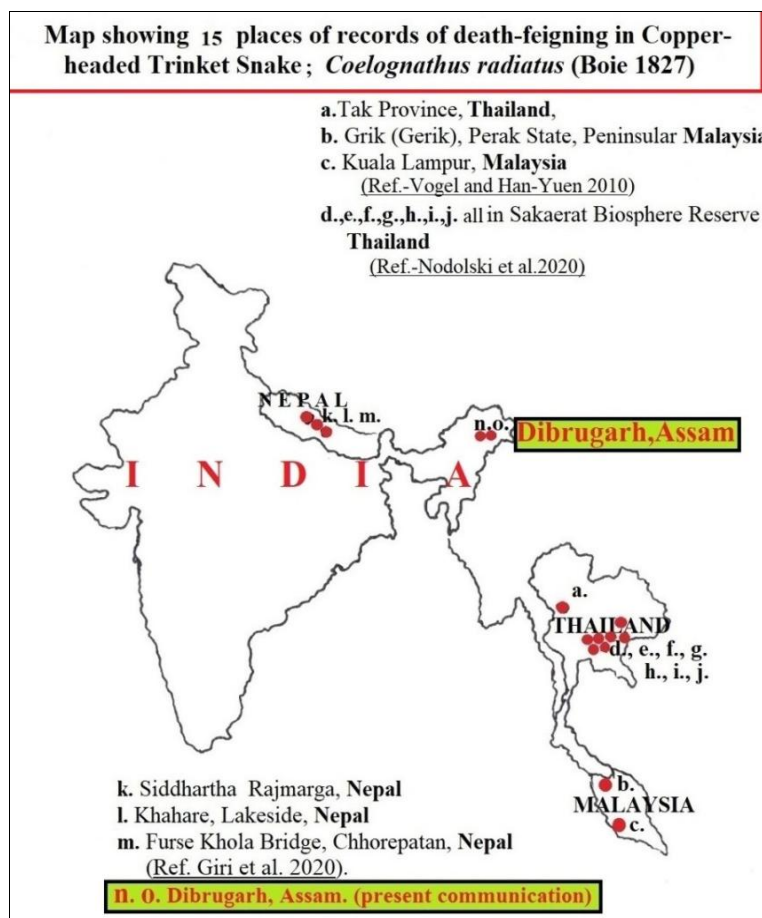


Fig 2: Map showing the places of records of death-feigning in Copper-headed Trinket Snake *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie 1827) in different countries of the world including that of the present communication.

Large-eyed False Cobra *Pseudoxenodon macrops* (Blyth, 1855) was reported to exhibit death-feigning in two occasions - one on the road between Manipoliang to Pange composite, Arunachal Pradesh on 05.6.2012 and the other on the road from Pange composite to Talle Valley WLS, Arunachal Pradesh [41].

Death-feigning in Burmese Python *Python bivittatus* Khul, 1820 was reported in two occasions in NTNC-BCC, Chitwan National Park, Nepal on 25.7.2015 [13].

A sub-adult Common Sand Boa, *Eryx conicus* (Schneider, 1801) was reported to display death-feigning at Sadak Arjuni, Gondia, Maharastra on 21.11.2018 [34].

There was an adult female Nicobar Kukri Snake *Oligodon woodmasoni* (Sclater, 1891) that displayed this behavior at Changua village, Camorta Island, Central Nicobar, Andaman Nicobar Islands [31].

Banded Racer, *Platyceps plinii* (Merrem, 1820) was also reported to display this behavior. There was a case report from Althan, Surat, Gujarat on 11.7.2021 [42].

There were reports of Spectacled Cobra *Naja naja* (Linnaeus, 1758) displaying death-feigning from two places- Bhubaneswar, Odisha on 24.12.2021 [43], and Hardoi, Uttar Pradesh on 24.4.2016 [44].

Two individuals of Russell's Viper *Daboia russelii* (Shaw & Nodder, 1797) were reported to display this type of behavior - one during shedding at Serenity Trust Campus, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, and the other in Navsari district, Gujarat while not shedding [3].

Copper-headed Trinket snakes *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie 1827) death-feigning in Dibrugarh City

Copper-headed trinket snakes *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie 1827) are often encountered in Dibrugarh City and enter houses particularly where there are rats and mice. There are records of not less than forty five individuals of this species in Dibrugarh city. Presence of this snake are recorded from rescue calls, individuals found by the author as dead (mostly as road killed) and photographed during personal observations and photographs received from others. There are at least 29 records of rescue of this species including eight records from the Government Forest Department personals. The present author has experiences of handling 21 individuals during rescue before their release to the environment/ handed over to the Govt. Forest Department. Most of them are found excited and restless during handling and some of them show their aggressiveness with attempts to bite. Most of them exhibited their characteristic defensive posture with 'S' shaped laterally compressed neck region and open mouth with attempt to bite. Only one individual rescued from a residence (27.47272°, 94.92913°) in the Bairagimoth area of the City was found exceptionally timid and without any excitement. Case studies of the two individuals displayed death-feigning before they were released to the environment are as follows.

Case study 1

In case study 1. the individual of Copper-headed Trinket Snake was rescued from below of an almirah (Fig. 3.) in a living room after a rescue call from Mr. Bijay Paswan, Tulsigaon ('T'), Dibrugarh City. The individual was handled to record some basic morphological characters and to click some close-up pictures before it was released to the wild / handed over to the forest department. While handling the very active snake was seen becoming timid and suddenly within two seconds it became motionless, loose and appeared as dead

(Fig. 4). The snake managed to escape to the small campus of the residence of this author moving around, allowed to click pictures in action (Fig. 5.) and disappeared / escaped from the campus on the 3rd day.

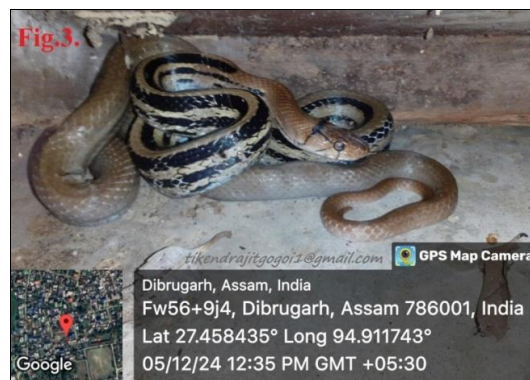


Fig 3: Picture showing the Copper-headed Trinket Snake *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie 1827) at Tulsigaon 'T' (case study 1) before rescue,



Fig 4: Death feigning by the Copper-headed Trinket Snake *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie 1827) of Tulsigaon (case study 1),



Fig 5: Display of defensive display of the Copper-headed Trinket Snake *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie 1827) of Tulsigaon 'T' (case study 1) after recovery from Death-feigning.

Case study 2: In the case study 2 the individual of Copper-headed Trinket Snake was rescued from lower chamber of an

almirah (Fig. 6.) in a living room after a call from Mr. Ratan Hazarika from Khaniagaon ('K') in Dibrugarh City. The snake was also handled to record some basic morphological characters and to click some close-up pictures before it was released to the wild / handed over to the forest department. While handling the very active snake was seen becoming timid and suddenly within two seconds it became motionless, loose and appeared as dead. The individual repeated death-feigning four times before it was released to the wilderness (Fig. 7).



Fig 6: Picture showing the Copper-headed Trinket Snake *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie 1827) at Khaniagaon 'K' (case study 2) before rescue.



Fig 7: Display of death feigning by the Copper-headed Trinket Snake *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie 1827) of Khaniagaon 'K' (case study 2).

Discussion

The present review work shows the occurrence of death-feigning behavior 37 individual cases in 13 species of Indian snakes under 10 genera are reviewed. Individuals of 13 Indian snake species reviewed (with corresponding numbers of display of the behavior recorded) include *Coelognathus radiatus* (13 cases), *Lycodon aulicus* (6 cases), *Fowlea piscator* (3 cases), *Naja naja*. (2), *Lycodon jara* (2), *Pseudoxenodon macrops*, (2), *Python bivittatus*, (2), and *Daboia russelii*. (2 cases). Other species with one cash each include *Lycodon flavicollis*, *Lycodon striatus*, *Eryx conicus*, *Oligodon woodmasoni*, *Platyceps plinii*.

All thirteen known cases of death-feigning behavior in Copper-headed Trinket Snake *Coelognathus radiatus* (Boie 1827) were documented from 3 countries viz. Thailand (8 cases), Malaysia (2 cases) and Nepal (3cases). The two more cases of death-feigning in *C. radiatus* reported in the present communication from Dibrugarh, City, Assam (India) are the 14th and 15th cases of this kind of behaviour for this species. This specific behavioural pattern in both the individuals of

C. radiatus rescued from Tulsigaon and Khaniagaon of the City. are the 14th and 15th cases of this kind and recorded for the first time from Indian limits. These two cases of death-feigning in *C. radiatus* documented with photographs and video rerecording are about 10.5 percent (n=21) of the total individuals handled by the present author.

Conclusion

The 37 individual cases in 13 species of Indian snakes under 10 genera under review and two more cases in *Coelognathus radiatus* reported in the present communication indicates that death-feigning behaviour is not uncommon in Indian species of snakes. There may be numbers of unreported death-feigning cases in the present 13 and other species of Indian snakes. This may be due to the fact that snakes are usually not handled by people and the observation on snakes when facing their potential predators may be very rare. On the other hand death feigning in certain species may be a very rare event or may be absent altogether. The present author has handled more than 50 individuals of Oriental Rat Snake *Ptyas mucosa* (Linnaeus, 1758) but none of the individuals found to display death-feigning behavior. However there is scope of study of various defensive behaviours including death-feigning in captive snakes as well as field observations in different species. Study of different aspects of such behavior may include sex, age, related environmental condition etc. There may be more cases of death- feigning in *C. radiatus* besides the reported cases in the present communication which are the 14th and 15th of this kind and the 1st two known records from Indian limits.

Acknowledgements

Thanks due to Mr.Bijay Paswan of Tulsigaon and Mr.Ratan Hazarika of Ghanashyam Hazarika Path, Khaniagaon. for information and cooperation. Thanks also due to Mrs. Anjali Hazarika of Ghanashyam Hazarika Path, Khaniagaon for cooperation.

Ethical issue

No experiment was conducted with the animals. Enough care was taken to avoid the risk of physical injury to the snake individuals and to minimize their stress during rescue of the snakes. Only body lengths were measured, clicked pictures and videography of the display of death-feigning behavior done before the snake(s) escaped/ released.

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