



THE GOLDEN PIT VIPER
OF ASSAM
MY PRECIOUSSS!

A RARE ENCOUNTER WITH A SPECTACULAR
AND POSSIBLY NEW SPECIES
IN THE *TRIMERESURUS ALBOLABRIS* COMPLEX

*Rather than the usual
bright green shown by the
pit vipers belonging to the
T. albolabris complex, this
Assamese morph is bright
golden yellow overall.*



■ A close-up portrait shows very clearly the thermosensitive pits located between the eye and the nostril. These are utilized by Crotalinae snakes to locate prey utilizing infrared radiation.

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Tantalizing news about a mysterious yellow pit-viper occasionally observed in the Jorhat area had been following us since our arrival in Assam, India's beautiful north-eastern region. We were obviously very familiar with the bright green, yellow- or red-eyed arboreal pit vipers belonging to the genus *Trimeresurus* (renamed in a few instances *Cryptelytrops* or *Popeia* by some researchers) which inhabit the thick understory of Assamese forests - but a bright yellow one? That sounded very interesting! So it was with unique enthusiasm that - after much searching and

with the help of our friend Diganta Gogoi - we finally were able to observe one of these elusive and apparently undescribed snakes in flesh and blood, when a small male specimen was located in a nearby tea plantation. And look and behold - bright golden yellow it was, with a luminous orange-yellow back fading to an impossibly bright yellow on its sides and a much paler yellow-white on its venter. A creature of unique beauty, despite the fact that the individual found was rather thin - almost emaciated - and obviously heavily parasitized by several subcutaneous

worms. But what species does this stunning and quite venomous reptile belongs to? Local herpetologists and field researchers such as Samrat Sengupta and Anita Malhotra prefer describing it as a local, highly localized variant (i.e. cf) of the well-known White-lipped Pit viper *Trimeresurus albolabris*, while European specialists such as Gernot Vogel are convinced it actually is better described as *Trimeresurus septentrionalis*, which has the same scale count of *T. albolabris* but is found within a different geographical range. All agree on the state of flux currently

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A faint dark-orange ■ temporal line is visible going from the bright yellow pupil to the corner of the mouth. As in *albolabris*, the lip is of a paler tone than the rest of the body.

■ The body of the male individual encountered near Jorhat showed heavy parasitizing by subcutaneous worms, with several nodules of different sizes all over its emaciated body.





Depending on light conditions, the dorsum occasionally appears of a toned-down, mustard-like color. The tail is however brick-red as in most bright green *Trimeresurus* species.



Strangely enough, all the sightings of this wonderful morph we heard of have taken place in tea plantations - none have been observed (yet) inside the forest proper. An indication of habitat preference or rather better chances to bump into one when actively picking tea leaves?

pervading herpetological research in NE India however, and given the furious and highly specialized debate about the constant (and often rather useless) revisions going on in the *Trimeresurus* complex, we'll just describe our wonderful find as a bright yellow, relatively uncommon and seldom described "new" morph of a pit viper belonging to the *Trimeresurus* complex, cf *albolabris* or *septentrionalis* (or even a new species which might be described in detail in the future, who knows). This beautiful color morph appears to be highly localized and with a remarkably restricted range, with most if not all individuals being found in tea estates and tea plantations exclusively; the specimen we observed appeared to be quite feisty and defensive, resorting on several occasions to intense tail rattling first and defensive lunges and bites immediately afterwards during our photographic session. Despite its relatively poor physical condition it was extremely active, ready to bite and very little inclined to allow gentle manipulation; at the very first opportunity to flee it dropped to the ground from the branch it was coiling on and immediately disappeared in a hole among the tree root system. Despite this proclivity to defend itself with alacrity, accidents in the plantations with tea-pickers seem to be extremely rare. In any case, it is quite obvious that further research is needed - the Golden viper of Assam is waiting for our next visit!



■ A close-up side view of the impressive head of this beautiful and enigmatic species or morph confirms all the visible external features of the *Trimeresurus albolabris* and *septentrionalis* complex.