

Spotted: Snake not seen here in 172 years

Reptile enthusiast says species seldom sighted even in Malaysia

Clement Yong

A snake not seen in Singapore for 172 years was spotted in Bukit Timah Nature Reserve in September, according to a report filed on Thursday.

Dr John van Wyhe, a senior lecturer from the National University of Singapore (NUS), found the lined blind snake, also known by its scientific name *Ramphotyphlops lineatus*, dead on a bike trail at the nature reserve on Sept 16.

Striped and worm-like, and more than 50cm in length, the black snake's discovery changes its previous status of "indeterminate" – or in need of verification – to "extant", now that its existence has been definitively recorded here in modern times.

"It was quite unexpected to find it in Singapore since it is an uncommonly seen species even in Malaysia," said Mr Law Ing Sind, who helped identify the snake. "We still don't know the current population size or how that population is distributed in Singapore."

The 23-year-old co-founder of the Herpetological Society of Singapore, an enthusiasts' group for the

study of reptiles and amphibians, said the features and habits of the lined blind snake could explain its elusiveness.

"The (snake) tends to burrow into the soft tropical soil in search of invertebrate prey, and so spends its entire life underground," he explained.

"They also have a great deal of superficial similarity with worms, so the public may just dismiss this as another worm when they encounter one."

Last seen in 1847, the lined blind snake has been so difficult to find that a 2015 National Parks Board (NParks) survey for reptiles and amphibians at Bukit Timah failed to detect it.

The recent rediscovery of the snake was documented in a report on Thursday by Mr Law, Dr van Wyhe, and Ms Rachel Seah in the Singapore Biodiversity Records, which is hosted by the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum.

Ms Seah, 23, is an NUS life sciences student who alerted Mr Law to Dr van Wyhe's sighting of the snake.

The trio noted in the report that the specimen found was the longest one recorded for the species.

They wrote: "The featured specimen is also of interest in that it is about 4cm longer than the maximum total length recorded for the species, which is 48cm total length."

Due to its long 172-year absence



POTENTIAL FOR MORE DISCOVERIES

Given that Bukit Timah hosts Singapore's oldest and largest patch of primeval forest, there is a potential to discover more surprising records and even potentially new species in the area.



MR LAW ING SIND, co-founder of the Herpetological Society of Singapore, comprising enthusiasts who study reptiles and amphibians.

This lined blind snake, found dead in Bukit Timah Nature Reserve on Sept 16, was the first of its species to be seen in Singapore since 1847.

PHOTO: JOHN VAN WYHE

from official records, "the featured specimen would, therefore, represent a significant rediscovery in Singapore", they added.

Following Dr van Wyhe's discovery of the snake in September, the dead reptile was moved to the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum with NParks' permission.

Taking an animal from the wild without permits or permission by NParks is an offence here.

In May, NParks said it found more

than 40 species that could potentially turn out to be new to Singapore, following a multi-year survey of the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve between 2014 and last year.

The lined blind snake, however, was not detected then.

Mr Law said this was not surprising, as there are about 55 terrestrial species of snakes in Singapore.

"Given that Bukit Timah hosts Singapore's oldest and largest patch of primeval forest, there is a potential

to discover more surprising records and even potentially new species in the area," he said.

Several animals have been rediscovered in Singapore in the past few years. For instance, two species of flower flies were sighted again after they were last seen in Singapore almost 200 years ago – in Pulau Ubin this year and in Bukit Timah Nature Reserve in 2017.

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Horse therapy in the heartland for people with special needs

Cheryl Teh

Valentina's job used to involve carrying a polo player through grueling training sessions, sometimes slogging through the rain at breakneck speed.

Years later, after a lifetime of being a polo pony, there is no longer a need for speed in her life.

She will now take it slow, accompanying people with special needs through horse therapy sessions.

Every Wednesday, she will make an appearance at a sheltered basketball court next to Block 311 Yishun Ring Road for four hours, as part of Singapore's first horse therapy programme to be conducted within a Housing Board estate.

The programme, Wednesdays with Horses, was launched yesterday with the aim of helping people with special needs open up more and, through interactions with the horses, develop more confidence.

The horses involved have been

rescued and retrained by local animal therapy charity Equal.

"In crowded and fast-paced Singapore, many of us prefer to live separate lives. Horses, however, have a magnetic quality that attracts people naturally," said Mr Ng Tze Yong, chief executive officer of Equal.

"Strangers not only come together, they learn, through working with the horses, the skills of relating to and understanding the needs of others," Mr Ng added.

In the long run, the programme is expected to see up to 200 participants and 60 volunteers a year.

Four beneficiaries have signed up for the programme so far, including four-year-old Janice Png.

Janice, who has autism spectrum disorder, attended the first session yesterday with her parents. She will undergo a carefully planned programme with activities involving therapy horses like Valentina.

"This programme can help expose Janice to different experiences. It is not often that children come into close contact with a horse," said Mr Png Huat Ching, 36, Janice's father.

Mr Png had noticed a marked improvement in Janice's condition after music therapy, and thought it would be a good idea to have her participate in some form of animal therapy. "I am hopeful she will become more receptive and open up over time – not only to people but to animals as well," Mr Png said.

Wednesdays with Horses is partially funded through SG Enable's Tote Board Enabling Lives Initiative Grant, and costs \$120 per participant, for four one-hour sessions.

To sign up for the programme, visit www.equal.org.sg/familyprogramme

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Janice Png, four, who has autism spectrum disorder, being led by her mother, Ms Koh Ming Hui, 32, as she strokes a therapy horse during the launch of Wednesdays With Horses – a horse therapy programme that aims to help people with special needs open up more through interactions with the horses.

ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Villas, water slide for new HomeTeamNS clubhouse

Cara Wong

Home Team national servicemen and their families can enjoy villas and Singapore's longest indoor water slide at the new Bedok Clubhouse.

The waterfront-themed clubhouse in Bedok Reservoir Park will open in the fourth quarter of 2021, with facilities like an indoor water adventure area, an infinity pool and a members-only lounge.

At the ground-breaking ceremony yesterday, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said the clubhouse, one of three in the works, is meant to be first-class in location, design, physical structure and activities. "A clear direction was set that the clubhouses will have to express, in concrete terms, what we say to our national servicemen about how we value them," said Mr Shanmugam.

The clubhouse in Khatib is expected to be launched in the first quarter of next year, with a third located in Tengah.

The Bedok location will also include 10 villas, each equipped with a sheltered barbecue area and a roof terrace. The villas are about 1,400 sq ft to 1,600 sq ft, about the size of an executive Housing Board flat, and will be available for short stays for all national servicemen of Home Team agencies.

The Bedok club will also have a three-storey indoor water adventure facility with Singapore's longest indoor water slide at 114m long. There will also be an indoor wet obstacle-rop course, and a slide tunnel decorated with LED lights in the shape of a rainbow.

Servicemen can book one of several man caves – sheltered terraces with a barbecue pit and dining area – for social gatherings.

The Bedok club, designed with input from national servicemen, is estimated to cost \$79 million.

Deputy Superintendent (NS) Jim Tan said the development committee comprised representatives from both the police and the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) – unlike in the past, where each agency took charge of a clubhouse. "This is the first time that we are building a clubhouse together as one Home Team," said DSP (NS) Tan, co-chair of the HomeTeamNS' East Clubhouse Development Committee.

SCDF's Assistant Commissioner Kadir Maideen Mohamed, who co-chairs the committee, added: "We all sat down together as part of the development committee, with everyone giving bits and pieces of advice."

Designed to serve more than 40,000 Home Team national servicemen and their families, the club will be built with sustainability in mind, with solar panels and rainwater harvesting facilities. The villas will be built around existing trees in the park.

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Gift is largest by an individual to NParks' fund

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efforts or discourage the feeding of pigeons.

Separately, billionaire Peter Lim's gift to the NParks' Garden City Fund will support students from less privileged backgrounds to participate in the programmes. The money from the Peter Lim Horticulture and Animal Science Scholarship is the single largest donation

by an individual to the fund.

Mr Heng noted that those taking part in the programmes would get a boost in their skills and employability across the horticulture, landscape design, ecology, veterinary and animal sectors.

He said that NParks has also been working with pre-school operator My First Skool to introduce the Community in Bloom programme at its centres. It is a nationwide gar-

dening movement that aims to foster a community spirit and bring together all residents – young and old – to enhance Singapore's greenery.

By March 2021, pre-schoolers at over 140 My First Skool centres will have the chance to tend to gardens in or near their schools, as well as learn about nature and gardening in the classroom, he said. "The Community in Bloom programme is a part of our nation-building effort. It is mean-

\$10m

Donation by Singapore billionaire Peter Lim to the NParks' Garden City Fund will support students from less privileged backgrounds to participate in the programmes.

ingful and fulfilling for a growing number of gardening enthusiasts."

Primary and secondary school children will also get to grow their own plants in dedicated green spaces within school compounds under a separate Greening Schools for Biodiversity programme.

He added that formal education curriculum in institutes of higher learning would be enhanced, allowing students in certain courses to get hands-on experience through internships and student-run parks.

Mr Heng said NParks has also been exploring ways to expand the variety of ornamental and edible plants

in community gardens here. Since the start of this year, its officers have planted over 75 plant species and cultivars at HortPark, including the edamame bean, red radish and the Japanese sweet potato.

"I am particularly excited about the effort to cultivate new edible plants, because this supports our strategy to strengthen Singapore's food resilience," he said, adding there is "great potential" for urban farming, not only in strengthening food resilience, but also as a potential new area of economic growth.

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