

# First Report of Occurrence and Conservation Status of Black Softshell Turtle, *Nilssonia nigricans* (Anderson 1875) (Reptilia: Testudines: Trionychidae) in West Bengal, India

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Received: 21 May 2018 / Revised: 19 April 2020 / Accepted: 27 April 2020  
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**Abstract** The study reports the first record of the Black softshell turtle, *Nilssonia nigricans* (Anderson in Ann Mag Nat Hist 16:282–285, 1875), a species categorised as “Extinct in the Wild” category by IUCN (<http://www.iucnredlist.org/>, 2002) from a locality in West Bengal (Baneswar village, District Cooch Behar, West Bengal; 26° 23.912' N, 089° 29.872' E). The study conducted during January, 2017 to January, 2020 found the species to occur in a protected temple pond and several other ponds in the locality. The mean Straight Carapace Length (SCL) and the mean Straight Carapace Width (SCW) of adult turtles were  $47.3 \pm 10.11$  and  $37.66 \pm 4.24$  respectively, whereas the mean SCL and SCW of juveniles were  $13.5 \pm 6.36$  and  $12 \pm 4.24$  respectively. The species is omnivorous in feeding habit. It enjoys local community protection. Further conservation efforts are required to save this local population from future extinction due to urbanization pressure.

**Keywords** Black softshell turtle · Conservation · Protected temple pond · Community protection · West Bengal

## Introduction

Softshell turtles belong to an ancient family of chelonians (Trionychidae) with highly derived morphology, dating back at least to the lower Cretaceous of Asia (Meylan and Gaffney 1992; Nessov 1995). The family includes 30 living species distributed in 14 genera and found in Africa, Asia, North America and New Guinea (Fritz and Havas 2007). Eight species of turtles of the same family are known to occur from the Indian subcontinent. Originally the black softshell turtle was described as *Trionyx nigricans* with type locality-Chittagong Tank (Anderson 1875). Later Meylan (1987) following the morphology placed it in the genus *Aspideretes* along with three other species of Trionychids. Subsequently, Praschag et al. (2007) replaced the species into the genus *Nilssonia* after a careful phylogenetic analysis.

Until recently one of these eight species, *Nilssonia nigricans*, categorised as ‘Extinct in the Wild’ by the IUCN (2002), was thought to be confined only to a pond (tank) at the Hazrat Sultan Bayazid Bostami Shrine in Nasirabad near Chittagong, Bangladesh. However, Praschag and Gemel (2002) reported this species from 8 other different locations, mostly from the Brahmaputra plains of Assam. In 2012 Wildlife Biologists of the Centre for Advance Research in Natural Resources and Management found another small wild population in the Sylhet, Bangladesh ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/black\\_softshell\\_turtle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/black_softshell_turtle)). In 2017 a singular wild turtle was discovered in the wetlands of Old Akuk Village in Wokha district, Nagaland, India (Longchar 2017). The present study conducted during January, 2017–January, 2020 reports its occurrence for the first time in West Bengal in a village about 12 km away from the district town Cooch Behar.

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