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Introduction

The Indian subcontinent is home to an incredible 700+ reptile species. The desert sands of the Thar, beaches and oceans of the Andamans and dense rainforests of the Western Ghats are rippling with reptile life. They come in every size and shape, from thumb-sized geckos to car-sized crocodiles. Every single one of these species is perfectly adapted to life in our diverse subcontinent.





What makes reptiles different from other animals?

Reptiles were the first animals with backbones to not just make the leap from ocean to land, but also fully adapt to terrestrial life. They've been around for a long time as they emerged over 300 million years ago! Reptiles have scaly, waterproof skin and shelled eggs that can survive out of water. These key cool characteristics let them leave their aquatic ancestors behind.

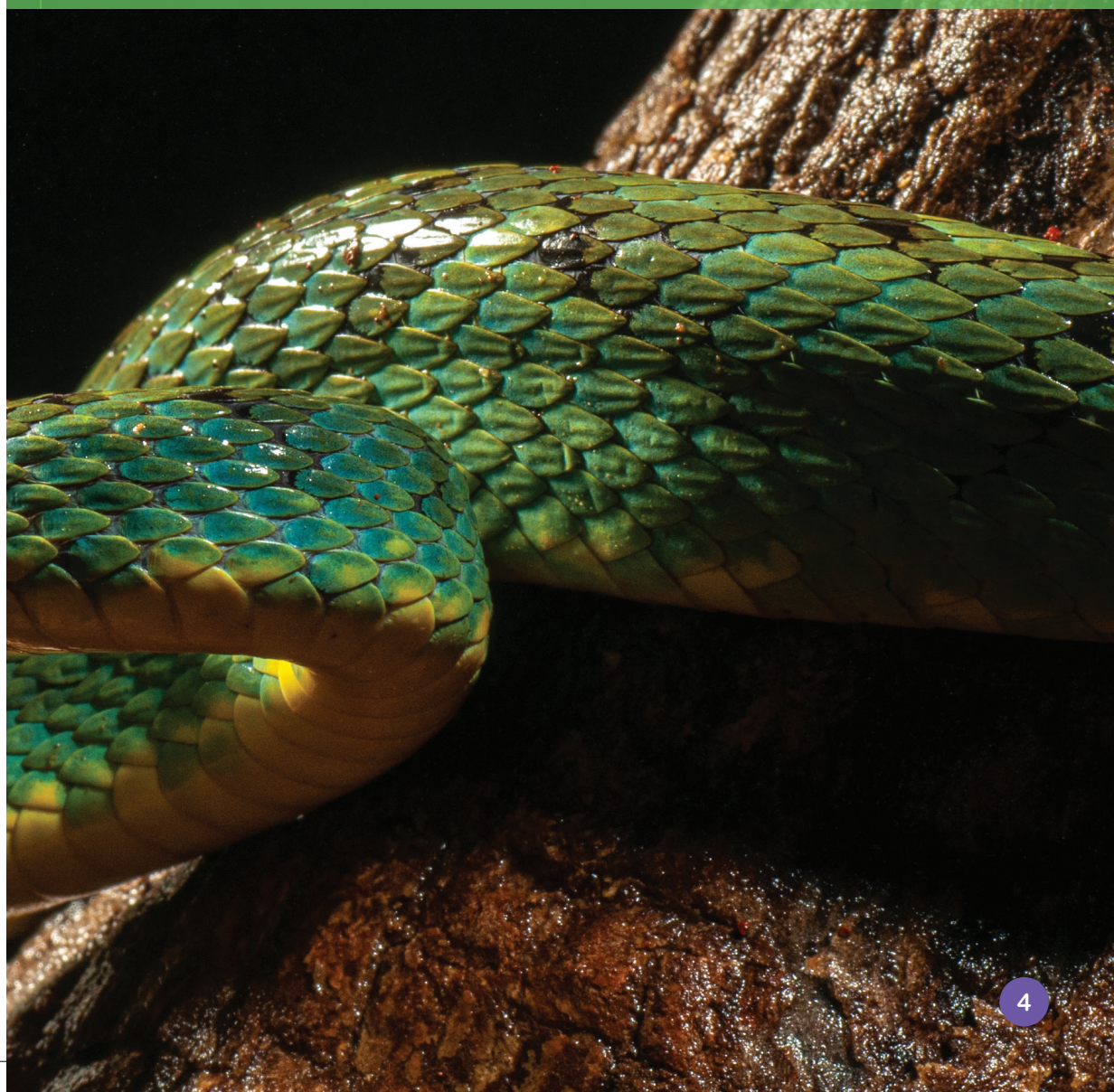
Why do reptiles (big and small) matter?

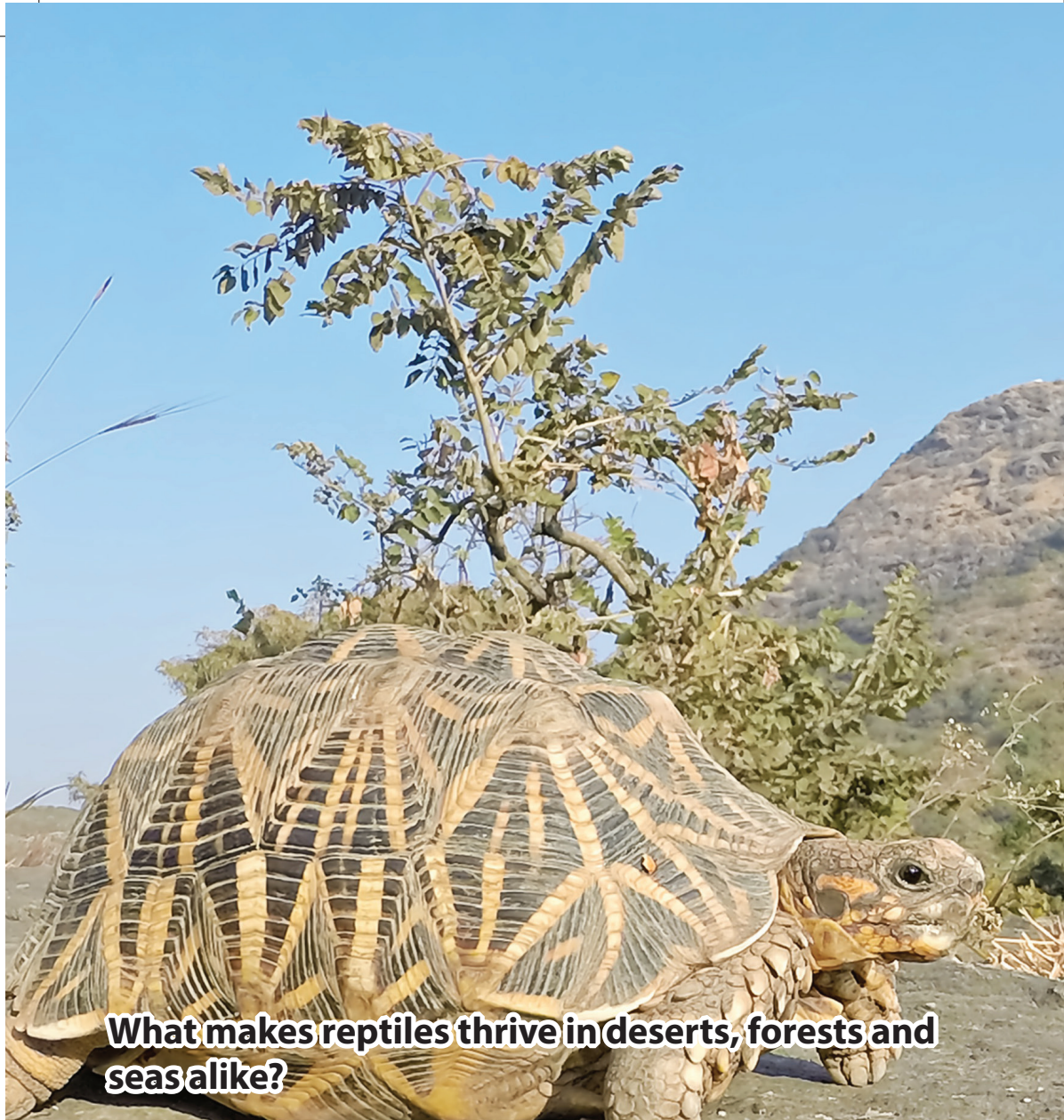
Reptiles play vital roles in maintaining nature's balance and ensuring that our ecosystems thrive. Reptiles can be both predator and prey, keeping all sides of the food chain in check. Herbivorous reptiles help disperse seeds and fruits, allowing plants to flourish. They're very useful for humans too! Snakes are some of nature's most important pest control measures. Helping keep rodent populations down. Lizards hunt down insect pests too.



Are reptiles in trouble?

Unlike birds and mammals, reptiles are mostly cold-blooded. Their body temperatures match those of their surroundings, though some reptiles can change this a little. They need to use tricks like adapting to different habitats, basking in the sun or even hibernating to keep their body temperatures in the right range. But climate change is affecting seasons, making summers hotter and winters shorter. Because reptiles rely on external temperature more than mammals, this could impact them a lot.





What makes reptiles thrive in deserts, forests and seas alike?

The cold-blooded metabolism of reptiles is the ultimate efficiency hack. Maintaining a warm body temperature takes an awful lot of energy. Warm-blooded animals consume way more food than cold-blooded ones. This lets reptiles survive where others would starve. Waterproof scales, hardy eggs and unique jaws are other special features. But being dependent on the heat of the sun for your body to wake up can also be a handicap that reptiles need to learn to live with.

Western Ghats King Cobra

Find Me Here!

The Western Ghats king cobra is found in the ghats of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra.

CRITTER STATS

Scientific name: *Ophiophagus kaalinga*

Size: usually 3–4 m long – as long as a small car

Weight: 4–10 kg

Habitat: forests, fields and even urban areas

Lifespan: 17 years in captivity

Conservation status: vulnerable

Between dense grasses, moss-covered tree trunks or on the forest floor, you may catch a glimpse of the king cobra. Black and white, brownish grey or even an olive green, it blends in with the shadows. Step carefully – you might see it rear up and spread its hood!



The king cobra reigns as the undisputed ruler of the serpent kingdom, a cold-blooded assassin that feasts exclusively on its own kind. When snakes are scarce, it might feed on lizards or birds.

Occasionally, you might see the king cobra flick out its forked tongue. It's not to taste the air, but it's a way for the snake to smell better!





This snake also relies on its sharp eyesight. It watches and waits, spotting movement from a distance. Once it spots prey, it pounces like a tightly coiled spring released.

The king cobra bites deep with long, sharp fangs. These fangs contain venom which quickly affects the prey's nervous system. Soon, the prey can no longer move.

If the cobra catches a large animal, it might go months without eating again!





DID YOU KNOW?



Although a king cobra's bite can be deadly, they try to avoid people as much as they can. King cobras bite only when threatened, like when accidentally stepped upon.

For a long time, scientists thought that king cobras were all one species. Newer studies have led them to believe that there may be four different species of king cobra! The Western Ghats king cobra is one.



The king cobra swallows its prey whole! Flexible jaws and stretchy ligaments help them achieve this dietary feat.