

King Cobras at 9K ft in Everest region stun scientists

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Dehradun: Ten King Cobras were recently spotted at elevations between 1,000 and 2,700m in the Everest region of Nepal, sparking concern among scientists who said the sightings could be linked to shifting climate patterns.

The reptiles, typically found in lowland tropical habitats, appeared in areas including Gopaleshwar, Bhanjyang, Sokhol and Fulchowk in what experts described as an unusual development.

Bishnu Pandey of the Institute of Forestry in Nepal said the sightings were a 'recent phenomenon'.

He said, "We found King Cobra eggs in the Gauri Shankar Range just before the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, cobras were sighted in Jiri municipality, which lies between 1,600m and over 5,000m." He



Jignasu Dolia

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added that the snakes found in these areas were the same species as those seen in Nepal's Terai region and suggested climate change as the most likely cause of their movement to higher altitudes.

Ramesh Chinnasamy, a scientist at the Wildlife Institute of India, said King Cobras typically inhabit rainforests and are naturally shy.

He said, "While we cannot

directly attribute this shift in distribution to climate change without a detailed scientific study, rising temperatures do tend to extend the active periods of King Cobras and other reptiles, potentially prompting them to expand their habitat range. Systematic research is needed to assess whether the sightings mark a broader ecological change or are isolated events." Wildlife

biologist and King Cobra researcher Jignasu Dolia, based in Nainital, confirmed similar high-altitude sightings in Uttarakhand.

He said, "King Cobras have been seen in parts of Kumaon, including Mukteshwar, which lies above 2,000m. Generally, cobra sightings diminish with increasing altitude, so these sightings are uncommon but not unusual."

He added that long-term studies were vital to understanding how the species is responding to changing climate conditions. Meanwhile, a recent study has shown that King Cobras — the world's longest venomous snakes — are not a single species.

Genetic data now reveals they comprise four distinct species, challenging the earlier classification under *Ophiophagus hannah*. Sanjiv Chaturvedi, chief conservator of

forests (research), Uttarakhand forest department, acknowledged their adaptability.

"Though they are native to rainforests, King Cobras show remarkable adaptability. In Corbett Tiger Reserve, for instance, they are found at elevations ranging from 300 to over 2,000m," he said.

Supporting the climate shift theory, a recent ICIMOD study warned that temperatures across the eight countries of the Hindu Kush Himalayan region, including Nepal and India, are expected to remain 0.5°C to 2°C above long-term averages. Nepal has also recorded an increase in extreme weather events, and its maximum temperature is rising by an average of 0.05°C per year. Experts said such changes could be altering local ecosystems and influencing animal distribution.

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