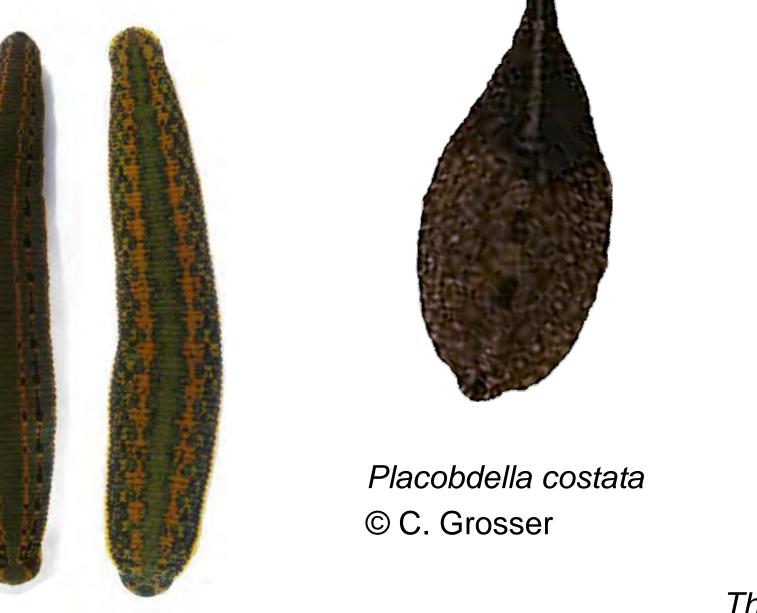
A Conservation Medicine's Ward: Haemopis elegans, an enigmatic toad-injuring autochthonous leech

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Five native leeches are well known sucking blood from or feeding on tissues of vertebrates except fishes: The allochthonous, exclusively sanguivorous medi-







cal leeches, *Hirudo medicinalis* and *H*. verbana, the autochthonous, ectoparasitic European turtle leech Placobdella costata, and the autochthonous, but endoparasitic duck leeches Theromyzon tessulatum and T. maculosum.



I: Hirudo medicinalis r: Hirudo verbana © A. Hassl

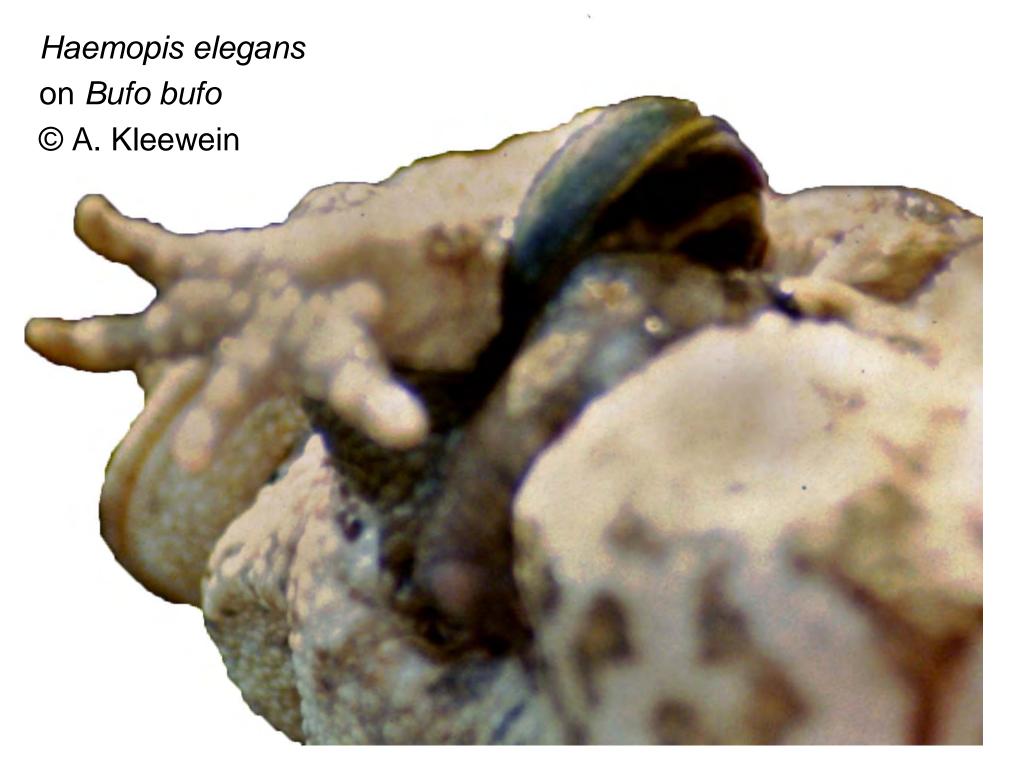


Theromyzon tessulatum © http://i.pbase.com/g5/01/ 12401/2/100394704.ImhCZOeN.jpg

The native species of the leech genus Haemopis (Deutsch: Unechte Roßegel) are considered to be macrophageous, not sanguivorous. Yet, in 2004 a superb taxon, Haemopis elegans (Moquin-Tandon 1846), has been re-erected by Grosser; and this presumptive native and autochthonous taxon, most probably a rare species deserving protection, is habitually separated from the ubiquitous, common, and sober H. sanguisuga. But, biological data of H. elegans are unknown to a large extend, especially the diet and the habitat of this leech are sensitive material.

Theromyzon maculosum © C. Grosser

During a herpetological survey in the Lanzendorfer Moor/Carinthia in May 2005 leeches were detected by chance attacking and injuring spawning toads (Bufo bufo). Some of the leeches were classified as H. elegans by the unicoloured dark-gray venter, the lateral margins with a compact longitudinal yellow stripe, and the brown median stripe with some paramedian rectangular brown spots on the greenish dorsum. At least one of them was stuck on a toad unequivocally, penetrated the toad's skin marginally via a bite, causing a massive skin reddening and irritation; and a picayune after-bleeding circle became apparent when the leech was removed by force.



Conclusions: Haemopis elegans may be the only known ectoparasitic and maybe even sanguivorous species within the leech genus Haemopis; macrophagous feeding behavior will no longer be regarded as a helpful taxonomic criterion within the family Hirudinidae; and the thesis of poly-paraphyly within this leech family is reinforced.

