

(205)

First Record of the Critically Endangered *Vandeleuria nolthenii* from Hakgala Botanical Garden, Central Highlands of Sri Lanka**Gamage, K.S.N.^{1*}, Galappaththi, S.U.², Kusuminda T.G.T.³**¹*Gamini Central College, Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka*²*Sri Sumangala Balika Maha Vidyalaya, Nalluruwa, Panadura, Sri Lanka*³*IDEA Lab, Department of Zoology and Environment Science, Faculty of Science, University of Colombo, Colombo 03, Sri Lanka***sakunagamage21@gmail.com***Abstract**

Rodents of the genus *Vandeleuria* are small, nocturnal, arboreal members of the family Muridae, distinguished by partially opposable digits and flat nails on the first and fifth toes. Sri Lanka hosts two species: the widespread *V. oleracea* and the Critically Endangered, montane-endemic *V. nolthenii*. During a citizen science survey in urban and semi-natural habitats, we recorded *V. nolthenii* for the first time from Hakgala Botanical Garden (1,700-1,800 m Above Sea Level), adjacent to Hakgala Strict Nature Reserve. The objective of this study was to document and verify the occurrence and nesting-site characteristics of *V. nolthenii* within human-modified montane habitats. On May 5, 2023, during an opportunistic survey, a dead *Cupressus macrocarpa* tree (Girth at breast height=135 cm) near the botanical garden exit gate was examined for nesting activity. The trunk had two oval-shaped openings: the lower at 90 cm above ground (28×44 mm) and the upper 40 cm above it (24×17 mm). The lower cavity was covered with dead cypress leaves and other plant matter. Examining it led to the sequential emergence of five small, brownish, long-tailed mice from the upper opening. Based on their external morphology and behaviour, the individuals were identified as *V. nolthenii*. Previous studies reported females with four half-grown young occupying bird nests in early April; the present observation of five similarly sized individuals in early May is consistent with a mother accompanied by nearly grown offspring. This record highlights the value of citizen science in documenting elusive small mammals and indicates that *V. nolthenii* can utilize exotic vegetation and persist in modified habitats. The finding extends the known distribution of the species within the montane zone and unveils the biodiversity present in human-managed landscapes. Continued collaboration among visitors, naturalists, and researchers can support monitoring and conservation of Sri Lanka's lesser-known mammals.

Keywords: *Vandeleuria nolthenii*, Citizen science, Distribution record, Sri Lanka