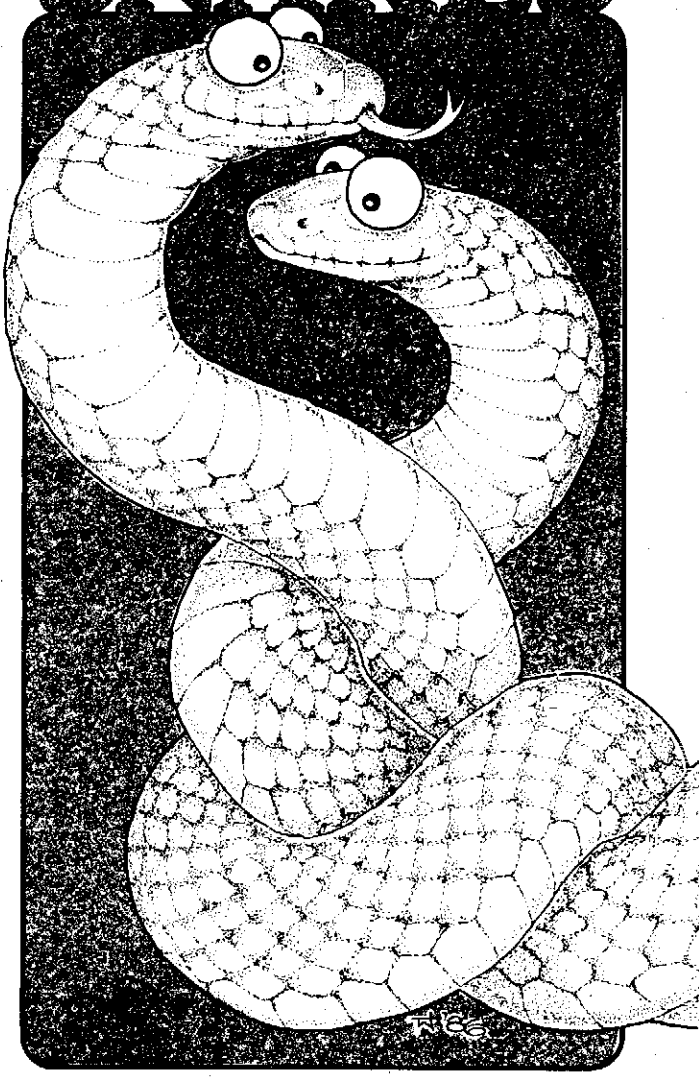
Living with SNAKES



ACT Parks and Conservation Service

LIVING WITH SNAKES

People react to snakes in different ways; some fear them, others are fascinated by them and recognise them as animals with a remarkable capacity to adapt for survival.

There is a growing recognition throughout Australia that we should not kill native wildlife or destroy their habitats simply for convenience or commercial gain. Many more people than ever before now accept the view that we should be living and working in harmony with nature.

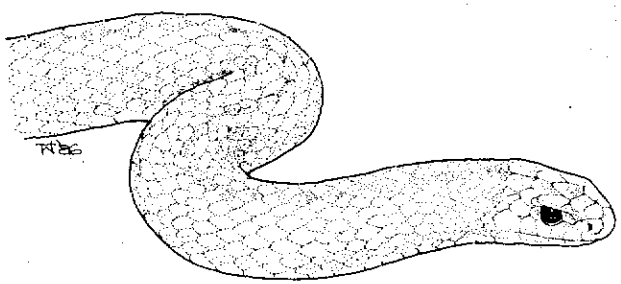
This change in attitude is reflected in the treatment of snakes. Many people now reject the old saying 'the only good snake is a dead one'. Today snakes are protected by law in all States and Territories of Australia and may not be killed unless they threaten life. This changed status recognises the role snakes fulfil in maintaining the balance of nature by consuming smaller animals — some of which are pests — while they in turn form part of the diet of other animals.

The information in this leaflet will help you develop a better understanding of these creatures.

WHICH SPECIES ARE IN THE A.C.T.?

There are approximately 3000 species of snakes in the world, 140 of which are found in Australia. Ten species are known to inhabit the ACT, although only three of these are likely to be found in suburban gardens. The eastern brown snake is seen most frequently. Red-bellied black and black-headed snakes are seen only occasionally. Each of the ten species found in the ACT is described in the following notes.

The eastern brown snake (*Pseudonaja textilis*) is light brown to grey-brown above, with a light brown to cream coloured belly marked with orange spots. Young snakes have a black patch on the head and another on the nape. Black bands along the body may be present. This species inhabits dry forest, woodland and grassland, and occasionally enters suburban gardens. Length: average 1.5m, maximum 2.2m.



The red-bellied black snake (*Pseudechis porphyriacus*) is black with an orange or red belly. It usually lives near water in swamps and streams. Length: average 1.2m, maximum 2.5m.

The black-headed snake (*Unechis dwyeri*) is light brown with a cream belly. The top of the head is black. It inhabits dry forests and woodlands. Length: average 0.3m, maximum 0.6m.

The common tiger snake (*Notechis scutatus*) is brown to almost black, with often indistinct light crossbands and a cream belly. The species inhabits swampy areas of mountain forests, for example the Orroral Valley. Length: average 1.0m, maximum 1.5m.

The copper-head (*Austrelaps superbus*) is dark to light grey with orange flanks and a yellow or cream-grey belly. It is common in the mountain forests southwest of Canberra, for example in Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Namadgi National Park. Length: average 1.0m, maximum 1.5m.

The white-lipped snake (*Drysdalia coronoides*) is light brown to reddish with a cream belly. A white streak extends from the nasal area passing below the eyes to the neck. The species inhabits wet areas of mountain forests. Length: average 0.36m, maximum 0.6m.

Only a few specimens of the death adder (*Acanthophis antarcticus*), little whipsnake (*Unechis flagellum*) and bandy-bandy (*Vermicella annulata*) have been recorded in the ACT. One species of blind snake (*Typhlina nigrescens*) occurs in the ACT.

Blind snakes are small, non-venomous, worm-like animals which burrow in loose soil under rocks and logs.

HOW VENOMOUS ARE SNAKES?

All species that live in the ACT, with the exception of the blind snake, are venomous. They have fangs which are used for injecting venom into prey. The four largest snake species in the ACT all have highly toxic venom and so are potentially lethal to humans.

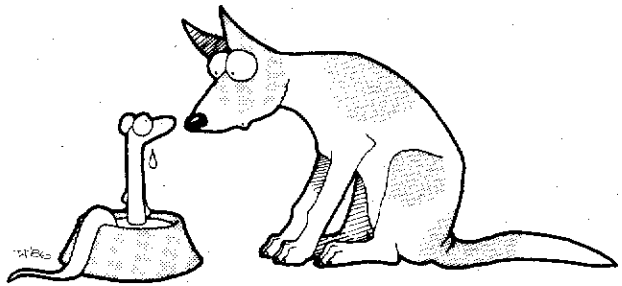
The most toxic snake venom found in Australia, and in the world, is produced by the inland taipan (*Parademansia microlepidotus*). Next in order are the eastern brown snake, the taipan and the common tiger snake.

When determining how dangerous a snake is, as distinct from how venomous, you have to consider several other factors. Queensland Museum researchers have measured venom toxicity, venom yield, fang length, and frequency of bite, and have assessed the temperament of different snake species. Their research shows the taipan to be the most dangerous, followed by the king brown, death adder, eastern brown, common tiger snake and inland taipan. The copper-head and red-bellied black snake were ranked ninth and eleventh respectively.

WHY DO SNAKES ENTER GARDENS?

In the ACT snakes are most active from October to March when they can be seen sunning themselves or moving across the ground searching for food.

The eastern brown snake is the species most likely to enter gardens in Canberra, but if you do find one in your yard it will only be passing through. They do not take up residence in suburban yards because of the lack of suitable food and shelter and their fear of human activity. However, they may be attracted to gardens for short periods in search of water (in pet bowls, fishponds, swimming pools and similar places) particularly during prolonged dry periods. If you keep your grass mown and garden debris to a minimum it will help to discourage these short visits.



HOW DO I AVOID BEING BITTEN?

Snakes are naturally shy animals and their first form of defence is to move away from danger. Contrary to popular belief, they will not deliberately chase humans, but if provoked or cornered they may attempt to bite. Most people who have been bitten were attempting to kill or handle a snake. Although snakes travel at a speed no greater than a person travelling at a fast walking pace, they can strike very rapidly if aroused. If you encounter a snake, the best thing to do is to let the snake go its own way. To avoid being bitten you should:

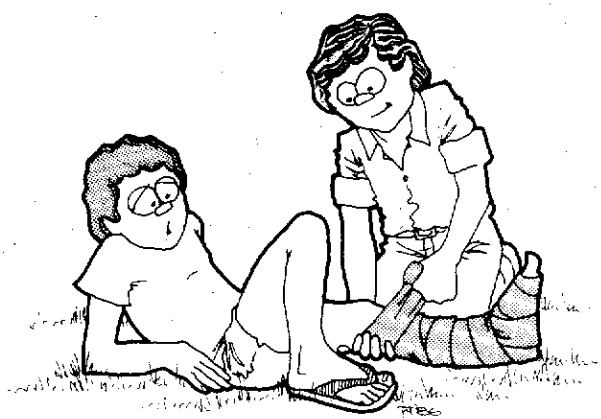
- be alert at all times when in the bush, especially in the early morning during the warmer months when snakes are more likely to be sunning themselves. Wear shoes and trousers, instead of thongs and shorts;
- avoid walking through long grass;
- inspect hollow logs and rock crevices before putting a hand into them.

If you do have to kill a snake, wear trousers and suitable footwear such as gumboots and use a rake or shovel to strike the snake on the head. Remember, such action should be taken as a last resort, and only if you consider the snake is a danger to you or your family.

WHAT IS THE FIRST AID TREATMENT FOR SNAKE BITE?

The recommended treatment for snake bite has changed considerably in recent years. The former method of washing and cutting the wound, sucking the blood and applying a tourniquet is now considered ineffective. If someone is bitten, you should:

1. Not wash the wound. Medical staff can use excess venom on the skin to identify the snake.
2. Apply a constrictive bandage (use clothing if necessary) to the whole limb and if possible place the limb in a splint. Venom moves through the body via the lymphatic system, located below the surface of the skin, rather than through blood vessels. The constrictive bandage will restrict the flow of venom for several hours.
3. Do not give alcohol, food or drugs as these will stimulate fluid movement.
4. Keep the patient still by having him or her lie down.
5. Reassure the patient to help prevent shock.
6. Take the patient to a hospital as quickly and safely as possible. Studies have shown that less than half of all snake bites result in venom being injected into the wound. Because antivenene can be almost as dangerous as snake venom medical authorities prefer to carefully observe a patient to detect signs of poisoning before administering antivenene.

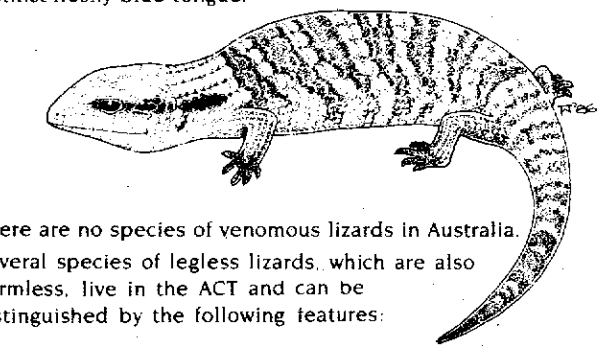


SNAKES: FACT AND FICTION

- the forked tongue is not poisonous but is actually a sensing organ used to detect the scent of prey;
- snakes do not have external ears and therefore they cannot hear sound. Instead they 'hear' by detecting vibrations passing through the ground;
- a snake's skin is dry not slimy;
- snakes produce young either by laying eggs or bearing live young. There is no maternal bonding between the young and adults. In fact some species are cannibalistic and are known to eat their young;
- snakes are not attracted to milk;
- the venom toxicity of a juvenile snake is the same as that of an adult, although the quantity they can inject is much less;
- only about 10 per cent of new-born snakes survive. The remainder die or are eaten by predators including lizards, birds cats and other snakes.

WHAT ANIMALS ARE MISTAKEN FOR SNAKES?

Many blue-tongue lizards are killed by people who believe they are snakes. You can recognise these harmless, non-venomous animals by their stout body, four stumpy legs and distinct fleshy blue tongue.



There are no species of venomous lizards in Australia.

Several species of legless lizards, which are also harmless, live in the ACT and can be distinguished by the following features:

Legless lizards	**Snakes**
Fleshy tongue	Forked tongue
Round scales all over body	Broad belly-scales
Visible ear openings	No ear openings
Tail usually longer than body	Tail shorter than body
Side skin-flaps at the base of the tail which represent vestigial hind legs.	No skin-flaps

Remember, snakes are native wildlife and are protected by law in the ACT and throughout Australia.

FURTHER READING

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McPhee, D. *The Observer's Book of Snakes and Lizards of Australia* Methuen, Sydney, 1979.

Shrine, R. *Australian Snakes*, A Natural History, Reed, Sydney, 1991.

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