

Snake ID and Information Guide

Biodiversity Management

East



Snake ID and Information Guide
Biodiversity Management
East

Compiled by

Jaco Uys

Biodiversity Management Branch

Environmental Resource Management Department

City of Cape Town

Photo credits:

Jaco Uys

Mark De Wet

Introduction

Snakes have traditionally been looked upon as slimy, repulsive and aggressive creatures that attack people at every opportunity. If cornered or hurt, a snake may well defend itself but, even then, most snakes prefer to move off quickly and quietly if given the chance. Other snakes will remain motionless, hoping that their excellent camouflage will enable them to remain undetected.

The snake is without a doubt one of nature's most skilful predators. For instance, a rodent, once it disappears down its network of burrows, is safe from most predators – except from snakes. With its long elongate, limbless body a snake can easily move through the burrows and not only kill an individual rodent, but in many cases eradicate an entire rodent family in one session.

What to do when you come across a snake

- Always leave snakes alone.
- Stand still. No snake will come and attack you. If you are a fair distance from the snake, approximately four meters or more, retreat slowly. Snakes never chase people.
- Do not tamper with dead snakes, as some of them feign death. The body may be turned sideways or upside down with the tongue hanging out.
- If the snake is in your house or garden please call your nearest Nature Reserve (See Useful contacts) with the following information handy: contact number, description of snake and if you have a visual of the snake. This will, in most cases, ensure that the person coming to collect the specimen can do so as quickly and safely as possible. Snakes move quickly and can disappear in seconds and for this reason NO snake handler will respond to a call if a visual of the snake is not kept.

How to minimize the chance of snakebite.

- If you are in the veld, wear stout shoes or boots and long trousers, preferably denims. Most victims are bitten on the lower leg or ankle, often when accidentally standing on a snake.
- Do not walk barefoot at night when in the veld or camping. Most snakebites occur just before, or within two hours of total darkness. This is when nocturnal snakes and people are very active.
- Keep your eyes open and watch where you are going. When mountain climbing, do not put your hands in places that are out of sight. When collecting firewood, don't reach into holes, burrows or hollow logs.
- Do not step over logs and large rocks, as a snake may be sunning itself on the opposite side. Rather step on to them.
- Do not allow the accumulation of rubble, building material, thick vegetation or other materials around your home – these could serve for refuge for snakes and their prey.

First Aid Treatment

If bitten by a snake:

- Try to obtain a clear description of the snake. However, this isn't essential, and you shouldn't waste time looking for the snake. The symptoms will give the doctor a good idea of the kind of snake (neurotoxic etc.), and the severity of the bite.
- Stay calm, and reassure the person who has been bitten. Fear and anxiety cause an increase in heart rate, and thus a more rapid spread of venom throughout the body.
- For neurotoxic and haemotoxic snake bites, it may help to wrap a crepe or pressure bandage firmly around the area of the bite, covering the entire limb (from fingertip to armpit; from toe to groin). Apply hand pressure at the site of the bite until a bandage or strips of fabric can be obtained. Pressure bandages should not be used for cytotoxic bites.
- Keep the person as still as possible and immobilise the affected limb by binding splints (e.g. straight branches) to either side of the limb.
- If a snake spits into someone's eyes, rinse the eyes with large amounts of water, preferably by holding the head under a running tap. This will also require treatment at hospital; a drop of antivenom is placed in the eye.
- Observe the person closely and record any symptoms and the time taken for them to appear.
- If the patient stops breathing, you will need to breathe for them until they can get expert medical help.

Don'ts:

- Don't use antivenom except in a hospital environment. Some patients react against antivenom and may go into anaphylactic shock a serious condition that requires emergency medical treatment. Antivenom also needs to be kept refrigerated, injected correctly (into the bloodstream, not the muscle, and not into the bite site), and given in sufficiently large quantities to be effective.
- Don't cut and suck the wound, or use suction cup devices or electric shocks
- Don't give the patient anything to eat or drink
- Don't rub potassium permanganate into the wound or soak the limb in home remedies
- Don't try to catch and kill the snake

FAQ:

Do snakes move in pairs?

Snakes usually pair up only to mate; at other times they are loners. If you find a snake in your garden, it is highly unlikely that you will find a second one close by.

Do snakes have nests?

Although many eggs may hatch from a clutch laid in a hole or other suitable spot, there is no such thing as a nest of snakes. If you find a snake in a hedge, it does not mean that the hedge conceals a nest full of snakes. One exception is the King cobra (not in SA) that builds a crude nest.

People and Snakes

Snakes are attracted to dark and neglected areas and will seek refuge beneath sheets of corrugated iron or asbestos, building rubble, firewood, grass heaps, and rubbish tips in gardens. Most snakes prey upon rodents, lizards, frogs and toads and will be drawn to gardens that harbour such creatures. To deter snake, always keep your property clean and tidy.

Dripping taps and fishponds may attract frogs and toads as well as snakes, which may come to drink water or seek food. Fowl runs, birdcages and rabbits will also attract snakes.

Useful Contact

Netcare 911

24-hour toll-free poison information hot-line: 0800 333 444 Countrywide – all hours

Website: www.netcare.co.za

Red Cross Children's Hospital

021 689 5227 all hours

Tygerberg Hospital

021 931 6129 all hours

021 938 6084 office hours

Helderberg Nature Reserve (Somerset West)

021 851 6982

Steenbras Nature Reserve (Gordon's Bay)

021 856 5605

Weltevreden Office (Mitchels Plain)

021 392 5134

Cape Nature (Somerset West)

021 8511996

Puff Adder

Bitis arietans

VERY DANGEROUS



Look out for:

- Triangular head distinct from the rest of the body
- Yellow to grey-brown with distinct dark backward-pointing chevrons on the back.
- May hiss or puff when disturbed.
- Usually found on the ground
- Very active after sunset.

Length: 90cm Average

Up to 1.4m

Food: Rodents, hares, ground birds, lizards, toads, and occasionally other snakes.

Venom: Cytotoxic

Mating Season: Spring

Berg Adder

Bitis atropos

DANGEROUS



Look out for:

- A triangular head distinct from the rest of the body.
- Hisses loudly when disturbed
- Lacks chevron markings along the body as seen in Puff Adder.
- Strikes readily, even when the aggressor is well out of reach.
- Likes to bask in the sun.

Length: Average 40 cm

Max 60 cm

Food: Mainly lizards and small rodents but also include amphibians and sometimes smaller snakes.

Venom: Mainly Neurotoxic

Mating Season: Spring

Southern Adder

Bitis armata

MILDLY VENOMOUS



Length: Average 28 cm

Max 41.4 cm

Food: Lizards and small rodents.

Venom: Unknown probably a combination.

Mating Season: Spring

Look out for:

- Short, stubby snake with triangular head.
- 22-28 pair of dark brown to black blotches on the back.
- Reduced tufts of horns above each eye.
- Not found higher than 200m above sea level.

Cape Cobra

Naja nivea

VERY DANGEROUS



Length: Average 1.4m

Max 1.6m

Food: Feeds on rodents, birds, other snakes, lizards and toads.

Venom: Neurotoxic

Mating Season: Spring

Look out for:

- Has medium sized eye with a large pupil.
- Non-spitter
- Scales are smooth and shiny.
- Body colour variable, from black to brown, orange, yellow or mottled.
- Stands it ground and spreads a broad hood when confronted.
- Active during day and early evenings.

Rinkhals

Hemachatus haemachatus

VERY DANGEROUS



Look out for:

- Scales on body and tail are keeled
- Often has black belly with white bars on the throat.
- Lifts up to half its body off the ground and spreads a broad hood.
- Can spit its venom.
- May sham death.
- Likes to bask in the sun.

Length: Average 1m

Max 1,5m

Food: very partial to toads but also feeds on lizards, rodents, snakes, birds, and their eggs.

Venom: Neurotoxic

Mating Season: Spring

Spotted Harlequin Snake

Homoroselaps lacteus

MILDLY VENOMOUS



Length: Average 40cm

Max 65cm

Food: Feeds on legless skinks, blind snakes and other snakes as well as other small lizards.

Venom: Unknown

Mating Season: Spring

Look out for:

- A brightly coloured little snake.
- Usually has a bright orange vertebral stripe or red to orange dots that form a streak from head to tail.
- Often found in termite nest.
- Wiggles violently to escape if caught.

Yellow-bellied Sea Snake

Pelamis platurus

VERY DANGEROUS



Look out for:

- Black above and yellow to yellow-brown below.
- Has a paddle-shaped tail with black and yellow markings.
- May be found washed up on beaches, especially after bad weather.

Length: Average 60cm

Max 1m

Food: Ambushes suitably sized fish that frequent the floating debris where this snake is found.

Venom: Neurotoxic and **NOT** Myotoxic

Mating Season: Winter

Boomslang

Dispholidus typus

VERY DANGEROUS



Length: Average 1,5m

Max 2m

Food: Actively hunts chameleons and other tree-living lizards, birds, nestling, eggs and frogs.

Venom: Haemotoxic

Mating Season: Early Spring

Look out for:

- Strongly keeled dorsal scales.
- Have enormous eyes and a short stubby head.
- May inflate the neck and most of the body under severe provocation.
- Spends most of its life in trees and shrubs.
- Active during the day.

Karoo Whip Snake

Psammophis notostictus

MILDLY VENOMOUS



Look out for:

- Very slender snake.
- Have large eyes with round pupils.
- Quick moving and active during the day.

Length: Average 90cm

Max 1m

Food: Mainly lizards, skinks, geckos, agamids and small rodents.

Venom: The venom is thought to have no affect on man.

Mating Season: Spring



Cape Whip Snake

Psammophis leightoni

MILDLY VENOMOUS

Look out for:

- Very slender snake.
- Have large eyes with round pupils.
- Quick moving and active during the day.



Length: Average 75cm

Max 1m

Food: Ground living lizards, skinks, small rodents and small snakes.

Venom: The venom is thought to have no affect on man.

Mating Season: Spring

Crossed Whip Snake

Psammophis crucifer

MILDLY VENOMOUS



Length: Average 60cm

Max 82,2cm

Food: Small lizards, especially skinks, geckos, as well as frogs.

Venom: The venom is thought to have no affect on man.

Mating Season: Spring

Look out for:

- Usually striped from head to tail.
- Active during the day.
- Have large eyes with round pupils.

Spotted Skaapsteker

Psammophylax rhombeatus

MILDLY VENOMOUS



Length: Average 85cm

Max 1,4m

Food: Rodents, lizards, birds, frogs and snakes.

Venom: Not thought to be harmful to man.

Mating Season: Spring

Look out for:

- Active during the day.
- Fairly large eyes with round pupils.
- Dashes for cover where it is well camouflaged.
- Nervous and quick moving.

Many-spotted Snake

Amplorhinus multimaculatus

MILDLY VENOMOUS



Length: Average 55cm

Max 63cm

Food: Frogs, lizards and small rodents.

Venom: Not thought to be dangerous to man, may cause some local pain, inflammation, swelling and free bleeding.

Mating Season: Spring

Look out for:

- Small head not very distinct from rest of body.
- Medium-sized eyes with round pupils.
- May coil in a tight spring.
- Bites readily.

Herald Snake

Crotaphopeltis hotamboeia

MILDLY VENOMOUS



Look out for:

- Iridescent blue-black on top of head.
- Upper lip may be red, orange, yellow, white or blackish.
- Active at night and common in urban gardens.
- Dark body often has white specks or dots.
- Found in damp locations.

Length:

Average 70cm

Max 1m

Food: Amphibians and the occasional lizard.

Venom: Not thought to be harmful to man.

Mating Season: Spring

Brown House Snake

Lamprophis capensis

HARMLESS



Look out for:

- A terrestrial nocturnal snake.
- Usually has a distinct light stripe that runs from the tip of the snout to the upper half of the eye and continues to the back of the head, as well as another light stripe from the lower half of the eye to the angle of the jaw.
- Common around human dwellings.

Length:

Average: 90cm

Max: 1.5m

Food: Mainly rodents and other small vertebrates, including bats and birds. Lizards, especially skinks, are also taken. Frogs are occasionally eaten.

Mating Season: Spring

Olive House Snake

Lamprophis inornatus

HARMLESS



Length:

Average: 75cm

Max: 1.3m

Food: Lizards, rodents and other snakes.

Mating Season: Spring

Look out for:

- A nocturnal terrestrial snake.
- Have small eyes.
- Plain olive green to grey or black above with no markings.
- Strictly terrestrial, seldom venturing into trees or bushes.

Aurora House Snake

Lamprophis aurora

HARMLESS



Look out for:

- Uniform olive green above with distinct yellow to orange stripe down the back.
- Strictly terrestrial, seldom venturing into trees or bushes.
- Nocturnal, but may bask in the early morning or late afternoon.
- Often active on overcast days.

Length:

Average: 60cm

Max: 90cm

Food: Nestling rodents, lizards and frogs.

Mating Season: Spring

Spotted Rock Snake

Lamprophis guttatus

HARMLESS



Length:

Average: 50cm

Max: 62cm

Food: Lizards, mainly geckos of the genera *Pachydactylus* and *Afroedura*, which also inhabit rocky areas, lacertids and skinks. Rodents are also taken.

Mating Season: Spring

Look out for:

- Dark blotches or spots down the back arranged in alternate pairs that may form a zigzag pattern.
- Nocturnal
- Prefer rocky areas where it lives in narrow rock cracks.

Yellow-bellied House Snake

Lamprophis fuscus

HARMLESS



Length:

Average: 50cm

Max: 76cm

Food: Mainly lizards. Dwarf shrews and other nestling rodents are also taken.

Look out for:

- A plain olive brown to olive green snake.
- Active at night.
- Upper lip, sides and belly usually yellow in colour.

Brown Water Snake

Lycodonomorphus rufulus

HARMLESS



Look out for:

- Plain blackish brown above with a beautiful mother-of-pearl, pink or yellow underside.
- Excellent swimmer.
- Largely active at night.
- The pupils are vertical.

Length:

Average: 60cm

Max: 85cm

Food: A powerful constrictor that feeds on frogs, tadpoles, small fish and occasionally nestlings and rodents.

Mating Season: Spring

Mole Snake

Pseudaspis cana

HARMLESS



Look out for:

- Varies tremendously in colour from nearly black to light brown. Juveniles often have rhombic markings.
- Pointed snout and small head.
- Spends much of its time underground in animal burrows.
- The eyes have round pupils.

Length:

Average: 1.4m

Max: 2m

Food: Adults feeds on rats, moles, gerbils and other small land mammals. Birds and nestlings are taken, as are eggs, which are swallowed whole, Juveniles feed largely on lizards.

Mating Season: Middle to late spring

Sundevall's Shovel-snout

Prosymna sundevalli

HARMLESS



Look out for:

- Active at night.
- The eyes have round pupils.
- The snout is depressed, forming a shovel shape.

Length:

Average: 25cm

Max: 36cm

Food: Reptile eggs and small lizards. May also feed on invertebrates.

Common Slug-eater

Duberria lutrix

HARMLESS



Look out for:

- Has a small head, hardly distinct from the rest of the body.
- Has powerful scent glands, which may be used in self-defence, especially when handled.
- May roll up into a tight spiral.
- Favour damp localities.

Length:

Average: 35cm

Max: 43cm

Food: Only on slugs and snails, which it locates by following the slime trail.

Mating Season: Spring

Common Wolf Snake

Lycophidion capense

HARMLESS



Length:

Average: 40cm

Max: 64cm

Food: Mainly lizards, including skinks and geckos. Snakes are also eaten.

Mating Season: Spring

Look out for:

- Plain brown to black above with white-edged scales, which create a speckled effect.
- A flattened head, barely distinct from the rest of the body.
- Active at night.

Common Egg-eater

Dasypeltis scabra

HARMLESS



Length:

Average: 75cm

Max: 1.16m

Food: Feeds on birds' eggs.

Mating Season: Spring

Look out for:

- Rhombic markings.
- 1 or more dark V-markings on the neck behind the head.
- The inside of the mouth is black.
- Nocturnal.
- The tongue is black.