

Death Adder (Deaf Adder)

There are three major death adder species that occur in Australia, some more species have been described and named in Australia and are awaiting official acceptances; whatever that might mean.

Death adders are found in all states of Australia excepting Victoria and Tasmania. In the early days of European settlement they were probably in Northern Victoria though perhaps no longer.

Death adders also occur in New Guinea and some adjacent islands.

The Common Death Adder (*Acanthophis antarcticus*)

The Northern Death Adder (*Acanthophis praelongus*)

The Desert Death Adder (*Acanthophis pyrrhus*)

The death adder is not a true adder; it belongs to the family of snakes called the elapids (elapidae). Elapids are snakes that are usually described as having short, front fixed (not hinged) fangs.

Death Adders are live bearers or viviparous (not egg layers). They never grow very long; a death adder of one meter in length would be classed as a monster. Their venom is primarily neurotoxic (effecting mostly the nervous system). The only antivenom to be used is specific Death Adder antivenom and in emergencies only would you use polyvalent antivenom (Australian universal antivenom).

It is possible that the name Death Adder is a corruption of the term Deaf Adder. This snake was in days gone by, called also by this name. Most snakes in the world are totally deaf. The name given by the inhabitants of the Island of Crete to a snake is kouphos', which means deaf in Greek, (kouphos' is pronounced with the accent or emphasis on the last vowel). In Greek proper, a snake is called phidi and the plural is phidia. The Greeks learned years ago, or at least the Cretan Greeks did, that a snake was deaf so they called it kouphos'.

Pythons will seldom try to escape when they see a person moving because they move too slowly so their greatest asset for defense is camouflage. Large venomous snakes of Australia will often try to escape when they see a human moving especially if they are not used to seeing moving humans.

Death Adders are not true predators and that means that they don't actively hunt their prey. Death Adders are what you might call a trigger snake or an ambush snake. They sit in wait until some unsuspecting edible size creature happens by and thwoomp, like lightning. Sometimes a death adder may use its lure at the end of its very short tail, which it moves in an undulating manner to attract a small skink or perhaps a small bird that could be interested in a grub. Some believe that the lure at the end of a death adder's tail is some kind of a sting; it is not, no snakes have stings in their tail.

Death Adders are too slow to get away from even a slow human walk. They rely on camouflage, which means that they just sit still. People had noticed that other snakes take flight at the approach of a person. One exception was always the Death Adder. It was thus believed that the other snakes could hear or at least feel the vibration of the footsteps that were approaching. Whereas in most cases the snake that had been seen escaping had seen the approaching person who seemed alien and dangerous to the snake, so it took flight. The death adder can not run so it did what nature had intended it to do; sit still. Because it did not run at the approach of anybody it was assumed that the snake must have been deaf; hence deaf adder. Most all snakes are totally deaf and only very penetrating vibrations will affect a snake.

In my earlier years of snake interest i found the names Death or Deaf adder interchangeable. Nowadays however, one seldom if ever hears the term deaf adder.

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