

The Brown Snake Complex

Genus *Pseudonaja* formally *Demansia*

All Brown Snakes are egg layers not live bearers and all but one species the Ringed Brown (*Pseudonaja modesta*) should be classed as deadly. Specific antivenom is Brown snake antivenom.

The Common or Eastern Brown **(*Pseudonaja textilis textilis*)**

Found over much of Victoria especially in the drier areas. It is to be found in the south eastern corner of South Australia and most of New South Wales. Its range covers most of Queensland and has been recorded in a few spots of the Northern Territory; it is also found in parts of New Guinea.

The venom of this snake is strongly coagulant and neurotoxic though other toxins are also present. The Eastern brown usually produces from 10 to 30 eggs. Egg counts will usually depend on the size of the snake.

Browns are quite common in the wheat and other grain growing areas and their numbers have multiplied to take advantage of the mice that follow the grain.

Browns being rather slender snakes can get their heads down mouse burrows or into places where mice would otherwise be safe. The Browns eat all the mice meaning the whole family. After taking care of the larger mice they'll consume all the baby mice. If the mother gets away and these baby mice were left then she would return and rear them. Within a few more weeks all the females would be pregnant and then they would of course, start to breed like mice. My belief is that without Brown snakes in Australia we would find it very difficult to grow any grain (cereal) crops at all.

It is very hard to be bitten by a brown because a brown is a very nervous and fast snake and will make its escape as soon as it spots you moving, especially if it has not seen many humans passing by in the past.

For example if a brown gets to see many horses or cattle and they don't happen to stand on the snake it will get used to seeing them as harmless. The same goes for humans after a snake sees many humans passing by and if they have not bothered the snake then the snake will see them as safe. If you don't bother them they will get used to you and eventually not take flight.

A Brown will only travel at its top speed when it is trying to escape. The story of them doing fantastic leaps is when they are trying to escape. Never attacking someone; sadly that part of the story never gets to be told.

Humans tend to love a drama and what better drama than to hang it onto some creature that is almost brainless is totally deaf and can only see you when you move. That's right, it can only tell that you are there as a living creature when you move. That is a fact i don't care what anybody says to the contrary. I've lived with up to half a dozen browns in my house and they can not even see a mouse until it moves.

They can however smell a mouse, especially when using their forked tongue to follow the scent. It is the forked tongue that gives the snake direction when following its prey. Otherwise how could it tell which way a mouse has gone? They cannot smell you, and if they can, you are of no interest to them. You don't come up on their register as a food item.

If a Brown is resting under a sheet of iron and sees your finger moving close by, where it can confuse you for possible food and, if it is hungry then you could get a bite. That is a mistake, easily done because the snake has almost no brains. We think that we are quite smart and we make mistakes all the time, well i do anyway.

Australian venomous snakes can not sense you by your heat. We have no pit vipers in Australia like the rattlesnakes of the Americas; they can see your glow in the dark. Most of the Australian pythons have heat sensing pits but **not** our venomous snakes. Another thing to remember is that no snakes can sense your fear; it does no matter how frightened you are.

You can get a bite by stepping on a brown if it is asleep and does not see you coming otherwise it'll usually manage to get out of the way. If a snake's tongue is flicking out from time to time, then it is not sleeping.

Do not pick a fight with a big brown on a hot day; if you do you are asking for trouble. If there is a brown around your house you can squirt it with the hose. It will not attack you for squirting it. It will not know that **you** are squirting it, remember that you are dealing with an almost brainless creature.

A bowl of milk will not entice a snake anywhere; sorry to have to inform those who have been passing on that 'folklore' but snakes do not drink milk; nor do they listen to music.

If you have a chookhouse, place the nesting boxes up high and not on the ground. On the ground you'll notice that mice tend to nest under the boxes and this is inviting browns to move in for the easy pickings. Piles of timber or corrugated iron around your house should be stacked on cleats so as mice won't nest underneath.

What you do is make it boring for the mice around your house and then it will be boring for the snakes. If a Brown happens by it'll soon leave if there are no mice around because that is what it is looking for. Of course if you have a hayshed then that will attract mice. Snakes are not territorial in the normal sense, they'll stay around if there is food available and then they'll move on to greener (mousier) pastures. They will **not** defend their territory; they don't have a territory as such.

The Peninsula Brown *Pseudonaja textilis inframacula*

The Peninsula browns don't have the typical speckled bellies as many of the larger browns. Their bellies are typically dark grey often tending to almost black. It is also normal for these snakes to be almost black backed however i saw a fairly well speckled specimen around the Coffin Bay area of South Australia.

Many of the farmers in the wheat belt south of Whyalla refer to it as a kind of Black snake; most of them have no idea that it is a brown. Many would not know either that it is these Peninsula browns that allow them to grow wheat. Without Browns in the grain areas, mouse plagues would be normal and common. See '**Plagues**' in the feral animal section at www.snakeshow.net.

These snakes are found on the Eyre Peninsula starting south of Whyalla at about Cowell, then their distribution tends to arc south, then across to the west. They can be found perhaps a little further west than Ceduna. After covering a lot of the Peninsula their range tends to get narrower, hugging the coast more towards the western extreme of their range.

Like most browns, the Peninsula browns are a very lithe, fast and retiring snake and are very hard to get close to on a hot day.

Western Brown or Gwardar in WA *Pseudonaja nuchalis*

This snake is rather tricky to define because what have been generally grouped as Western browns cannot be the same snake. I've heard whisper that someone has sorted them out and if that has been well done, then it's about time.

The snakes that enjoyed the name Western brown occurred over most of West Australia excepting a slice along the southern coastline they cover all of South Australia with the exception of the southeast. They have been found in Victoria only in the extreme northwest about as far south as Ouyen. They occur throughout the Northern Territory, through the western half of New South Wales and Queensland. As i said these snakes could not be the same species of snake. Many of them could not even hybridise let alone produce fertile offspring.

For example, there is a very lithe golden brown snake that is called a Western brown (*nuchalis*) in the Top End of the Northern Territory typically around and south of Darwin. This particular snake grows to about a metre in length; it varies in colour from light to sometimes darker golden brown. It is often found with a narrow pale bar across the top of its head starting above to just behind the eye. This snake has the typically speckled belly as most other browns. Its range extends at least as far south as Katherine NT and west to Timber Creek still in the Territory; it may of course be found further in each direction.

There is no way that this is what is normally called a Western brown across the rest of Australia. I also believe that that these snakes could not interbreed with those other snakes and produce either fertile or infertile young. It is possible that they do not even belong to the genus *Pseudonaja*. Two of the most salient similarities to the casual observer would be that they have speckled bellies and their venom would probably match that of the Brown snake complex.

From my own observations these snakes would have to have the fastest strike of all Australian snakes with the exception of the Death adders and the true Whip snakes of the genus *Demansia*.

On one occasion i witnessed a female of this type of snake perform an act that left me incredulous. I was dropping a mouse into the enclosure to feed this snake that had always been a healthy feeder. As the mouse was falling, the snake casually reached up and took the mouse by the throat in mid air. Browns are usually fast but this snake was unbelievable.

The Speckled Brown *Pseudonaja guttata*

If any of the brown snakes should be in a different genus this has to be the one.

Some specimens of these snakes must be the most striking of the browns but they don't look like any of the *Pseudonaja*; nor do they act like them in any way. To me they just don't seem to fit the bill of a brown. In fact I believe that they belong to another genus. Perhaps i'm wrong because if you're not right you are probably wrong. However, more work needs to be done regarding the snake called *Pseudonaja guttata*.

A record of the effect of the venom on one of its own kind was quite horrific; Roy Pails of Ballarat can attest to that. The resulting necrosis and ultimate death of the bitten snake may have been caused by bacteria but, if it was the venom that caused it then this snake should be re-visited.

Many snakes are immune to the venom of other snakes some are not and may suffer badly or pay the ultimate cost from a different species of snake; i have never heard of a snake that was not immune to a bite from its own species.

I have witnessed a bite during a feeding mishap, when a taipan bit another in the spine and it inadvertently killed its mate. However not even a taipan could kill its own kind with a normal flesh/muscle bite. This does not appear to be the case with a speckled brown; as least with the only case that i've heard of, and the result was quite messy.

The Dugite *Pseudonaja affinis affinis*

Found in the South West of West Australia extending east along the coast as far as just into South Australia. This snake can look very much like the snake called the Western brown and only a scale count can sort them out for most people. Dugites are found in a variety of colour phases, as are the Western browns.

Tanners Brown *Pseudonaja affinis tanneri*

Found on the islands of the Recherche Group and the type of Brown snake on Rottnest Island is believed to be the same species. This snake was named after the late Charlie Tanner a gentleman and a scholar with a sense of humour to match. Charlie spent the later part of his life in Cooktown and that is where he left us.

Ingrams Brown *Pseudonaja ingrami*

Found only in a small area of Central Western Qld and Central Eastern NT across the borders of both. This is a very rare snake in captivity.

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