

The Black Snake Complex

Red-bellied blacks belong in the so-called 'black snake complex' of which there are at present 5 members in Australia and there is one in New Guinea/Irian Jaya. The New Guinea cousin, the Papuan black (*Pseudechis (cannia) papuana*) is now very rare because it seems that they have been eating the introduced cane toad, which is deadly to almost anything that eats it.

These snakes are often cannibalistic by nature though by no means are they the only Australian snakes that will eat other snakes. For example i've seen Browns and Copperheads quite happily eat other snakes if they are small enough to fit down their throat. But Tigers, Taipans and Death adders just don't seem to eat other snakes. On very rare occasions a Tiger snakes and Death adders have been known to eat another snake but most Tigers especially the mainland Tigers would die of starvation rather than eat one of their own kind. Taipans never eat reptiles Taipans love to eat rats.

The Red-bellied black is the only true Black snake in the black snake complex. The Blue-bellied black is the only other jet-black snake in this group though it is also known as the Spotted black and often comes in a grey colour with paler spots.

In captivity these other 4 snakes could most likely all hybridise with each other but i don't believe that any of them could come anywhere near cross breeding with the Red-bellied black. If a Red-bellied black were kept together with any of these other 4 and if the other snake were larger than the Red-belly, then as soon as the other got hungry it would just eat the Red-bellied black.

It is my personal belief that the Red-bellied black has nothing to do with these other snakes. Although their venoms are similar and the same antivenom **can** be used as cross protection against the 5 of them, that is where the friendship ends.

It appears to me that the only link they have is that their venoms have a lot in common and their feeding habits are a little similar. It may be their feeding habits that give reason to convergent evolution that has afforded them similar venoms. It is my belief that divergent evolution of the Red-bellied blacks from these other 4 or vice versa, is just not on.

There are moves afoot by some to have these other 4 snakes moved out of the genus *Pseudechis* and put into a new genus of their own *Cannia*. Of course by international taxonomic law, as long as a creature is believed to be a species in its own right then the original species name must remain.

That law says however, that if a creature proves not to belong to its original genus it may join the genus of another group or, if sufficiently different then it can be put into a genus of its own. There is no other existing genus amongst our snakes that these 4 can belong to, so i guess it's fair to give them a genus of their own. So until someone has a better suggestion i'll use their new genus here; *Cannia*.

Red-bellied Black (*Pseudechis porphyriacus*)

These snakes occur right along the East Coast of Australia, starting from South Australia in the highest rainfall area following the river systems including much of the Murray Darling Basin. They can sometimes be found within cooe of the rivers and streams throughout Victoria. In some places they are still common up the East Coast through New South Wales right up along the coast of Queensland following the river systems towards the top of Cape York Peninsula.

However in the north Red-bellied blacks are in trouble because of the Cane toads. The snakes eat them and then usually die.

There is a story about Red-bellied blacks eating all the Eastern (Common) browns. As one farmer once said to me "If the Blacks are supposed to eat all the Browns, how is it that I've seen them sleeping together on the channel bank?" Yes Blacks and Copperheads will eat Browns if the Brown is small enough. Browns will eat Blacks and Copperheads if they are small enough. Blacks are more likely to eat snakes but Browns live in dry 'mouse' country Blacks don't, so they seldom cross paths, so the story is nonsense; it is folklore.

Here are the 4 Australian species in the genus *Cannia* formerly *Pseudechis*: All these 4 are egg layers whereas the Red-bellied black is a live bearer.

The Mulga or King Brown (*Cannia australis*)

If any venomous snake in Australia could be described as a - heavy-duty industrial type snake - then the mulga has to be the one. It would have to be the flagship species of this group. The King brown by the way has nothing to do with a Brown snake. They are not even remotely related. King browns are not found in Victoria; they do not come south of the Murray River.

The King brown is not just a large species of Brown snake. It is just a name given to a snake that can sometimes be found in a brown form and can grow to become the largest venomous snake in Australia. There is one reliable record of one that died in captivity in Humpty Doo near Darwin that measured just over 10 foot. It was a wild caught animal owned by Graeme F Gow and i know the person very well that caught it. The person that caught it had caught a lot of snakes and it was the biggest venomous snake he had ever seen. In most cases however across Australia a 2 metre Mulga is a good size snake. Taipans can get rather large for a venomous snake but they can never attain the size of a northern Mulga.

To save confusion it may be better to refer to this snake as a Mulga snake. There are many farmers in northern Victoria who believe that they have King browns on their property. King browns have never been found south of the Murray River. The snake in question is a Common brown. With lots of mice or young rabbits in the area in the warm weather Browns will feast on them. With lots of food around Common browns can attain lengths of over 6 foot or 2 metres but they are not King browns (mulgas).

It is easier to be bitten by a Mulga (king brown) than a Common brown. The Mulga is a large stupid snake and can not escape easily when startled. It is quite easy to step on a Mulga and be bitten. A true Brown snake is very hard to step on, unless the snake is asleep, because they are very fast and if they have a chance they'll just disappear as soon as they spot you moving.

However, just because it's not a King brown and, you get the idea that it might be smart to pick a fight with a large Common brown snake on a hot day, DON'T! And by the way, the bite from a Common brown is much deadlier than that of a King brown (Mulga). The Mulga is found in all states bar Victoria and Tasmania.

The Spotted Mulga or Buttlers' snake (*Cannia buttleri*)

Buttler's Snake is only found in the desert areas of Southern West Australia.

Colletts Snake or Downs's Tiger (*Cannia colletti*)

Although this snake is sometimes known as a Downs tiger it has nothing to do with the snake commonly referred to as the Tiger snake which belongs to the genus *Notechis*. Strangely however, Tiger snake antivenom can be used as cross protection against a bite from this snake. In the areas where this snake is found and if a person were to receive a bite from a very large Colletts then it may be deemed appropriate to use Mulga antivenom. Whereas cross protection can be afforded by using Tiger antivenom for a Collett's bite, you cannot get away with using Mulga antivenom for a Tiger bite; it will not work. Collett's snake is found in Central Queensland.

The Blue-bellied black or Spotted black (*Cannia guttatus*)

This is the only one in this genus that can be completely black having a dark grey belly; not blue. Many specimens of this snake can come in varying grey colours with paler spots. To the inexperienced observer they would look like two completely different species. This colour variation does not even seem to be related to habitat; they just come in different colours. This snake is said to have the most toxic venom of all those in the black snake complex.

The Blue-bellies and spotties are found in a very limited coastal range of Southern Queensland and Northern New South Wales.

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