

Tiger snakes of the genus *Notechis*

There are 2 recognised species of Tiger Snakes and 4 sub-species found mostly in the southern high rainfall areas of Australia. To learn how the terms species and sub-species are arrived at see Classification at www.snakeshow.net.

Tiger Snakes are live bearers and produce from between 10 to 90 young depending on the species and size and age of the Tiger. Their venom is highly neurotoxic. Specific Tiger snake antivenom is the treatment for a bite. Tigers from some areas can be cannibalistic though most Mainland Tigers will not eat other snakes.

The following are the two species of Tiger Snakes:

The Common or Eastern Tiger (*Notechis scutatus*)

South Eastern South Australia, Victoria, a few spots in Eastern New South Wales and in the extreme southeast corner of Queensland.

Kreffts Tiger (*Notechis ater ater*)

Only found in a very small area just north east of Spencer Gulf SA.

Although this is a species in its own right it is the rarest tiger snakes due mostly to the destruction by grazing, of its very restricted habitat.

The next group contains the four sub-species of the Tigers.

Peninsula Tiger (*Notechis ater niger*)

The Peninsula Tigers are found on Kangaroo Island, the Southern end of Spencer Gulf then west for some miles along the coast from Spencer Gulf and on most of the small Southern Islands of Spencer Gulf South Australia.

Western Tiger (*Notechis ater occidentalis*)

It is found in the high rainfall area in the South West of West Australia and some of the adjacent islands.

Chappell Island Tiger (*Notechis ater serventyi*)

Although this snake is named after Chappell Island it is found on most of the islands of the Furneaux group. The Furneaux group comprises the islands on the eastern side of Bass Strait the two major islands of this group are Flinders Island and Cape Barron Island.

Tasmanian and King Island Tigers (*Notechis ater humphreysi*)

Found over most of Tasmania, King Island and many of their adjacent islands.

About Tiger Snakes

Many Tiger snakes are banded though not all of them. Many of the snakes of the Islands of Bass Strait, Tasmania and the Peninsula tigers of South Australia and its adjacent islands are black. Even the Common tiger *Notechis scutatus* can be black.

In 1961 when just a kid i caught black Tiger just out of Swan Hill in northwest Victoria. It was along a channel bank at a place called Murraydale and it measured close on 4ft over a metre. It was jet-black and a very strong snake.

At the time i did not know what it was, but knew it would have been a dangerous bite and knew also that it was not a Red-bellied black; Red-bellied blacks don't always have a red belly especially during a slough. On returning to Melbourne i took it to John Coventry at the Melbourne Museum and learnt in those days that Tigers do not have to be banded.

The snake referred to by some country folk, as a Yellow-bellied black is just a black Tiger with a yellow belly. We don't have any Yellow-bellied black snakes unless you are referring to a Green tree snake from northern Australia, those snakes can come in a black form and have a yellow belly. Green tree snakes are non-venomous and completely harmless to humans; they belong to a family of snakes called Coludrids. Whatever colour an Australian Green tree snake might be, it is harmless; unless of course, you were to inhale one of them.

Tiger Snakes and what they eat

Tigers are classic small bird and frog eaters but this is now their problem. Once upon a time there were many wetland areas with adjacent low bushes and scrub growing across the high rainfall areas of Southern Australia. Many of the swamps have been drained, and the scrub has been cleared away to allow for grazing or general farming.

Because Tiger snakes are slow travellers they cannot travel far from water and so the wetlands were a great food source because of the frogs. Browns can inhabit drier areas because they can travel great distances, which they must do in search of mice, their preferred prey.

With the draining of the wetlands the frogs are doing it hard and it appears there is another disaster hitting the frogs over much of the froggy world. Most who study amphibians agree that there is a fungal disease hitting the frogs. It is now believed that this disease was inadvertently introduced from Africa. On that continent, at least in the areas where the disease came from the frogs were mostly immune.

Wherever this disease has arrived it has been devastating for the frogs with some species already extinct because of it. This will prove disastrous for many creatures that rely on frogs as a food source.

With so much of the low scrub gone from around our southern wetland areas in Australia there are less small finch and wren type birds. Now, because of the lack of the scrubland and with the abundance of cats and foxes those smaller birds are finding it harder to survive.

Because those smaller birds are now so exposed they are perpetually harassed by the magpies and find it even harder to find peace and prosper. So there are less and less frogs and birds for the Tiger snakes to eat.

Tigers will eat mice and skinks but they are not particularly good mouse catchers; they are nowhere near as good at it as the Browns are at catching mice. In many areas the skink population has dropped right off because of the cats and foxes so that makes another possible food source harder to utilise.

Because Tigers are not good travellers they will often ensconce themselves around a chookhouse or where possible in it. They can live in a chookhouse if there is either a broken concrete floor with cavities underneath or if the nesting boxes have been placed on an earthen floor. You may have noticed that often under nesting boxes on the ground there will be mice living there and those mice will be reproducing.

People often believe that the Tigers are around the chookhouse to steal the eggs but Tigers are not good egg eaters at all. We don't have true egg eating snakes in Australia those types of snakes come from Africa. With such an easy supply of mice, water and shelter close at hand the chookhouse seems to Tigers as a good alternative to the swampland that was once their home.

So around the chookhouse the Tigers are not stealing the eggs, they are stealing the mice that are stealing the wheat.

It is natural for Tigers to be out on balmy evenings especially after rain because it is in the snake's make up, to know that such times are when the frogs are out and about. So in Tiger snake country it is not smart to walk around bare footed on balmy evenings.

How to be bitten by a Tiger Snake and when it is most likely to bite.

A tiger will not hear you coming and contrary to popular belief it will not pick up your vibrations. You would have to be making the vibrations of a jumping bulldozer to have any effect on a Tiger snake. So carry a torch and look where you are putting your feet. You could wear shoes with reasonably thick trousers, they will baffle a bite. Trousers as thick as jeans will stop or at least soak up most venom from a Tiger snake bite; Tiger's fangs are rather short.

If a fang breaks the surface of the skin have it seen to, that is treat it as a serious bite. Let them decide at the hospital whether or not it is serious, it is always better to be safe than sorry.

If you get to within two metres of a Tiger you are still safe and you can quite safely view it from that distance just keep your eye on it. Don't go any closer than a metre because it could get nervous and give you a nip and then, whatever you had planned for the rest of the day you'll probably have to put on hold. As some people can be extra nervous, so can snakes. If you come across one of the nervous ones give it extra space. It will not leap at you; Tiger snakes can **not** leap.

Always remember that it can **not** hear you and it is almost impossible for it to feel you coming and it does **not** know that it is venomous and it does **not** sense your fear. Also, it can only discern you as a threat or a living creature when you are moving. Once you are not moving it only takes a few seconds for it to forget that you were the one that moved; so then you are no more than a tree and not seen as a threat.

Very slow movements they find hard to perceive at all. They do not have heat-sensing pits so they do **not** sense your body heat. Australia does not have venomous snakes with heat-sensing pits. All but two of our Australian pythons have heat-sensing pits on their lower lip but our venomous snakes do not. The pit vipers like the rattlesnakes of the Americas are the classic venomous snakes with heat-sensing pits.

If a tiger snake has flattened itself out there are two things that could be happening. The most common reason for flattening is to increase the surface area of the snake. This means that on a cold day that still has sun and if the snake is out of the wind it can increase its surface area to aid in the absorption of the available heat. This means that the snake is looking rather relaxed and often angled to the sun. This angling can be seen when the sun is closer to the horizon. The snake's body will often in this case, be fully extended to gain full value of the angling towards to the heat source.

The other reason that a snake will flatten its body is to look scary, that means that it is asking you to leave it alone because it is frightened and you look scary to it. This flattening however, usually takes place towards the front part of the body and it could be angled towards you, (the one that is frightening it). This is the time you are most likely to receive a bite from a Tiger snake if you are very close to it.

Imagine that this is akin to the moment, when someone who is very frightened of you, is holding a gun. That is of course the moment that they are most likely to shoot you. The snake however, does not have a gun and the so-called strike does not go far. For example a Tiger snake of a metre long could strike about one third to one half of its body length. You see it does not want to extend itself too far from its safety-zone that being the place that it is sitting, at that moment. That is why, if it bites your foot at that moment it is usually only a quick nip then it retracts to what it feels as the safest place to be, close to itself.

If it is taking food it will usually hang on because it wants the food; you it does not want. It will usually only hang on or continue biting if you keep your foot on it. If it feels that it can make a run for it then it may try, but will be prepared to stop and return again into the defensive position if it feels that the escape is not going to work.

If you look down and see that you have ended up next to a Tiger snake and you have not already panicked, and not been bitten within those first few seconds, then use your brain. If you are not standing on it and if you are going to receive a bite it can only happen within the first 3 to 4 seconds, 5 to 6 seconds is stretching it a bit; their short term memory does not last any longer than that. That is of course if you are standing still and so, not frightening it.

The snake may be asleep and still look rather relaxed and at that time it is not going to bite if you are not moving. That is because if you are not moving it does not see you as a threat. If its tongue is flicking it is awake, though it may not have panicked as yet. If it has gone into the flattening defensive mode then it is more likely to bite, especially if you push the issue; it does not however, truly want to bite because you look too scary and are obviously too large to eat.

Step away from the snake. Once you are at least two metres away you are perfectly safe. It will not truly chase you. If it comes towards you in what looks like a threatening way you'll notice that it is at the speed of the equivalent to a human waddle. Step back another metre or so then keep still and it will forget you.

If you pick it up it will probably bite you. If a snake is heading towards you with its head and whole body flat on the ground then it is not chasing you it just happens to be going in your direction; it has to go somewhere. If you stand where you are it will go straight past you, as it does not see you as a living threat.

If the snake is close to your house you can turn the hose onto it. It will not know that you are the one that is squirting it and it will not blame you for it. But it won't like the fast water and will leave.

The Tiger snake can not truly attack you, which is impossible, regardless of what anybody thinks they have seen. If you were to describe, a small creature with less brains than a squid that is travelling towards you for a few seconds at the speed of a human waddle as an attack, then so be it. For so-called 'Tiger snake attack' read the story under reptiles at: www.snakeshow.net

Snakes do not attack dogs. A large snake might eat a dog but the dog must be small enough and the snake large enough, otherwise they'll seldom try.

Dogs playing with snakes or nosing at them or just sniffing them can cause themselves to get a nip. A nip is a warning but can still carry venom. A nip without venom is often referred to by snake handlers as, a dry bite. Although some dogs and cats die from snakebite, the snake never sets out to kill any creature just for fun; it does not even know that it might be venomous. It is not the dog's fault in this case, because the dog is only curious or just playing but the snake has no idea of play because snakes are not mammals. Mammals play, reptiles don't; they just try to survive.

A real snakebite is for subduing prey, or because of serious fear on the part of the snake, normally such a bite will carry venom. Almost without exception, when I get a snakebite it is when I am not handling the snake, it's because my moving finger was mistaken for a mouse close to a hungry snake; my fault not the snake's.

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