

Copperheads

Genus *Austrelaps* formally *Denisonia*

There are 3 recognised forms of Copperhead but i don't know whether or not the Highland or the Pygmy forms have full species status as yet.

The Lowland Copperhead (*Austrelaps superbus*)

Found over most of Tasmania and occurs on many of the islands of Bass Strait. It can be found over much of Victoria especially the high rainfall areas and follows some of the Great Divide from Victoria into NSW.

The Highland Copperhead (*Austrelaps ramsayi*)

As its name suggests it is found in the high country, though only on the mainland.

The Pygmy Copperhead (*Austrelaps?*)

The Pygmy Copperhead is only found on Kangaroo Island and a few places on the mainland in South Australia.

By my own observations, the Copperheads have to be amongst the most stupid of the larger venomous snakes of Australia. Tiger snakes don't have much in the brains department but they are much smarter than Copperheads. And yet strangely and i'm still not positive about this, but a Copperhead seems at times to display slightly better vision for ascertaining whether or not something is food.

I have not been able to work out whether or not they have a better sense of smell or perhaps they can sometimes discern the shape and identify something as a food/prey item better than many other Australian venomous snakes. It is a rule of thumb that Australian venomous snakes only identify a prey item as such by its smell or when they see it moving.

In some respects it can be easy to get a bite from a Copperhead and a Tiger snake. The reason that it is easy to get a bite from a Copperhead and a Tiger snake is precisely because they are so slow and stupid. They are slow travellers and so it can be hard for them to get out of your way; whereas a Brown snake can quickly slip away as soon as it spots you moving.

There is some strange folklore on and around Flinders Island in the Furneaux group in Bass Strait. Some of the locals there believe that it is the Copperheads that can leap at you.

On the islands of Bass Strait and Tasmania there are only 3 species of snakes and then the Tiger Snakes are split into two sub-species.

A quick overview goes like this:

Copperhead (*Austrelaps superbus*)

White-lipped snake (*Drysdalia coronoides*)

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

Chapel Island Tiger (*Notechis ater serventyi*)

The Copperheads (*Austrelaps superbus*) are found over much of Tasmania and the Bass Strait Islands.

Tiger Snake (*Notechis ater serventyi*) of the Furneaux Island group are a sub-species in their own right and have been given the name Chappell Island Tiger.

The Tasmanian and King Island Tiger Snake is known as (*Notechis ater humphreysi*).

White-lipped Snake (*Drysdalia coronoides*). The White-lipped Snake is only about as venomous as a bee sting; though their venom is usually not as painful as a bee sting; and you would have to pick the snake up, to have it bite you. On the Bass Strait Islands the White-lipped Snake is sometimes called the Whip Snake. This snake however, is not even remotely related to the true Whip snakes of mainland Australia of the genus *Demansia* which are a long slender fast moving and typically, lizard eating snake.

If you would like to see more on how the classification of snakes and all other creatures is set out go to Classification at www.snakeshow.net

As far as leaping is concerned these snakes can not leave the ground unless they climb into a bush. Whatever you might like to believe, there is hardly a snake in the world that could leave the ground in a leap. And as for the so called 'long distance strike', most snakes could not strike more than half the length of their body, especially snakes from a cold climate; but folklore is great for stretching stories, and with the stories go the leaps.

Copperheads can be very beautiful. Sometimes they can be soft black velvet in texture. Other times you'll find them in the most beautiful bright or rich deep copper, always keeping that typical velvet texture of the Copperhead.

Sometimes people may call a Copperhead a Brown snake because it is often brown in colour. A Copperhead will always have at least 2 different colours sometimes up to 4 colours over its body.

If you look along the belly line when the snake is lying on the ground you'll notice that it is lighter than the colour on the back. The Copperhead can have a dark bar across its neck and its lips may have pale marks down between the labial scales. Some Copperheads may have a dark line that runs down the length of its back and on rare occasions it may have dark blotches down its back. The underside of the Copperhead will be one colour only, the underside of the eastern brown will usually be speckled; though not always.

A Common or Eastern brown will be one colour only that is of course once it gets towards maturity. On rare occasions a Brown may have the odd scale on its back that is black and in some areas they may have very pale bands across their body, but nothing like the colour variation across the body of a Copperhead.

Young Browns always have a black head and a black bar just behind the head. Perhaps about one in 20 of the young Browns can be completely banded but once they reach about half a metre they will have lost those markings and then remain that one colour for life.

The Copperhead will basically be the same colour as an adult as it was when juvenile; and as with all snakes, becoming a little duller just before it sloughs (sheds its skin); slough is pronounced sluff.

If ever you get to compare the two snakes together you'll find that it is very simple to differentiate between the Copperhead and the Brown, at a glance.

If you ever get to see the scales on the underside of the snake look at those scales beginning just past the anal scale and extending to the tip of the tail. These scales are called the subcaudals (from Latin meaning under tail), on the Copperhead as on the Tiger the anal scale and the subcaudals are single on the Brown they are paired (divided).

Copperheads like Tiger snakes are live bearers (viviparous) Browns are egg layers (oviparous). Neither of these snakes can take care of their young or eggs, nor will they defend their young. Young Australian snakes are on their own from the day they are born.

Snakes don't have nests as such; they just try to find a place where it is safe away from the elements. They will usually take up lodgings close to where there is food available. They are **not** territorial in the sense that they will defend a territory. When the mice, or whatever it is that they are eating, run out they'll move on.

So, if you don't want snakes around your chook house there is something simple to do. If you have the chooks' nesting boxes on the ground, you'll notice that it does not take long for the mice to burrow around and make their own nests under the boxes. If a snake that has reached the size that it can eat mice happens by, and finds a supply of mice then it is likely to take up lodgings in the vicinity. That way it has a regular meal and a drink without too much effort.

So if you don't like the idea of snakes stealing your mice, then you'd be better off getting the mice to nest some place else. Put those nesting boxes up high where the mice can't nest underneath. Where possible get the grain for the chooks up where only the chooks can reach it. If you have timber or iron lying around put that up on cleats so as it is not comfortable for the mice. If there is not much food around then it will be boring for the snakes, so you will only get to see them passing through from time to time.

If you find a snake at your back door you can turn the hose on and squirt it in the direction you'd like it to go. It may take a squirt or two but it will learn that your place is not a comfortable place to be hanging around especially if there is not much food to be had.

Strangely, we are supposed to be intelligent but at times we act like some of the greatest nincompoops on the planet.

There is no such a thing as Copperhead antivenom. Tiger snake antivenom works perfectly well for a Copperhead bite. As a matter of fact it works so well, that if you are sensible about a Copperhead bite using the prescribed pressure bandage then it is almost impossible for a Copperhead bite to be fatal. In most cases with Copperhead bites you won't need antivenom but you won't know that in advance; so treat every bite seriously.

To cover any snakebite in Tasmania or the Bass Strait Islands, Tiger Snake antivenom is the only antivenom that is needed. In Victoria, Brown snake antivenom must be included in the choice. That is why on the mainland of Australia the bite area should not be washed because a swab will indicate which antivenom is to be used. Also, if you are not sure whether or not you have received a venomous bite, a swab to the suspected bite area will tell you that immediately. If you have washed off the venom then you may have to await the snakebite symptoms or have urine and blood test however, it is never too late to give antivenom so long as the patient is still alive.

You must of course be sober about all bites and treat them as though they could be dangerous. It is simple to learn how to use a pressure bandage and it is strange that it is not taught in schools as a matter of course.

A Copperhead or a Tiger snake cannot truly **attack** you. Any person who thinks that they have been truly attacked by any of these snakes is living in fairyland. Imagine standing up in court and telling the Judge that a three year old child attacked you with a knife so you killed the child in self defense.

See **Tiger snake attack** at www.snakeshow.net. Read this story through a couple of times and you'll get to understand how an Australian venomous snake sees the world. Snakes do not see the world as we do; so let's at least, try to be fair about it.

There are more short stories about our world at:

www.snakeshow.net