

The three Taipans

The Coastal Taipan (*Oxyuranus scutellatus scutellatus*)

The Coastal Taipan is sometimes referred to as the Common Taipan.

The New Guinea Taipan (*Oxyuranus scutellatus canni*)

This Taipan is a close relative to our Coastal Taipan.

The Inland Taipan (*Oxyuranus microlepidotus*)

The Inland Taipan is also known as the Fierce Snake, the Western Taipan, the Small-scaled Snake and in some areas where it is found there are lignum bush so it has been known also as the Lignum Snake.

Taipans are egg layers (oviparous) and produce from 10 to 20 eggs, younger snakes may produce a few less. Their venoms are strongly neurotoxic and coagulant with other toxins present. The only treatment for a bite is specific Taipan antivenom; only ever use polyvalent antivenom in an emergency.

The Taipans are classic rat eaters, rats are what they live for; it is amazing to see the size rat that can go down the gullet of one of these snakes especially the inland taipan which has a rather narrow gullet.

The Inland Taipan. (*Oxyuranus microlepidotus*)

Inland Taipans are one of the few Australian snakes that change their colour according to the seasons. In winter they will become quite dark, even in captivity. In summer, they'll become a much lighter colour. However, these snakes come in two standard colour phases. Some will always have a shiny black head regardless of the season and some will have a cream to golden coloured head but they all get darker in the winter. This changing of colour due to the change of seasons is rare amongst Australian reptiles.

Although these snakes are sometimes called Fierce Snakes they are not fierce by nature but their venom is a bit fierce and as with any other snake when they are frightened they can give you a nip.

The Coastal Taipan (*Oxyuranus scutellatus*)

My first contact with Coastal taipans was in 1963 at Hartley's Creek Wildlife Park in North Queensland. In those days the way i handled Taipans was very different to the way i handle them today. With the way i handled Taipans in those early days, it is a wonder i'm still alive.

It is good to listen to others because that is the way we learn many things. The problem is that when you listen to folklore you are often learning only folklore. That is just a simple fact. When I first arrived in Mossman North Queensland back in the early 60s and showed some interest in snakes a local snakeman assured me that the Death adders could really jump; and so to watch out for them. "How high?" i asked. He said words to the affect that "well you might find this hard to believe, but they jump up into the trees to get the mangos". Even back then at the age of 17 i did know that snakes were not vegetarians.

Taipans however left me a little bewildered because the warnings were consistent. "Taipans will attack without provocation!" was the warning and there was many a tale to back it up.

When Garry Zillfleisch at Hartley's Creek Wildlife Park told me that he was paying a fortune for Taipans but he could not get them to eat, yours truly said "don't worry i'll force feed them". Till then, i don't think that such a term or practice had existed, as 'force-feeding' for snakes.

Having handled snakes in Victoria and southern New South Wales since the age of 7, i thought that a taipan must be something like a big Common brown snake (*Pseudonaja textiles*); it is not.

If a Brown is nervous it will show it like any other brown snake. When a Taipan is nervous it is usually a lot more sober about it than a Brown. Even their table manners are distinct; as any observant Taipan and Brown keeper will tell you. When a Brown takes its food, especially if its food is alive it takes it completely differently to that of a Taipan.

The Inland taipans often look, to those who are not familiar with them, just like some kind of a Western brown (*Pseudonaja nuchalis*). However, the Inland taipan will take its prey in the same manner as the Coastal taipan; never like a Brown which throws its coils around its prey. Taipans seldom hang on to their prey unless you are feeding captive Taipans with dead food. Because Taipans are generally rat eaters they know not to mess with a rat until it is dead. The other reason a Taipan may hold its food is if it has hold of a young rat; somehow Taipans seem to know that a young rat cannot do them damage.

By my observations the Inland taipan is no more intelligent than the Brown snake, if at all. The Coastal taipan is different. Any person who has spent hours and hours with Australian venomous snakes including with Taipans and handled them enough will know that the Taipan is an intelligent snake. Of course a two and a half-year-old child could outsmart it, but as far as snakes go they are intelligent.

Strangely an Inland taipan can be very dangerous when it is cold. When it is cold and startled it often appears insecure and will hold its mouth open and could easily bite because of fear. The Coastal taipan can be trusting, whatever the temperature. If a Coastal taipan trusts you then as with any other snake you are safe, and with the Coastal taipan the temperature has nothing to do with it. Of course you never mess with it at feeding time. Although it is intelligent it can still confuse you for prey if it is chasing it. Never put your hand into its cage when it is after a rat or you are asking for trouble.

As with all snakes a Taipan is never out to get you, if that were the way of a Taipan then there would be ambulances picking up snakebite victims all day long. And if that were the case we would have a special ward at the hospital for all those snakebite victims.

However, never pick a fight with a Coastal taipan especially if it is a large snake and it is a hot day. My advice is. Don't! If you do you will be stunned by what it is capable of when cornered and frightened. If you haven't trodden on it or startled it and it hasn't bitten you, then within about two or three seconds of the encounter it will stabilize it will forgive you and it will not bite. Just stand there, not waving around of course, and observe it for as long as you like; then walk away.

It will not chase anything that does not appear a real threat or is not food and it will chase food only if it is hungry. You don't come up on its radar as a rat or mouse, so it is quite safe to walk away. Taipans do not have heat-sensing pits like the pit vipers of the Americas like Rattlesnakes for example, so they cannot see your glow; no Australian venomous snake has heat-sensing pits.

A Taipan can only taste you with its tongue when very close or touching you and your smell is irrelevant to the snake; you do not smell like a rat. With a flick of the tongue it can tell the difference between a rat and a mouse so you are not food. It does not react to the so-called smell of human fear.

The Coastal Taipan does seem to have better vision than other Australian snakes. If your movement has not caused it to bite out of fear in the first instance then don't do anything threatening to the snake and it will not bite you. As far as you are concerned, there is nothing else. Just read that again 'nothing else'.

To most people this information on how to observe a wild Taipan will not be much use because not many people ever get to see a wild Taipan. Very few people in the land of the Taipan ever get to see one in the wild. If you do see one in the wild you will be honoured. Do not pick a fight with the snake and do not try to catch it or pick it up. Just be sensible and enjoy the encounter.

To me, because of its general appearance, intelligence and personality, the Coastal taipan is the most beautiful snake in the world. If i were left with only one snake to keep, there would be no other choice but the Coastal taipan.

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