

Crowned Snakes

Fact Sheet



White-crowned Snake, *Cacophis harriettae*. Image: QM, Jeff Wright.

Crowned snakes (genus *Cacophis*) are small, weakly venomous snakes that derive their name from the distinctive pale marking on the neck. This 'crown', along with the belly colour, is different in each species and can be used as a means of ready identification.

Three species of crowned snakes are common in southern Queensland, including the Brisbane suburbs, while a fourth is confined to northern Queensland.

Of the three Brisbane species, the **White-crowned Snake** (*C. harriettae*) is the most frequently encountered. The broad white band across the neck sweeps forward onto the face to enclose a black patch on top of the head. The body is dark grey above and below.

This snake grows to about 40 cm.

The **Dwarf Crowned Snake** (*C. krefftii*) has a very narrow yellow collar and its belly is yellow with thin black bands. This, the smallest of the crowned snakes, is fully grown at only 25 cm.

The largest species, the **Golden-crowned Snake** (*C. squamulosus*), has a broken golden-brown collar. It forms an incomplete band on the neck, with each half failing to meet on the midline. The belly is orange with a prominent row of black blotches running down the centre. Golden-crowned snakes grow to about 70 cm.

The northern species, *C. churchilli*, lives in rainforest in the region between Tully and Cape Tribulation. It has a narrow yellow neckband similar to the Dwarf Crowned Snake, a dark grey belly like the White-crowned Snake and grows to 45 cm.

Brisbane's crowned snakes can each be distinguished by the distinctive markings on the neck. A broad white band identifies the White-crowned snake (bottom) while a narrow yellow band is characteristic of the Dwarf Crowned Snake (middle). The Golden-crowned Snake (top) has an incomplete band. Illustrations: Bronwyn Perkins.



By day, crowned snakes shelter in slightly moist situations beneath rocks, logs and mats of leaf-litter. In the backyard, compost heaps and rockeries provide ideal habitats. After dark, these snakes emerge to hunt lizards, particularly skinks. Since the bulk of their prey consists of swift sun-loving species, it seems likely that these are captured at night as they sleep. Crowned snakes are largely terrestrial.

When harassed, crowned snakes rear their heads and flicker their tongues, attempting to look as fierce as possible. For the White-crowned and Dwarf Crowned Snakes this is largely bluff. If further threatened they may strike, but usually with a closed mouth. Their menacing appearance belies their weak venom, tiny mouths, short fangs and a general reluctance to bite. The Golden-crowned Snake may bite if provoked and large individuals may cause uncomfortable symptoms. Medical advice should be obtained following a bite from any venomous snake.

Crowned snakes are an integral part of the natural fauna of our parks and gardens, and as predators they play an important role in these ecosystems. Like all reptiles, they are protected by law in Queensland.

Further Information

Ryan, M. (Ed.), 2007. *Wildlife of Greater Brisbane*. Queensland Museum, Brisbane.

Ryan, M. (Ed.), 2000. *Wildlife of Tropical North Queensland*. Queensland Museum, Brisbane.

Shine, R., 1980. Comparative ecology of three Australian snake species in the genus *Cacophis* (Serpentes: Elapidae), *Copeia*, **1980**: pp.831–8.

Authors: Steve Wilson, Eric Vanderduys & Patrick Couper

Queensland Museum
PO Box 3300, SOUTH BRISBANE QLD 4101
Phone: (07) 3840 7555
<http://www.qm.qld.gov.au/>