

Eastern Brown Snake

Fact Sheet



Eastern Brown Snake. Image: Steve Wilson.

Introduction

There are nine species of brown snakes (Genus *Pseudonaja*) in Australia. They occur over most of the continent, mainly in dry areas. In a land famous for its large number of dangerous snakes, these alert, fast-moving species are among the most highly venomous. The largest, is the Eastern Brown Snake (*P. textilis*) which occurs widely over eastern Australia.

It may come as a surprise to learn that Eastern Brown Snakes thrive on the outskirts of virtually every town and city between Adelaide and Cairns. They are responsible for the majority of serious snake bites in Queensland though fortunately human fatalities are rare. Widely regarded as highly aggressive, Eastern Brown Snakes are actually extremely shy and spend up to 90% of their time inactive and well-hidden. If provoked, they rear their bodies and may bite savagely. However, they generally retreat swiftly at the first sign of danger, or lie unseen as people pass by.



Image: Steve Wilson.

Identification

This is one of Australia's most variable snakes, ranging through shades of brown to almost black. Adults may be plain or marked with a herringbone pattern of dark streaks or prominent to obscure dark bands. Juveniles may also be plain or banded, but invariably have a black hood covering the head and a broad black band across the neck, separated by a brown to reddish gap. Snakes of all ages have a cream belly with distinctive orange flecks, though very dark coloured snakes tend to have grey-flecked bellies. The head is relatively narrow and the eyes are large, a feature particularly obvious on young snakes. Total length may exceed 2 metres although a typical adult grows to about 1.5 metres.

Natural History

There are winners and losers in this world of rapidly changing environments. Eastern Brown Snake are certainly among the winners. The clearing of forests, creation of pastures, and introduction of house mice have combined to produce ideal conditions.

Eastern Brown Snakes tend to shun moist and shaded sites such as swamps and closed forests. They thrive in open, sunny and lightly timbered areas such as farms, where fields and the occasional haystack are features of the landscape. Sites attractive to mice, including granaries, rubbish tips, aviaries and chook sheds are particularly favoured. The mice offer a valuable food source and their burrows are ideal shelter sites.



Pseudonaja textilis juvenile feeding. Image: Steve Wilson.

Eastern Brown Snakes hunt a wide range of vertebrate prey, primarily reptiles, mammals and birds. Prey is subdued by a combination of powerful venom and constriction, with the snake biting an animal and holding it in tight coils until the venom takes effect.

During spring males engage in ritualised combat. These tests of strength, where snakes elegantly and sinuously intertwine their bodies, raise their heads and attempt to press their opponent down, are often mistaken for mating. Such bouts may last many minutes until the loser tires and departs. Mating is a more passive affair, with the male rubbing his chin along the female's body before twisting the lower part of his body under hers. Eastern Brown Snakes are egg-layers, depositing clutches of 10-35 soft-shelled eggs in burrows and remaining with them.



Eastern Brown Snake. Image: Steve Wilson.

Are they aggressive?

There is no doubt that an angry and cornered Eastern Brown Snake is a frightening and highly capable adversary. However, research on human interactions with Eastern Brown Snakes has produced some interesting results.

Based on an extensive questionnaire in rural New South Wales, people are, on average 100 times more likely to attack a brown snake than vice versa. During another survey researchers deliberately approached Eastern Brown Snakes to document their responses. Of 455 encounters, nearly all snakes retreated, ignored the approach, or remained motionless. Only 3% moved towards the researcher and very few of these were offensive. In another study designed to initiate a response, provoked snakes attempted to flee in almost all cases but when further harassed resorted to bluff. This ranged from flattening and curving the neck to rearing the fore-body in a tight S-shape clearly displaying the spotted belly and hissing with mouth partly agape. Only as a last resort did they try to bite. It is simple common sense to leave them alone.



Eastern Brown Snake. Image: Steve Wilson.

Are they a problem?

Highly venomous snakes are obviously a potential risk when they thrive in populated areas. When left alone, Eastern Brown Snakes are shy and secretive but accidents do happen and bites are life-threatening. Actively provoking or attacking them is courting disaster but simple steps can be taken to discourage brown snakes from taking up residence and reduce the chance of encounters.

Store sheets of iron and other building materials well off the ground, either stacked on planks or (preferably) stored vertically.

Keep all other rubbish well away from the house.

Never put your hands or bare feet where you cannot see them. Always make a visual check before reaching under or over something.

Discourage mice. Stored grains should be in metal

canisters, spillages minimised, and keep a vigilant eye for burrows, droppings and other signs of mouse activity.

Do not initiate attacks. There is nothing to be gained and much to be lost by interfering with an animal only too happy to mind its own business but prepared to respond savagely if provoked.



Eastern Brown Snake. Image: Steve Wilson.

Further Information

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Author: Steve Wilson

Queensland Museum

PO Box 3300, SOUTH BRISBANE QLD 4101

Phone: (07) 3840 7555

<http://www.qm.qld.gov.au/>