

Never say never! Two adult female Australian Copperhead Snakes sharing a single rock in the Spring.

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ABSTRACT

In mid October 2022, I (Raymond Hoser) as the Melbourne snake catcher was called to Hillcrest Christian College in the outer Melbourne suburb of Clyde, to catch a snake. It was a female Copperhead sunbaking on a rock in a rocky drainage ditch.

Turned out that there was two in the same site.

With Copperheads having a reputation of not liking their own kind to the extent that they eat one another regularly, and appear to have no immunity to their own venom, that two adult female snakes chose to be together is worth reporting as part of the scientific literature.

Keywords: Copperhead; snake; *Austrelaps*; *superbus*; Clyde north; two females.

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

In mid October 2022, as the Melbourne snake catcher, I (Raymond Hoser) was called to Hillcrest Christian College, in Clyde North, Victoria, to catch a snake that had been seen basking in a rocky ditch on the perimeter of the school.

St. Patrick apparently is no good with Australian venomous snakes, so the "God Squad" get the Snake Man ® to deal with their snake problems instead.

Upon being shown where the snake was, I saw an adult Copperhead snake *Austrelaps superbus* (Günther, 1858) basking on a whitish piece of granite in a drainage ditch comprised of lots of mid-sized blocks of granite.

As I ran to the snake it fled under the rock, but I was able to grab it by the tail, stopping the escape.

At this point, I saw that the rock it was fleeing under was small enough to lift, so rather than pulling the snake from the hole, I simply lifted the rock to free the snake more easily.

As I did this, I saw and grabbed a second adult Copperhead.

The first snake that had retreated to the rock cavity, had in fact curled around the second one.

Both were adult females.

While the rock the snakes went under was in a ditch and to that extent out of wind, so too were countless rocks on every side of the ones the snakes had chosen to lodge under.

The whole ditch was filled with similar sized rocks and realistically there were no thermal advantages in the rock the snakes were hiding under as compared to others in the area.

In similar sites (e.g. Lynbrook Railway Station) where I am called to retrieve Copperheads most years in early spring, it is not uncommon for me to find and catch more than one copperhead, basking in the spring sun in a garden bed, or stony drainage ditch. But invariably the snakes make a point of keeping away from one another and not basking on top of one another.

It is for this reason, I found the two snakes being in the same site, so unusual.

That the two females had chosen to be together is beyond any doubt. I do not believe it was a chance situation of two snakes occupying the same rock.

The school staff had observed the snake coming out from under the rock, basking for a short period and then going back under it. They were unaware that there had been two snakes.

As already mentioned the thermal attributes of the site, when considered with other similar sites in the area and no shortage of them, meant that the snakes had made a deliberate choice to be together.

Copperheads are known to be cannibalistic, both of their own kind and of other snakes.

On one occasion in April 2020, I caught an Copperhead in Wonga Park. Upon being placed into a plastic tub, it regurgitated a live half-grown Tiger Snake (Peters, 1861). An hour later when I went to release the snakes, I noted that the Tiger Snake had been eaten again.

On another occasion in February 2019, I was called to catch a Copperhead at Wattle Glen, Victoria. Upon arrival, I found one adult male eating another. The half-eaten one was regurgitated out by the other one at the time I caught the snake/s, but it was also noticed to have died.

Lack of immunity to their own venom is known in Copperheads (Hoser 1985, 2006) and on the basis of this knowledge, two female Copperheads choosing to stay together is a high-risk option that must in this case, have some as yet unknown benefit.

As a final note, both snakes were tail sexed as females and probed as well to confirm the fact.

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