

SYDNEY'S SNAKES, PART 2

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Contents: Family Elapidae.

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FAMILY ELAPIDAE

Krefft's dwarf snake, *Cacophis kreffti* Günther, 1863. Photo 8.

Description.

This innocuous snake is steely grey, brown or black above, with a narrow white stripe around the head, forming a thin collar around the nape. The belly is whitish with black edging. There is a black stripe along the underside of the tail. The scalation is smooth with 15 mid body rows, 140-160 ventrals, 25-40 paired subcaudals and a divided anal. This snake averages 25 cm in length, and is of moderate build.

Distribution.

The Krefft's dwarf snake occurs in coastal and near coastal areas north of Broken Bay. It does not occur anywhere near Sydney City. It is common around Gosford, Ourimbah, Wyong.

General.

This wholly nocturnal snake is only found in wet forests and adjoining bush. Most specimens are found during the day in litter or brought into houses at night by domestic cats. This snake's habits are little known. When caught it may threaten the catcher by pretending to strike but it never bites. Though venomous, the venom of the Krefft's dwarf snake is of no consequence to humans.

The diet consists overwhelmingly of skinks. Mating is thought to occur in spring with an average clutch of three large eggs being laid in summer. The young measure roughly 16 cm at birth. Females of this species tend to be larger than males.

Golden-crowned snake, *Cacophis squamulosus* (Duméril, Bibron & Duméril, 1854). Photo 9.

Description.

This small moderately built snake has a wedge shaped head well distinct from the neck. Its colour is usually dark brown dorsally with a light fawn, brown or yellowish stripe around the side of the head enclosing the snout, head and extending well back onto the nape on each side without meeting to form a collar. The lower labials are striped. Ventrally the colour is pink to red with each ventral lined with black and the subcaudals are divided by a dark line. The scalation is smooth with 15 mid body rows, 170-185 ventrals, 30-52 paired subcaudals and a divided anal. Average adult length is 50 cm although some large females may exceed 75 cm in length.

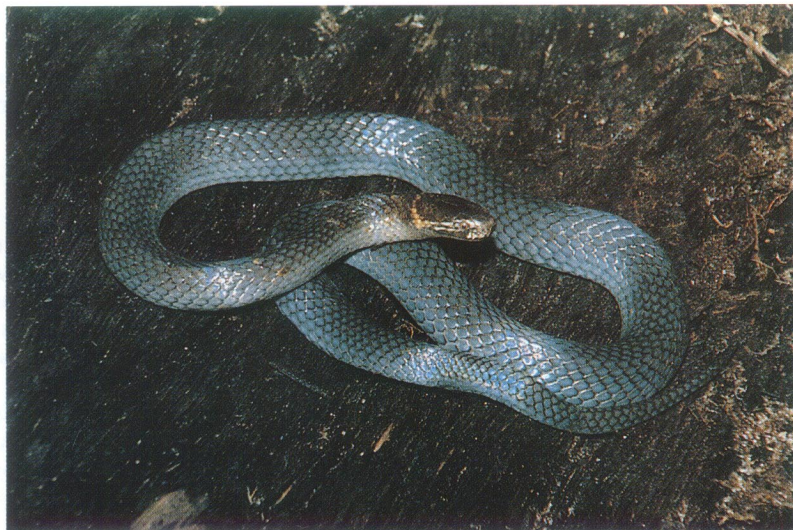


Foto 8: *Cacophis kreffti* (Gunther, 1863), Krefft's dwarf snake, Krefft's dwergslang, Ourimbah, NSW; foto R.T. Hoser.



Foto 9: *Cacophis squamulosus* (Dumeril, 1854), golden crowned snake, goudenkroon slang, St. Ives, NSW; foto R.T. Hoser.

Distribution.

The Golden-crowned snake is found in all wetter parts of the Sydney area and is only absent from the driest parts of the Cumberland Plain. It is most common on the upper and lower north shore.

General.

This wholly nocturnal snake is essentially a rainforest or wet sclerophyll forest inhabitant. When found in drier habitats it is usually found in close proximity to water. Specimens caught during the day are usually found under ground cover such as well embedded rocks. At night this species is frequently found crossing suburban streets, and caught by domestic cats. Observations have shown this species to be both a burrower and partly arboreal in habits. When caught this snake almost always adopts a fierce striking posture but rarely attempts to bite even if it strikes. Though venomous, the Golden-crowned snake is not considered dangerous.

In the Sydney area, this species feeds mainly on skink lizards of the genus *Lampropholis*. This snake is often active on nights considered too cold for most other snakes. Mating occurs in spring with an average of six large eggs being laid in summer. The young measure 16 cm at birth. females tend to be larger than males.

Small-eyed snake, *Cryptophis nigrescens* (Günther, 1862). Photo 10.

Description.

This moderately built snake has a small head slightly distinct from the neck. It is grey to black dorsally, and is cream to bright pink ventrally, often with blackish flecks or blotches. The scalation is smooth with 15 mid body rows, 165-210 ventrals, 30-45 single subcaudals, and a single anal.

Around Sydney this snake averages 55 cm in length, rarely reaching 80 cm in length. In Queensland this species may reach 1.1 m in length. The Small-eyed snake is commonly confused with the Red-bellied black snake and is commonly killed in mistake as juvenile Black snakes.

Distribution.

The Small-eyed snake occurs in most areas around Sydney with undeveloped land, although it is probably absent from the drier parts of the Cumberland Plain (see photo 12).

General.

This wholly nocturnal snake is venomous and no less than two people are known to have died from its bite. Both deaths were the result of exceptional circumstances and this snake could not in general be called 'deadly'. A bite from the Small-eyed snake must however be treated with care. Most bites result in little more than local swelling.

Most specimens of this snake are caught during the day under cover, particularly in cold weather. When caught this snake will usually attempt to bite and may flatten out its body whilst doing so. this snake has been found inside termite mounds, although it is assumed that it eats lizards, and not the termites that inhabit the mounds. Small-eyed snakes eat skinks, geckoes and frogs.

Winter aggregations of this snake numbering up to nearly thirty specimens are known from around Sydney. It is suspected that mating occurs in the colder months even though many winter aggregations often contain juvenile specimens. In colder months many species are found in pairs under the same or adjacent rocks, particularly in highlands to the west and south-west of Sydney.



Foto 10: *Cryptophis nigrescens* (Gunther, 1862), small-eyed snake, kleinoog slang, Port Douglas, Qld; foto R.T. Hoser.

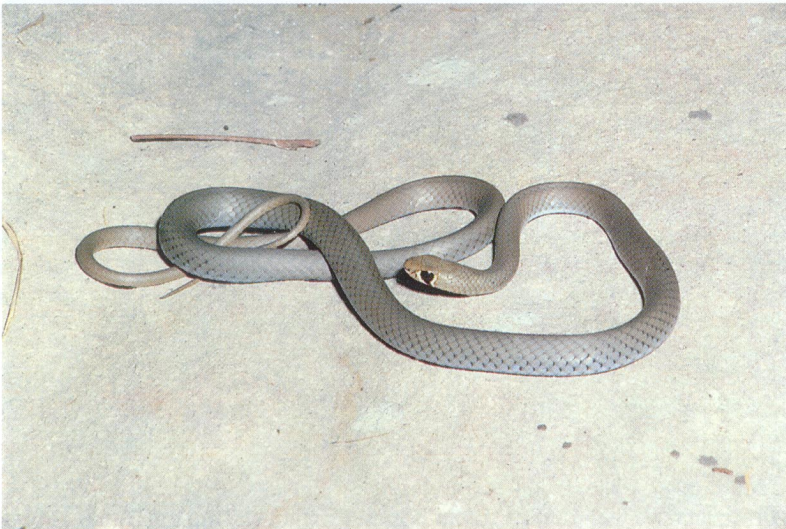


Foto 11: *Demansia psammophis* (Schlegel, 1837), yellow-faced whip snake, geelkop zweepslang, West Head, NSW; foto R.T. Hoser.

This snake produces up to eight live young in late summer, although four to five is the average number of young produced. Youngs measure 10-12 cm at birth. (See my paper, Melbourne's snakes, published in Vol. 10 (2) of this journal for more details about this species).

Yellow-faced whip snake, *Demansia psammophis* (Schlegel, 1837). Photo 11.

Description.

This slender snake has a head which is distinct from its body. Around Sydney the dorsal colour is a light steely grey green above, occasionally with a reddish colouring down the neck. The head is olive green in colour with a black 'comma' marking going through the eye. Ventrally the snake is grey green to yellowish with the yellowish predominating under the tail. There is frequently a green ventral stripe. The scalation is smooth with 15 mid body rows, 165-230 ventrals, 68-105 paired subcaudals, and a single anal. This snake averages 65 cm in length but may exceed 1 meter.

Distribution.

The Yellow-faced whip snake is found throughout the Sydney area, being most common in sandstone rock bushland, where it is one of the most abundant snake types (see photo 13).

General.

This diurnal species, though venomous is not considered dangerous. Typical symptoms of its bite are severe local stinging and swelling which lasts for several hours and an intense itch that may last for a few days.

Yellow-faced whip snakes are most commonly found under slabs of sandstone rock, and in late winter to spring adult pairs may commonly be found together, indicating that this is the mating season. Winter aggregations of four or five specimens are commonly found. This is probably the fastest moving species of snake found in the Sydney area and has no hesitation in biting a captor.

This snake feeds on skinks and other lizards which it actively chases. Occasionally other animals such as snakes and small mammals are eaten. Sydney herpetologist Robert Croft noted a captive adult of this species consuming a Green tree snake *Dendrelaphis punctulatus* of similar size that was being housed in the same cage.

Males are usually the larger specimens and male combat in the form of two males twisting around one another and biting each other is known. Male combat occurs in the mating season, although often it is not directly connected with the attempted seduction of a mate. From three to nine eggs are laid, often communally, in summer by this species. These take about nine weeks to hatch and the young measure about 15 cm at birth.

White-lipped snake, *Drysdalia coronoides* (Günther, 1858). Photo 14.

Description.

This snake is of light build with a head distinct from the neck. Its colour may be any shade of grey or brown dorsally. Ventrally its colour is most commonly a salmon colour although it may be cream, pink, grey or yellow in ventral colouration. A continuous or broken black streak and a white streak below it occur from the snout along the upper lip and fade out on the side of the neck. The scalation is smooth with 15 mid body rows, 120-160 ventrals, 35-70 single subcaudals and a single anal. The snake averages 40 cm in length and rarely exceeds 60 cm in length.



Foto 12: Nepean River habitat, + 60 km south-west of Sydney, on the outer edge of the relatively flat Cumberland plain, aan de rand van de relatief vlakke Cumberland vlakke; foto R.T. Hoser.



Foto 13: Kurringai Chase habitat, + 25 km north of Sydney, bushland, 5 km north of Salvation Creek (West Head). Woeste streek, 5 km ten noorden van Salvation Creek. foto R.T. Hoser

The White-lipped snake is commonly confused with the Copperhead (*Austrelaps superbus*), Eastern master's snake (*Drysdalia rhodogaster*), and the Swamp snake (*Hemiaspis signata*).

Distribution.

Around Sydney this snake is found in only a few isolated pockets in high country to the west and south. White-lipped snakes are known from Wentworth Falls/Katoomba in the Blue Mountains and from Otford, near Wollongong.

General.

White-lipped snakes are very common where they occur. They are found in hilly country and occupy a variety of habitats. White-lipped snakes are mainly diurnal, except in hot weather when they may become semi nocturnal.

Most specimens are caught during the day sheltering underneath any available cover including well embedded rocks. When caught this snake exhibits an uneven temperament, often biting unexpectedly. Its venom is of little consequence to humans. The likelihood of fang penetration upon being bitten by this snake is remote as its venom apparatus is very small.

White-lipped snakes actively stalk their food, which consists of skinks and frogs, although studies by Richard Shine indicate skinks by far are the most important component of the diet.

Mating occurs in autumn and spring and about six live young are born in late summer. These measure about 10 cm at birth and are similar in colour to the adults. Unlike most kinds of snake, the White-lipped snake feeds throughout pregnancy. Hibernating snakes have been found in water soaked logs in water soaked areas.

Eastern master's snake, *Drysdalia rhodogaster* (Jan & Sordelli, 1873). Photo 15.

Description.

This snake is of similar form and appearance to the White-lipped snake, (*Drysdalia coronoides*), with which it is closely related. The Master's snake is of light build, with a cylindrical body and a head slightly distinct from the neck. The colouration is grey-brown to olive often with a russet tinge. Ventrally the snake is yellow with black mottling on the sides of the belly. The head is usually a dark grey dorsally speckled with black and brown markings which become darker towards the rear of the head. This is bordered by a lighter collar 2-3 scales wide on the nape. A black streak runs from the nostril to the eye and another, sometimes broken black streak runs from the eye to the side of the neck. The scalation is smooth with 15 mid body rows, 136-160 ventrals, 39-50 single subcaudals, and a single anal. This snake averages 40 cm in length and rarely exceed 60 cm.

Distribution.

The Eastern master's snake is found in a few scattered localities to the south and west of the city. It is common in Woodford and Kurrabung Heights, in the Blue Mountains, even in built up areas

General.

The Master's snake is very abundant where it occurs. It occupies all habitats where it occurs, and is particularly common on farms and rubbish tips. It is mainly diurnal in habits, though occasionally nocturnal in hot weather. This snake is not dangerous though it is often inclined to bite when freshly caught. The fangs are so small that they rarely break the skin. Most specimens are caught either on the move or sheltering under cover, such as sheets of tin.

The actively chased prey consists almost entirely of skink lizards. Mating occurs in the cooler months, with an average of three to five young being born in the summer. The young measure about 8 cm at birth and are considerably darker in colour than their parents, and have a much brighter collar. In NSW the young are reproductive at three years old.

Red-naped snake, *Furina diadema* (Schlegel, 1837). Photo 16.

Description.

This snake is of very light build and has a head distinct from its neck and body. The dorsal colour is shiny light to dark brown, often reddish. The head and neck are shiny black with a red patch on the nape. The ventral surface is white to cream. The scalation is smooth with 15 mid body rows, 160-210 ventrals, 35-70 paired subcaudals, and a paired anal. This snake averages 45 cm in length and rarely exceeds 60 cm.

Distribution.

The Red-naped snake is found throughout the Sydney area, except for the heavily built-up areas.

General.

This species is nocturnal in habit, although it is strongly crepuscular (active at dusk). This snake rarely attempts to bite and its weak venom apparatus makes it effectively harmless to humans.

Specimens caught by day are found under ground litter, whilst at night they frequently cross roads. In bushland areas this snake is particularly common around disused rubbish tips, and several specimens may be found sharing the same site. This snake has been known to occupy the same site as the Yellow-faced whip snake (*Demansia psammophis*), for hibernation purposes.

Red-naped snakes are commonly found in termite mounds and for years it was believed that this species fed on termites. Captive observations proved that this snakes' true diet is skinks, geckoes and possibly small frogs. Termites and other insects taken from the stomach of this snake are now presumed to have been incidentally taken by the snakes after prey lizards had fed on the insects.

Four to ten eggs are produced in summer which hatch to produce young measuring about 8 cm in length. Little is known of the breeding biology of this species.

Red-naped snakes are one of the more common snakes to reach museum collections on account of their unusual colouration. The exact relationship between the Red-naped snake and similar Moon snake *Furina ornata* found over a wide area of northern and inland Australia is not certain.

Swamp or Marsh snake, *Hemiaspis signata* (Jan, 1859). Photo 17.

Description.

This species is of moderate to stout build and has a smallish head only slightly distinct from the neck. In Sydney this snake is olive brown dorsally, with a black or dark grey belly. The throat is lighter than the belly and the head is often darker than the body, especially in the juveniles. There is a narrow white or yellow streak, dark edged, from the eye to the side of the neck, and another narrow streak of the same colour but usually flecked with darker colour along the upper lip. Melanistic specimens occasionally occur, particularly near Wollongong. The scalation is smooth with 17 mid body rows, 153-170 ventrals, 41-56 single subcaudals and a paired anal. Average length is 50 cm although some large females may attain up to a metre



Foto 14: *Drysalia coronoides* (Gunther, 1858), white-lipped snake, witlipslang, juv., Snowy Mountains, NSW; foto R.T. Hoser.



Foto 15: *Drysalia rhodogaster* (Jan & Sordelli, 1873), eastern masters' snake, Lithgow, NSW; foto R.T. Hoser.

in length. The Swamp snake is commonly mistaken for the White-lipped snake (*Drysdalia cornoides*).

Distribution.

The Swamp snake is found throughout the Sydney area with the exception of the driest parts of the Cumberland Plain. They are found in many inner suburbs including Bellevue Hill (Coopers Park), Artarmon (near the railway line), Northbridge (golf course), and Cammeray (Primrose and Tunks Parks).

General.

Swamp snakes are usually found in marshy country, wet forests or adjacent to sand dunes. This species will aggregate in large numbers in areas of suitable habitat such as rubbish tips. This snake is mainly diurnal in habit and most specimens are caught during the day either on the move or under any suitable cover.

The food of this snake is skinks and frogs, which it kills by the use of its venom, which is not dangerous to humans. Bites from this relatively non-aggressive snake only cause local swelling.

Mating occurs in late autumn, winter and spring and live young are produced in late summer. Although the average number of young produced is about six, up to twenty young may be produced from larger specimens. The young which measure about 10 cm in length are brightly coloured and have velvety black or dark heads. Females are usually the larger snakes, attaining much greater lengths and girths than males.



Foto 16: *Furina diadema* (Schlegel, 1837), red-naped snake, roodnek slang, West Head, NSW; foto R.T. Hoser.



Foto 17: *Hemiaspis signata* (Jan, 1859), swamp snake, moerasslang, male, man, Northbridge, NSW; foto R.T. Hoser.