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There's more to deer than hunting

VENOMOUS SNAKES IN DEER HABITATS

By Mark Pelley

As Australia's own 'Snake Hunter', I capture and handle the most venomous snakes in the entire planet as part of my daily life. To help keep you safe from snakes when hunting, this is the first of a three-part series of articles about: Understanding the types of snakes you are most likely to come across when stalking deer, what to do if you see a snake, and finally about how to protect your gun dogs from venomous snakes.

TIGER SNAKES

Within prime deer habitats you will most likely come across the tiger snake. Tiger snakes are the fifth most venomous land snake in the entire planet.

Description

Eastern tiger snakes (typically found in Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia) can vary significantly in colour, banding and size. There can be significant variations of brown, black, grey, yellow, blue and green. Black tiger snakes (usually found in Tasmania) conversely are usually, as the name suggests, all black with mild banding or colouration visible only in good light.

Tiger snakes typically have shorter and broader heads and are usually found between one and 1.5 metres long but very thick specimens over two metres long are not unusual in prominent deer locations.

Behaviour

Tiger snakes are typically more active during the day however during hot summers, I find them more frequently moving

around at night. They are often misunderstood as being 'aggressive' however it is often not the case. When they perceive a threat, a tiger snake will flatten out its neck and can raise its head similar to a cobra. This defensive posture is what is often misconceived as aggressive where in reality it is trying to scare you away. That said, if provoked, a tiger snake will not hesitate to bite so be extremely careful.

Venom and Symptoms of a Bite

Tiger snake venom is extremely toxic to humans. It contains powerful neurotoxins which affect the brain and nervous system. Further, tiger snake venom has deadly blood coagulants (affect blood clotting), haemolysins (destroy red blood cell membranes) and myotoxins (cause severe muscle necrosis and paralysis). These toxins act simultaneously on the body whereby symptoms can include severe pain, numbness, sweating, rapid onset of breathing difficulties, paralysis, and if untreated – death. You can die in as little as half an hour without treatment from a tiger snake bite.

Distribution and Habitat

Tiger snakes are common around swamps, wetlands, water courses, ponds, rivers and dams. As tiger snakes love to eat frogs, small lizards, birds, and rodents, keep in mind that where food sources are plentiful, it is not uncommon to see large numbers of eastern tiger snakes in a small area.

Never let your guard down around tiger snakes. They can climb trees quite easily in search of birds for their next meal. Tiger snakes also are quite adapted to the cold or wet climates so can be found at any time of year.

EASTERN BROWN SNAKES

Description

The eastern brown snake is typically a uniform brown colour with a tan belly, however can appear as a grey or black as well. They are generally a thinner snake with a small head, typically between one and 1.5 metres long however I have caught specimens around two metres. Juvenile brown snakes have dark head markings as well.

Behaviour

Eastern brown snakes can be extremely fast, agile and very formidable to deal with when threatened. They create an 'S' bend when about to strike and can lunge their body forward. They have the ability to easily access small gaps and can hide extremely well. Within primary deer



A tiger snake, in this instance showing the characteristic banding.



An eastern brown snake is a uniformly coloured slender snake.

hunting habitats, this is the most venomous and dangerous snake you can come across.

Venom and Bite Symptoms

The eastern brown snake is the second most venomous land snake on earth. They are responsible for more deaths in Australia than any other group of snakes. Their venom contains neurotoxins as well as blood coagulants and myotoxins. A person can suffer cardiovascular collapse in as little as 30 minutes. Bite marks can sometimes not appear on the skin and are not always felt. Therefore, if the head of a brown snake makes contact with bare skin, treat this situation as a life-threatening emergency as opposed to taking a chance.

Distribution and Habitat

Eastern brown snakes can be encountered on farms or otherwise in drier parts of forests, scrub lands, open grasslands or similar environments. They frequently emerge from the ground or hiding near logs or loose scrub. They are located within all deer hunting environments except Tasmania.

BLACK SNAKES

Black snakes are likely to be encountered when stalking deer and include the red bellied black and blue bellied black snake (also known as the spotted black snake). Note that there are other types of black snakes but for the purpose of this article, we will focus on those you are most likely to encounter while hunting.

Description

As their names suggest, these snakes are essentially glossy black with either a bluish or reddish underbelly depending upon the species. Red bellied varieties typically grow between 1.5 and two metres long and their blue bellied counter parts are usually smaller, growing up to 1.5 metres.

Distribution and Habitat

Both species are found in woodlands, near swamps, wetlands and creeks but the red bellied black can handle somewhat drier and more arid habitats. Both are found in New South Wales, the eastern parts of Queensland and the red bellied black is also found in eastern and northern Victoria.

Behaviour

Both snakes are very active during the day but depending upon the weather, the blue bellied black can also be active at night. These are typically shy

snakes that will attempt to back away from confrontation with humans. They can headbutt before striking, however if harassed sufficiently will bite. From my experience these snakes, tend to hold on when biting and 'chew' but this only an observation.

Venom

The venom of black snakes is nowhere near as dangerous as that of the tiger or brown, however any bite needs to be considered a life-threatening emergency. Black snake venom contains myotoxins and anticoagulants. The muscle damage that can occur is preventable but irreversible. Red bellied black snake venom also contains procoagulants and neurotoxins however this is rarely a complication for humans after being bitten.

SOUTHERN DEATH ADDER

Description

There are many types of death adders, the most common that deer hunters are likely to encounter being the southern death adder. This snake is short and stout usually between 40 and 70 centimetres but can grow to almost one metre. They are usually brown or grey with irregular darker cross bands and a lighter coloured tail.

Distribution and Habitat

These are ground dwelling snakes that make use of natural ground cover such as grass, leaf litter and loose small stones. They are typically found in scrubland, rainforest and heathland. They camouflage extremely well so keep a look down as you walk around.

Behaviour

Death adders are typically nocturnal and an extremely patient sit-and-wait ambush predator. Most snakes will typically attempt to flee if disturbed but the death adder will often remain still. Though this is generally a slow-moving snake, hunters can easily be deceived because when the death adder decides to bite, it becomes the fastest striking snake in the world.

Venom

Death adder venom is predominantly neurotoxic containing both pre- and post-synaptic toxins. The effects of the venom are usually slower compared to other Australian species however that does not stop this snake being ranked the ninth most venomous land snake on the planet.



An example of a red bellied black snake. The red belly is just visible in this photograph.



The north adobe is a short, solidly built reptile.



A copperhead snake.



The author, Mark Pelley

COPPERHEAD SNAKES

The lowland and highland copperhead are also likely to be encountered by deer hunters.

Description

Both the highland and lowland copperhead can vary significantly in colour and pattern ranging anywhere from black, brown, grey yellow, copper and red. The lips of the highland copperhead are strongly barred while those of the lowland variation are not. These snakes both typically grow to between 1.3 and 1.7 metres long and can be quite thick and strongly built.

Distribution and Habitat

Lowland copperheads can be found in Victoria, Tasmania and the extreme south-east of New South Wales and South Australia. The highland copperhead is predominantly found in New South Wales and in some parts of the extreme east of Victoria. These snakes are typically found near marshlands, forests, swamps and are very common near waterways.

Behaviour

Copperheads typically are docile and shy with humans, preferring to retreat. If threatened, they can assume a menacing position flattening out their neck and puffing in size. When significantly harassed, they repeatedly change position with great speed ready to strike out. They strike very fast however are not aggressive and bites are uncommon provided you leave these snakes alone. Copperhead snakes thrive in a cold environment and can survive above the snowline. Expect to see this snake at any time of year.

Venom

Copperheads contain pre- and post-synaptic neurotoxins with some myotoxins and haemotoxins also present. At least one person has experienced life threatening systemic neurotoxicity from a copperhead bite however recovered following administration of appropriate antivenom.

FINAL WORDS

The above are some of the more common snakes that you will come across while hunting however is not an exhaustive list. There are plenty of other species that you may inadvertently engage with while searching for deer. It is important to note that Australia has extremely venomous snakes that you may encounter when hunting and the 'What to do if you see a snake' will be covered in the next issue.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Pelley – *The Snake Hunter* - is a catcher of venomous snakes and consultant in Melbourne who has a passion to keep people safe from snakes. He is an avid hunter and frequently appears in the media for consultation, advice or for his different adventures capturing snakes in precarious situations. Follow *The Snake Hunter* on Facebook @SnakeHunterAus.