

Surf Coast Snake Stories - are they really that scary?

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Now we are coming into the warmer weather we start to consider those awe inspiring and (perhaps more often) fear inspiring reptiles that live along this coastline. Snakes are emerging from their winter dormancy and sunning themselves. Pictures of sleepy snakes shared on social network community pages quickly gather fearful comments and over-reactions. While it is obviously extremely undesirable to get bitten by one of these native reptiles, the likelihood of that happening remains miniscule, and even then, envenomation is not guaranteed. I don't want to take away from any tragedies that have happened, but I often see a fear of snakes as a barrier to people experiencing joy in the natural environment.

All of us have snake stories and they are exciting to tell and hear because of the cultural air of fear and danger associated with snake encounters. Like other venomous animals it is important to remember they are defensive when it comes to humans, with many bites occurring when people are attacking them or trying to pick them up to move them on. In my experience their reputation is largely undeserved, but I do still love a good snake story. I'll share a few here and interpret the behaviour.

*Tiger Snake—*Notechis scutatus**

Everyone's favourite stripey villain, this robust, incredible reptile certainly packs a venomous punch. Tigers hunt for their prey and can subdue it quickly with a potent bite. Around here, small rodents, marsupials and frogs would be on the menu. Interestingly, their jet-black cousins on the Bass Strait islands that eat seabird chicks can only gorge themselves for a short period before fasting the rest of the year. A recent encounter was far too close for comfort, when my son accidentally scared one with his bike while riding near the old coal mine. We both saw it at the same time crossing our path and he braked and came to a halt just a few cm away. It reared up and flattened its body as I hauled him away over my head. It didn't strike at him nor chase or advance at all. It hastened its crossing of the path slightly and added that flat body threat display in an effort to scare away the fast-approaching huge animals—and it worked!



*Black Snake—*Pseudechis porphyriacus**

Considered reluctant to bite with a less potent venom, there aren't any confirmed deaths from this species. Their dark-coloured surface will rapidly absorb heat, and they feed primarily on frogs. In the past they have been commonly encountered in the urban environment, but in areas in the north of Australia they have declined with the arrival and spread of the Cane Toad. I came across a full-size 1.8 m long snake basking right in the middle of a dirt road above Anglesea. It must have felt entitled as not even the approach of my car, then my increasing efforts to motivate it towards the bush were enough to get it to budge. Perhaps this tendency to insist on minding their own business is why they accounted for most bites in early colonisation—they hang around too long until the human does something it shouldn't.

*Copperhead—*Austrelaps superbus**

Australia's most cold-adapted snake, it is active when most other reptiles are not. Variable in colour, this less frequently encountered species is also considered reluctant to bite—but does have a potent neurotoxic venom. My only experience with this species was all too brief on the back road to Aireys from Anglesea. It was crossing the road rapidly so I rushed out to get a better look which inspired a flat body display as it rapidly slithered away. They have an attractive, chocolate-brown sheen to their scales, superb you might say.

I do feel it is a bit of a personal shortcoming that I can't handle snakes when I am comfortable with everything else (even the much maligned other 's' with eight legs). Like all skills, it requires a knowledge of your subject and experience doing it. Considering all my encounters are where snakes live and there's no need for contact, I'm happy to leave it that way.

Ref: White, Edmonds & Zborowski. 1998. *Australia's Most Dangerous*. Australian Geographic.
H.G. Cogger. 2014. *Reptiles and Amphibians of Australia*. CSIRO.