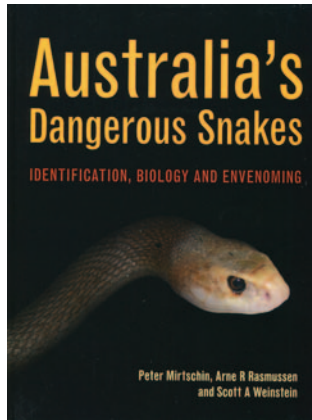


# Australia's Dangerous Snakes: Identification, Biology and Envenoming

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Being married to an Australian and having visited her home country almost annually over 25 years, my personal experience is that there is a widespread distrust and indeed fear about snakes amongst many Australians. As a visitor interested in Australia's amazing natural history most locals are incredulous that I want to see snakes and other reptiles in their beautiful country.

Such a "climate of fear" can in part be explained by the fact that Australia does (in)famously possess some very, very venomous snakes: the inland taipan *Oxyuranus microlepidotus* is one of the world's most venomous snakes with its venom being 50 times more toxic than that of the Indian cobra *Naja naja*. But the reality is that in an increasingly urbanised country many Australians seldom encounter snakes. Furthermore, snakebites of humans are rare and deaths from snakebites even rarer. Australia's Dangerous Snakes notes that there are 200-500 snakebites per year in the country with just 2-3 resulting in fatalities. To put this in perspective about 1,300 people died on Australian roads in 2016.

Clearly much needs to be done to overcome this atmosphere as snakes play a crucial part in the biodiversity and ecology of the country and can co-exist with humans. One route is through education, understanding and appreciation. This is where the publication of *Australia's Dangerous Snakes* is timely and helpful.

This comprehensive book describes the venomous snakes of Australia defined as "medically important (dangerous)". These include 39 terrestrial species (out of an Australian total of 100), 24 species (out of 34) of sea snakes including two species of sea kraits (*Laticauda*).

In various chapters the book covers the identification of each snake species with keys, text and photographs (though of the latter more later). It also has large sections on the production, action and use of venoms and the clinical management of snakebites. Chapters on the conservation of snakes along with their interactions with humans are included. Finally, there is an appendix describing the history of snake venom production in Australia, a useful glossary and an extensive reference list.

I found the text comprehensive and authoritative with the complementing contributions from all three authors very good. The authors should be congratulated on the work they have done to bring together for the first time so

much significant information. This will make *Australia's Dangerous Snakes* an essential reference for many years to come.

A major part of the book is the identification of the snake species: this is done through a key, a table and individual species accounts including photographic images. Though the text is well written, in many cases the photographs of snakes are of medium to sometimes low quality. These are of either live animals or museum specimens and have a curious (and old-fashioned) look as in each case the background has been cropped, leaving a uniform and contrasting white surround. Though I understand the motives for wishing to show a photo for each species and the practical reason for doing this as presented (some species are rare or difficult to photograph) it is not successful. In an era of high-resolution digital cameras and modern book design and production the photos are sometimes below standard. This is a shame as for many readers the images of snakes are the first thing that they will look at when opening the book. High quality images of these beautiful creatures would go a long way to increasing appreciation of them.

Unfortunately such criticism also feeds into the general production of the book. Again it has an old-fashioned feel. Many schematic figures are copied directly from other sources sometimes with too much detail included. These should have all been redrawn for this book to make a uniform style. Other figures/tables specifically made for the book are very basic. Some photographs are superfluous and seem to be added to fill space. I feel uncomfortable making these criticisms because the authors have put a great amount of high quality content in this important book, but it is a shame that the publishers have not invested more money and time to match this in the production.

However, with this proviso, I hope that *Australia's Dangerous Snakes* is widely circulated and used as it offers much essential information about venomous snakes in Australia which should be disseminated. As for the goal to reduce the "climate of fear" and increase understanding and appreciation in the general public of these creatures, this will be best served in a book containing high quality photographs and drawings to display these wonderful animals and their role in the Australian natural environment.

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