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**RESOURCE NOTES**

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DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND WILDLIFE

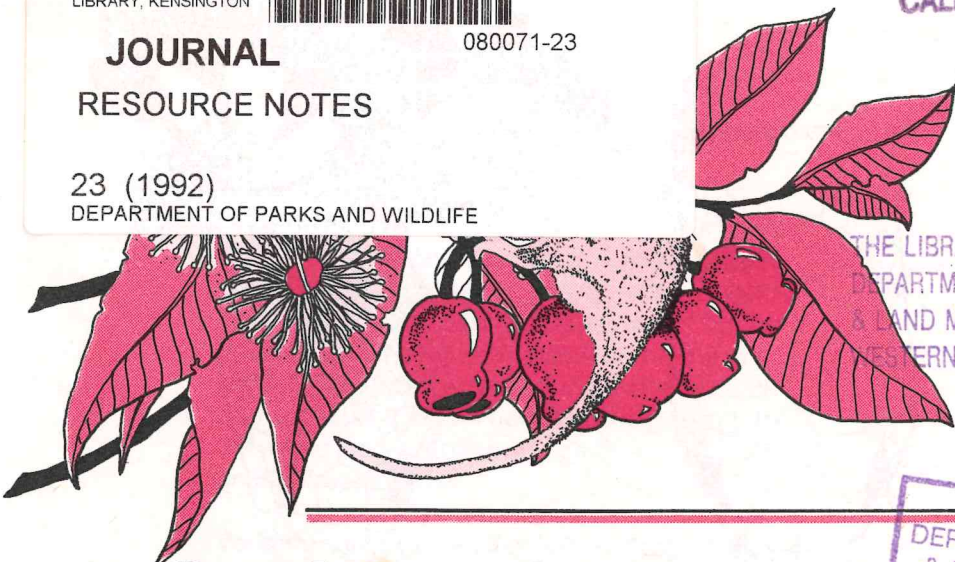
# Resource Notes

[#23]

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## Snakes of the Katanning District



Thirteen species of snake occur in CALM's Katanning District according to the WA Museum and CALM records through 1988 (Fig. 1).

Two more species are considered likely to occur in this area on the basis of their known distribution and habitat.

However, a more detailed reptile survey is needed to confirm their occurrence by specimen collection.

The fifteen species mentioned here include one Python, four Blind snakes and ten Elapid or venomous snakes.

### Pythons

Pythons can be distinguished by their typically long snout, broad head and narrow neck. At mid-body their scales are in rows of more than 29 and the head is covered with many small scales (Fig. 2).

#### 1. Carpet Python (*Morelia spilota*)

- Length: up to 2.4 metres
- Colour: Quite variable but generally a complex pattern of dark-edged pale brown blotches and bars on a dark greenish or blackish background.
- Venom: Not venomous
- Remarks: Will bite if disturbed or handled roughly, leaving a row of small puncture marks. High risk of infection in these wounds.

### Blind Snakes

Small, burrowing snakes with a very short tail and hard, shiny scales. Tiny eyes located under transparent scales. Generally found in the topsoil or in ant nests and termite mounds. Usually only found on the surface at night or after heavy rain. May be initially mistaken for large, active worms. Four species are recorded from the Katanning District. However determination is difficult without the use of appropriate texts and some expertise in this field.

#### 1. Blind Snakes (*Rhamphotyphlops* species)

- Length: 8-50 cm
- Colour: Shiny. Silver to purplish-brown with a pale lower surface.

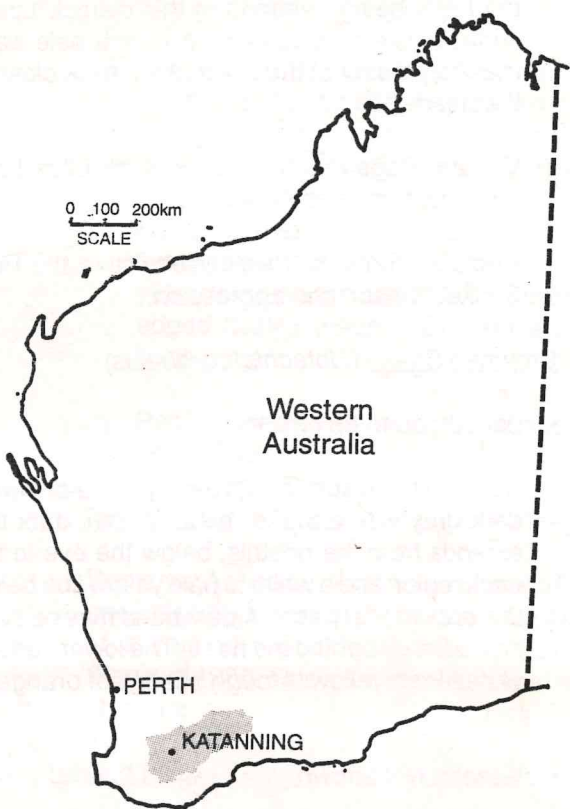
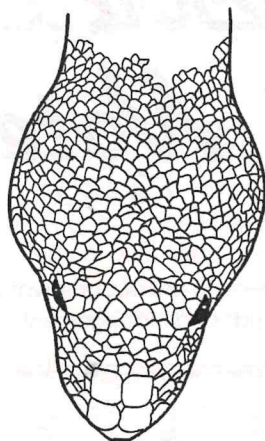
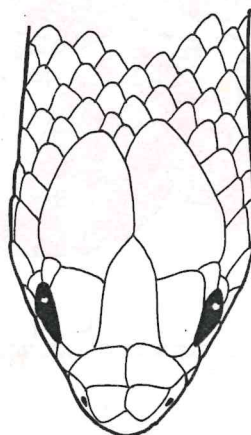


Fig 1. CALM'S KATANNING DISTRICT

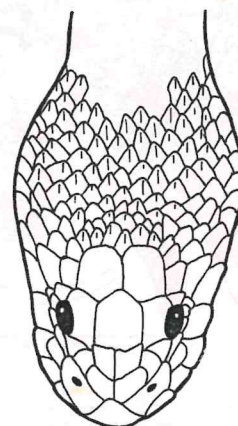
Fig 2. HEAD SHAPES



(a) Typical python, broad head and narrow neck. Head covered with numerous small scales.



(b) Typical elapid snake, no obvious neck constriction. Large scales on top of head.



(c) Typical death adder, obvious neck constriction. Top of head with large scales.

- Venom: Not venomous
- Remarks: Harmless, however exudes an offensive odour, particular when handled.

### Elapid (Venomous) Snakes

An extremely variable group of snakes in size, colour and markings even within examples of the same species, depending on age and the locality. They vary from pale brown, through reddish/grey tones, to black. Other colour markings, such as bands or darker heads may be present. In general, they are slender snakes with a head narrower, or equal to, the width of the body (Fig 2). With the exception of the Southern Death-adder there is no obvious neck constriction immediately behind the head (Figure 2).

At least one species, the Tiger Snake, may display a slight hood when alarmed, similar to the Cobras of Asia and Africa.

#### 1. Tiger Snake (*Notechis scutatus*)

- Length: up to 1.2 metres
- Colour: Mostly black, or dark brown to blackish. Bands of yellow-orange-pale brown may be present. Lower surfaces pale to bright yellow.
- Venom: One of the world's deadliest snakes and often pugnacious when confronted.
- Remarks: May be active at night, in wet areas

and at cooler temperatures than anticipated.

#### 2. Bardick (*Notechis curtus*)

- Length: up to 70 cm
- Colour: Upper surface olive-brown to brick red, the latter being common in this district. Lower surface pale grey to pink. A partial pale band may be present at the sides of the neck close to the head.
- Venom: Dogs deaths from Bardick bites have been confirmed at Katanning.
- Remarks: Similar to their close relative, the Tiger Snake, in habit and aggression.

#### 3. Crowned Snake (*Notechis coronatus*)

- Length: up to 65 cm
- Colour: Upper surface olive-grey, olive-brown or dark grey with a darker head. A thin, dark line extends from the nostrils, below the eye to the neck region and a white to pale yellow line below this dark line is typical. A dark band may be seen immediately behind the head. The lower surface varies from yellow through shades of orange to red.
- Venom: Not known
- Remarks: Should be treated with caution due to its close relationship with the Tiger Snake and Bardick.

4. Dugite (*Pseudonaja affinis*)

- Length: up to 2 metres
- Colour: Upper surface pale to dark olive-brown often with irregular or occasional black scales. Lower surface generally a dirty white colour. Young specimens pale yellowish brown on the upper surface, often with a dark herringbone pattern. The head is often dark to almost black and sometimes a dark neck band is present. In the young there are often orange-brown blotches on the lower surface.
- Venom: Highly toxic, well developed fangs. Quick to bite when handled or cornered.
- Remarks: Dugites are common around dwellings and farms due to the availability of the introduced House Mouse as food. Generally they are very alert snakes and will move away before they are approached too closely.

5. Gwardar (*Pseudonaja nuchalis*)

- Length: up to 1.6 metres
- Colour: Extremely variable, four main colour types have been described:
  - a) Grey or brown - similar to Dugites with which they can be confused. Proper identification requires technical expertise.
  - b) Banded - Head pale-brown to black, body alternating broad bands of brown or black and pale-brown to yellowish bands. Sometimes incorrectly called "Tiger Snakes".
  - c) Hooded - Head and neck black, sometimes extending to upper body. Upper body mostly yellowish to brown with darker black or brown edged scales which may form a herringbone pattern.
  - d) Pale-headed - Pale brown head and a dark brown body.
- Venom: Highly toxic, well developed fangs.
- Remarks: A suspicion that Gwardars and Dugites would hybridize was confirmed by the collection of a verified hybrid at Gundaring Lake near Wagin in 1986. This specimen is held at the WA Museum.

6. Ringed Brown Snake (*Pseudonaja modesta*)

- Length: up to 60 cm
- Colour: Variable with age:

a) **Juvenile:** Bright orange with dark markings on nose and head, sometimes extending to the throat. Up to 11 dark rings on body and tail.

b) **Immature:** Faded orange with grey flecks. Dark marking on head and rings on body and tail faded.

c) **Adult:** Dull grey with a faded dark neck ring.

- Venom: Not known. Similar toxicity to others in the *Pseudonaja* family should be assumed.

- Remarks: Despite general information that this species occurs only north of the central wheatbelt several records at the WA Museum are from within the Katanning District of CALM.

7. Mulga Snakes (*Pseudechis australis*)

- Length: up to 2 metres

- Colour: Mid to dark brown, usually with a close pattern formed from darker edges to individual scales.

- Venom: Highly venomous. Fortunately, this is a fairly docile snake except when handled or cornered. Unlike most venomous snakes, which tend to strike and retreat when biting a victim, Mulga Snakes have been known to grip and chew; the amount of venom injected is therefore maximised.

- Remarks: No confirmed records of occurrence in the Katanning District. However, collections from Narrogin indicate that occurrence in the more recently developed areas to the north and east of Dumbleyung and Lake Grace might be anticipated.

8. Southern Death Adder (*Acanthopis antarticus*)

- Length: up to 70 cm

- Colour: Dull brown-grey with up to 50 evenly spaced pale bands edged with dark brown or grey. Lower surface white which extends to a streaked, white upper lip and jaw-line. Distinguishable from other elapid snakes by a broader head and markedly thinner tail.

- Venom: Highly venomous. Although sluggish, their excellent camouflage and habit of partial burial in loose soil and litter increases the risk of accidental disturbance and retaliatory attack.

- Remarks: No confirmed records from the Katanning District, however distribution patterns

indicate that occurrence is likely.

9. Rosen's Snake (*Denisonia fasciata*)

- Length: up to 62 cm
- Colour: Tan to brick-red with many, irregular reddish to grey-brown blotches which may form into broken bands. Lower surface and lips white.
- Venom: Bites have been known to cause severe local swelling.
- Remarks: WA Museum records include collections from the Pilbara, south to Dumbleyung. Not recorded from nature reserves in the Katanning District to date.

10. Gould's Snake (*Rhinoplocephalus gouldii*)

- Length: up to 50 cm
- Colour: Orange or reddish-brown with each scale edged with black. Head and neck glossy black. A pale mark in the front of the eye identifies the species. Lips and lower surface white.
- Venom: Although venomous, they can be regarded as harmless in view of their docile nature and small fangs.
- Remarks: May be confused with the young of more dangerous species by people with little experience in reptile identification.

11. Black-backed Snake (*Rhinoplocephalus nigreiceps*)

- Length: up to 60 cm
- Colour: Head and neck glossy grey-black extending into a dark stripe down the length of the back and tail. Sides pale-cream to tan with a dark blotch at the front of each scale. These dark blotches gradually increase in size up to the body to blend with the dark stripe of the back and tail. Lips and lower surface white.
- Venom: Although venomous, may be considered to be harmless in view of their docile nature and small fangs.

12. Jan's Banded Snake (*Vermicella bertholdii*)

- Length: up to 30 cm
- Colour: Head white to creamy-grey, freckled with black spots which increase in size towards the neck. Body and tail alternatively banded with 18-30 black and orange-yellow rings.

- Venom: Harmless.

13. Southern Shovel-nosed Snake (*Vermicella semifasciata*)

- Length: up to 35 cm
- Colour: Body and tail creamy, pale brown with up to 80 regular dark brown bands. A largish dark blotch on the head and on the neck. Nose and throat usually pale brown.
- Venom: Harmless

### Laws About Snakes

The 1950 Wildlife Conservation Act protects all fauna throughout WA. It is unlawful to keep any snake in captivity, or to keep skins or carcasses not lawfully obtained. Some snakes have been declared as rare, or likely to become extinct, and severe penalties (up to \$10,000) can be imposed for capturing, harming or killing them. Although licences can be obtained to keep or take snakes, they are granted only for certain purposes (e.g. research) and under stringent conditions. Such licences are not freely available to the public.

Under certain circumstances people may kill individual snakes. This is allowed only when there is immediate danger to human life, farm stock or domestic animals and birds.

### Poisonous Snake Bites

Take a first aid course to be up to date with first aid knowledge. One source of information on snake bite is Australian First Aid, Volume One, An authorized manual of St. John Ambulance, 1991 from which the following is derived.

- Keep the victim calm, reassured and lying down. Immediately apply a firm (not tight) broad bandage to the bitten area over any clothing, and if possible cover the whole limb. It must be firmly applied and only removed under medical supervision.
- Keep the limb still with a sling or splint.
- Then seek medical aid urgently. Be ready to begin artificial respiration if breathing stops.

### Further Reading

1. Snakes of Western Australia; G.M. Starr, L.A. Smith and R.E. Johnstone (1986). WA Museum, Perth.
2. Reptiles and Amphibians of Australia; H.G. Cogger (1983) 2nd Revised Edition, Reed, Sydney. Australian

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