

Tree Snakes

Fact Sheet



Common Green Tree Snake, *Dendrelaphis punctulatus*. Image: QM, Gary Cranitch.

Introduction

Although most terrestrial snakes in Queensland can climb, only a few species do so regularly. A number of species that are not normally regarded as good climbers have, on occasion, been found in arboreal locations e.g. Blind Snakes, Slatey-grey Snakes, Common Death Adders, Keelbacks, Red-bellied Black Snakes & Common Brown Snakes.

Three of our elapid snakes are frequent climbers. Like other elapids, these snakes are venomous and can produce severe symptoms. The Rough-scaled Snake, *Tropidechis carinatus* is mainly terrestrial, but sometimes hunts among thickets or foliage above the ground. Stephen's Banded Snake, *Hoplocephalus stephensi* and the Pale-headed Snake, *H. bitorquatus* shelter in the hollow branches of large trees with rough bark. The Rough-scaled and Stephen's Banded Snakes are largely associated with rainforests and moist eucalypt forests while the Pale-headed Snake usually occurs in drier eucalypt woodland.

Our largest climbing snakes are the heavy-bodied pythons. Members of the genus *Morelia* are the most regular climbers and one Queensland species, the Green Tree Python (*Morelia viridis*) lives almost exclusively in trees. The pythons that climb tend to do so in a slow, deliberate manner. They usually establish a firm grip on a secure perch before extending towards the next intended perch. Their climbing is thus effected in a series of 'stages'.

Tree snakes are the expert climbers of the snake world and these employ a different strategy for moving through the trees. There are three species and they all have light, long, and slender bodies, ideal for bridging the gaps between branches and neighbouring trees and shrubs. With superb balance, they move through the trees with a graceful sliding motion.

Common Tree Snake *Dendrelaphis punctulata*

The non-venomous Common or Green Tree Snake has a body color varying from olive to bright green, dark grey to black or even blue, most have a distinctive yellow underside. Because of this variation in colour, the name Common Tree Snake is preferred. When frightened, the neck and fore body may be inflated to reveal flecks of pale blue skin between the scales. Average adult length is

from 1–1.8 m. This alert snake is diurnal and has excellent vision. It is often seen basking in the sun or fleeing swiftly to cover when disturbed. Common Tree Snakes feed mainly on frogs and small lizards. Breeding occurs in the summer months and hatchlings are often encountered through February and March. Common Tree Snakes shelter through the cool winter months in safe, secluded places including hollow branches, rock crevices and the cavities in ceilings and walls. The Common Tree Snake has a wide distribution across the tropical north and down the eastern coast of Australia. It also occurs in New Guinea.

Northern Tree Snake *Dendrelaphis calligastra*

The Northern Tree Snake is the smaller, tropical cousin to the Common Tree Snake. In Australia it is restricted to forested areas along eastern Cape York Peninsula and also occurs through New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. It possesses a dark streak along the side of the head that distinguishes it from the Common Tree Snake. The Northern Tree Snake is a non-venomous diurnal hunter of small lizards and frogs.



Brown Tree Snake. Image: QM, Gary Cranitch.

Brown Tree Snake *Boiga irregularis*

The Brown Tree Snake is strictly nocturnal. It has a narrow neck, a bulbous head and large protruding eyes with vertical, cat-like pupils (related species are known as Cat Snakes overseas). This snake is widely distributed up the

eastern seaboard and across the tropical north of Australia. It also occurs through much of the tropical western Pacific and is famous for causing the catastrophic decline of native birds on the island of Guam, where it was accidentally introduced during World War II.

Specimens from coastal eastern Australia are brown to apricot in color, usually with darker bands. Those from the Gulf of Carpentaria and west into the Northern Territory and Western Australia are cream with vivid red-orange bands.

The Brown Tree Snake feeds mainly on roosting birds and/or their eggs and will readily devour pet budgies and canaries where the opportunity permits. It is not uncommon for a pet owner to find a Brown Tree Snake in the bottom of the budgie cage. Having crept in and eaten the bird, the bloated snake is unable to squeeze back between the bars. These stealthy hunters also steal eggs from beneath sleeping birds.

Although venomous, the Brown Tree Snake is usually regarded as being of lesser medical importance. Large specimens should be treated with caution and medical advice should be obtained following a bite from this snake. Successful envenomation by this species requires a chewing bite in order to engage the small rear fangs. Adults grow up to 2 m.

Further Information

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