

NOTES ON THE SNAKES OF TASMANIA.

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While the several species of snakes met with in Tasmania have received careful study in some respects, in conjunction with their mainland congeners, the information is to a certain extent scattered in numerous works. The mis-use of vernacular terms has led to considerable confusion, and the object of these notes is to make more widely known the correct nomenclature and characteristics of the species.

There are only three terrestrial species recorded from Tasmania. I have heard reports on several occasions of another supposed species, but have never yet had a specimen produced. This reported species is spoken of as being about three to four feet long, and very slender, like a whip snake.

The valid species are (1) *Denisonia superba* (Copper-headed or Superb Snake); (2) *Denisonia coronoides* (White-lipped Whip Snake); (3) *Notechis scutatus* (Tiger Snake). In addition to these three there is a species of ringed sea snake (*Platurus laticaudatus*), which is occasionally met with on the Tasmanian coasts. *Denisonia flagellum* (Little Whip Snake) has also been reported ⁽¹⁾ from Tasmania, but this is undoubtedly an error. The wording of the sentence describing the whip snakes in "The Animals of Australia" (Lucas and Le Souëf) is also slightly misleading, but the intention is that *D. flagellum* is common in Victoria. Mr. Le Souëf informs me that he knows of no record of this species from Tasmania.

Brachysoma bimaculata (now *Furina bimaculata*), Verreaux's Snake, and *B. calonotus* (now *F. calonota*), Spotted Snake, were at one time considered to be found in Tasmania. The error apparently arose through Duméril and Bihron recording them (1854) as occurring in Tasmania, having been discovered here in 1844 by M. Verreaux. No other specimen of either species has since been procured in the island, and it is safe to assume that the original record is in error as regards locality. They were recorded in the British Museum Catalogue of 1858 as occurring in Tasmania, but in the 1896 Catalogue their habitat is given as West Australia.

(1) British Assocn. Ad. Science, Tas. Handbook, 1914.

It is of interest to notice the remarks concerning the snakes of Tasmania by Ronald Gunn ⁽²⁾ in 1852:—"The number of species is still undetermined, but there are believed to be at least ten, although it is probable that the young of some kinds may be mistaken for distinct species."

Kreffit supplied a more exact description, as he stated ⁽³⁾ "Snakes abound, but the number of species is limited to two highly venomous kinds, and a small one, venomous but not dangerous."

CLASSIFICATION.

Class REPTILIA.

Order OPHIDIA.

Family COLUBRINÆ.

Section *Proteroglypha*.

Div. ELAPINÆ.

Genus DENISONIA.

1. DENISONIA SUPERBA (Superb or Copper-headed Snake).
2. DENISONIA CORONOIDES (White-lipped Whip Snake).

Genus NOTECHIS.

1. NOTECHIS SCUTATUS (Tiger Snake).

Div. HYDROPHINÆ.

Genus PLATURUS.

PLATURUS LATICAUDATUS (Wandering Sea Snake).

Denisonia superba.

Superb or Copper-headed Snake.

Denisonia superba, Boulanger, Cat. Sn. Brit. Mus. Vol. III. p. 335 (1896);

Waite, Aust. Snakes, p. 55 (1898);

Smith, Naturalist in Tas. p. 89 (1909);

Lucas and Le Souëf, An. Aust. p. 177 (1909);

Brit. Assocn. Ad. Sc. Tas. Hbk. p. 89 (1914).

Hoplocephalus superbus, Günther, Brit. Mus. Cat. p. 217 (1858);

Kreffit, Sn. Aust. p. 54 (1869);

McCoy, Prod. Zoo. Vic. Vol. I. p. 7 (1878).

Pawerak of the Aborigines.

(2) West's History of Tasmania, Vol. 1., p. 333.

(3) P. & P. Roy. Soc. Tas., 1868, p. 102.

Vernacular synonymy:—Superb = Copper-headed = Large-scaled = "Diamond Snake."

Habitat:—Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales.

Description:—Central scale on head about twice as long as broad, sides concave. Scales in rows of 15-17. Abdominal plates 150-160. One anal plate. Sub-caudals in one series, approximately 50. Average length from 3ft. 6in. to 5ft. Head pointed. V-shaped copper coloured markings at back of head. Colour of body variable.

The Superb or Copper-headed Snake is not nearly so common in Tasmania as the Tiger Snake (*N. scutatus*). It is usually referred to as the "Diamond Snake," but this should not be so, as the true Diamond Snake (*Python variegatus* var. *spilotes*) is a python and a variety of the true Carpet Snake, and does not occur in Tasmania. *D. superba* is also referred to as the Large-scaled Snake. This species is known on the mainland as the Copper-headed or Superb Snake. I consider the latter designation the more preferable for several reasons. It more closely approaches the scientific designation, and its use would eliminate considerable confusion. If all the specimens met with conformed to the type, in which the copper-coloured markings are most distinct, it might be a different matter. However, as with all the Tasmanian snakes, there is a great diversity of colour. While this species usually frequents swampy country, it is also found in more open country. During the Tasmanian Field Naturalists' Club's excursion to Port Arthur during Easter, 1918, I secured a specimen of this species on the rocks at the summit of Brown Mountain.

Denisonia coronoides.

White-lipped Whip Snake.

Denisonia coronoides, Boulanger, Cat. Sn. Brit. Mus. Vol. III. p. 336 (1896);

Waite, Aust. Snakes. p. 55 (1898)

Smith, Nat. Tas. p. 89 (1909);

Lucas and Le Souëf, An. Aust. p. 177 (1909);

Brit. Assocn. Ad. Sc. Tas. Hbk. p. 89 (1914).

Hoplocephalus coronoides, Günther, Cat. Sn. Brit. Mus. p. 215 (1858);

Krefft, Sn. Aust. p. 62 (1869);

McCoy, Prod. Zoo. Vict. Vol.

I. p. 8 (1878).

Habitat:—Tasmania, Victoria.

Description:—Central scale on head three times as long as broad. Scales in 15 rows. Abdominal plates 138-150. One anal plate. Sub-caudals 38-50. Average length 1ft. 3in. to 1ft. 9in. Body elongated and rounded. Head and tail not distinct from trunk. Distinctive white streak on lip. General colour very variable.

The White-lipped Whip Snake is well named, for its most distinctive feature consists of white markings on the lip extending some distance back behind the eyes. In some of the older works this species is referred to as the "black-bellied snake." The true black-bellied snake (*Denisonia signata*) does not occur in Tasmania, but is found in New South Wales and Queensland. The White-lipped Whip Snake is therefore the correct and also the most appropriate designation. The only reason I can advance for the synonym "black-bellied" is that the under surface becomes dark in specimens preserved in spirit, while the upper surface is inclined to fade.

This species may be met with in all localities. I have observed it on the sea shore and on the tops of mountains over 4,500ft. elevation. Its variety of habitat is only equalled by its variety of colours, which may be white, dark brown, green, red, or any intermediate shade. Perhaps the most fashionable colour scheme is brown. It can readily be identified by the white markings on the lip, which, however, show considerable variation. Also by the long narrow central shield on the head.

While this snake is usually treated with all the respect due to its class, it is doubtful if there is an instance of its bite proving fatal. The Tasmanian variety grows to a larger size than the mainland form. Krefft has stated (4) "This snake, even when handled, seldom, if ever, offers to bite, and the wound caused by it is not as bad as the sting of a bee."

Notechis scutatus.

Tiger Snake.

Notechis scutatus, Boulanger, Cat. Sn. Brit. Mus. Vol. III. p. 351 (1896);

Waite, Aust. Snakes, p. 60 (1898);

Lucas and Le Souëf, An. Aust. p. 81 (1909);

Br. Assocn. Ad. Sc. Tas. Hbk. p. 89 (1914).

(4) P. & P. Roy. Soc. Tas., 1868.

Hoplocephalus curtus, Günther, Cat. Sn. Brit. Mus. p. 216 (1858);

Krefft, Sn. Aust. p. 53 (1869);

McCoy, Prod. Zoo. Vict. Vol. I. p. 11 (1878);

Smith, Nat. Tas. p. 89 (1909).

Loina of the Aborigines.

Vernacular synonymy:—Tiger Snake = Brown-banded = Black Snake (Dark var.) = Carpet Snake (Light var.).

Habitat:—Tasmania, Australia.

Description:—Central scale on head shield shaped and almost as broad as long. Scales in 15-18 rows. Abdominal plates 160 or more. 1 anal plate. Sub-caudals, in one series 40-55. Average length 3ft. 6in. to 5ft. Head distinct from neck, body cylindrical. Colour variable, from black to sand colour, with more or less prominent yellowish bands.

This species is more common in Tasmania than *Denisonia superba*. It is the most deadly of all Australian snakes, and care must be taken when dealing with a representative of this species. The Vernacular nomenclature, like that of the rest of the Tasmanian snakes, has been so abused that it is very difficult in some cases to know which species is referred to. In the first place bushmen usually refer to the dark coloured specimens as Black Snakes and the lighter ones as Carpet Snakes. This is courting confusion, for the true Black Snake (*Pseudechis porphyriacus*) does not occur in Tasmania, nor does the true Carpet Snake (*Python variegatus*). The latter is a non-poisonous python growing to a length of 14 feet, and is met with on the mainland. The correct name "Tiger" should always be given to this snake, no matter what its colour. The various hues cannot be regarded in the classification of species.

If a snake above the size of a whip snake is met with in the Tasmanian bush it will be found that on the average almost two out of every three are Tiger Snakes. If disturbed in the ordinary way it will usually attempt an immediate retreat, but if disturbed while mating or annoyed, its truly vicious temper is soon manifested. It spreads out its neck to a large extent until the dark skin can be seen between the scales, and assumes the offensive readily. In this characteristic it shows its similarity to its closely related species, the cobra of India.

While it may be found in all localities it prefers, as a rule, dryer country than *D. superba*. Its main item of food consists of lizards, which are varied with frogs and other small animals.

While the average size is from three to five feet in length, larger specimens are often met with. The largest specimen of this species in the Tasmanian Museum measures no less than 6ft. 2½in.

This species produces fifty or more young each season, and the young show the same diversity of colour as the adults. On some occasions a very large number of young are produced, especially by the Tasmanian species. One specimen forwarded to the Tasmanian Museum was found on dissection to contain no less than 109 young.

Platurus laticaudatus.

Wandering Sea Snake.

Platurus laticaudatus, Boulanger, Cat. Sn. Brit. Mus. Vol. III. p. 307 (1896);

Waite, Aust. Snakes, p. 68 (1898);

Lucas and Le Souëf, An. Aust. p. 188 (1909).

Habitat:—Bay of Bengal to China Seas and S.W. Pacific.

Description:—"Scales in 19 rows. Ventrals not keeled 210-240. Sub-caudals 25-45. Olive above, yellowish beneath, with 29-48 black annuli, which are as broad or broader than the interspaces between them. Total length 970 millimetres, tail 90 mm."—B.M. Cat.

This species has, on rare occasions, been found on the East Coast of Tasmania. There are records of its occurrence in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania, and there is one specimen from Tasmania in the British Museum.