

## SNAKES ON THE MOVE

By

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Increasing day length and warmer temperatures in late spring tempt Tasmania's snakes out of winter torpor. All three Tasmanian species (Copperhead *Austrelaps superbus*, tiger snake *Notechis scutatus* and white-lipped snake *Drysdalia coronoides*) are now on the move. While all are venomous, only tiger snakes have claimed human lives, mainly before the development of antivenom in the 1930's. While Tasmania's snakes have a reputation for aggression, most behaviour that people find threatening is largely bluff. This is borne out by a very simple fact; in most rural areas snakes are present in very high densities, but bites to people are very rare.

Snakes will always retreat if given the opportunity to do so and even in very rare cases when tiger snakes feel sufficiently threatened to advance towards a person, they will not bite but veer away. Most snake bites occur when people are attempting to capture or kill snakes. If you see a snake at a safe distance simply walk away or around it. If a snake is disturbed very close to you, the best thing to do (but also the hardest for many people) is to stay completely still. With poor eyesight limited to about 1 meter, if you are not moving the snake will crawl passed you without being aware of your presence.

While the potential negative side of having snakes in your environment often receives plenty of press, the positives rarely do. Tiger snakes have a very broad diet which includes introduced rodents such as mice, rats and juvenile rabbits. These rodents are responsible for a lot of agricultural damage and few land owners appreciate the enormous numbers of these pests that snakes consume every year. Copperheads also consume rats and mice but tend to specialise on frogs. The ecological health of your dams, creeks and lagoons can be very quickly gauged by the presence or absence of healthy copperhead populations. Without exception, high copperhead densities reflect high frog densities and high frog densities reflect a healthy ecosystem on your property.

While many land holders are not overly concerned by snakes away from homesteads and stock yards, there are a number of things you can do to deter snakes from choosing to take up residence close to human dwellings. Most reptiles are very good at conserving water, mostly by absorbing moisture from prey and having a slow metabolism and scaly skin. During dry weather, snakes often move closer to homesteads and urban areas in pursuit of prey such as frogs and rodents. While snakes may not need lots of water in hot weather, their prey generally does. Snakes can be discouraged by reducing cover for them as well as their prey. Keep grass very short, stack timber, roofing iron etc well off the ground and away from residences and above all, eradicate rodent populations quickly. Nothing will encourage a large tiger snake around your house like an out break of rats.

While all Tasmanian snakes are protected, they can be destroyed if deemed a threat to people or livestock. Given the many positives of having these animals on your property, an alternative response should be considered. There are a range of people around the state who will relocate the snake to a more remote part of your property without any of the risks of trying to kill the animal yourself.

North West Coast:

Contact Michael Thow on 0418 170 952 Insured (public liability) for catch and release  
For information visit [www.allaboutreptiles.com.au](http://www.allaboutreptiles.com.au) download the living with snakes flyer. Or  
email: [enquiries@allaboutreptiles.com.au](mailto:enquiries@allaboutreptiles.com.au)

Alistair Ross (Central North Wildlife Care & Rescue Inc) Insured (public liability) for catch and release.

Statewide: DPIW Wildlife Management Branch 1300 368 550

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