Common death adder

Brigalow habitat © Craig Eddie

Description

The common death adder has a short, stout body with a large triangular head and a thin tail ending in a flat, soft spine. The tail tip is cream or black and the body colouration varies between grey to rich reddish brown. This species' body is marked with irregular dark-edged cross-bands. The underside is whitish and flecked with black or brown. The common death adder's eyes are small and inconspicuous. This snake grows to a length of 70 to 100 centimetres, although the average size tends to be 40 centimetres.

Scientific Name:

Acanthophis antarcticus

Conservation Status

Rare - *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (Queensland)

Distribution

The common death adder occurs from the Gulf region of the Northern Territory across to central and eastern Queensland and New South Wales, then through to southern parts of South Australia and Western Australia. Once very common in the southern Brigalow Belt, the common death adder has undergone an extreme reduction in numbers, due to loss of habitat and habitat degradation.

Habitat

This snake can be found in a wide variety of habitats including rainforest edges, shrubby eucalypt and ooline forests, shrubby A*cacia* woodlands (particularly brigalow), grasslands, chenopod dominated shrublands and coastal heathlands.

Ecology and Life Cycle

Common death adders are reliant on cover in their habitat, particularly deep leaf litter, logs, rock piles and bushy shrubs such as currant bush *Carissa ovata*.

The common death adder ambushes its prey while half-buried in sand, soil or leaf litter, often lying in wait at the base of trees or shrubs. The tail is segmented and can be wriggled convulsively like a worm or caterpillar to lure its prey. The fangs are long and capable of administering large quantities of powerful venom.

A secretive snake, the common death adder can lay concealed for hours or days at a time using cryptic colouration to avoid detection.

Common death adder © Steve Wilson

The common death adder feeds, during the day and night, mainly on lizards and small mammals, and to a lesser extent, birds and frogs. Young individuals usually feed on reptiles and frogs, whereas adults feed on a greater percentage of mammals and birds. It is a slow growing species with a lower food intake compared with other snakes.

Sexual maturity is attained at 24 months old for the males and 42 months old for the females. The female reproduces every second year, with mating usually occurring in spring. Litters vary in size comprising from two to 32 fully formed live young usually born in autumn, with each about 12 centimetres long at birth.

Key Threats

Habitat loss: the common death adder is susceptible to habitat loss (clearing), habitat fragmentation (isolation of remnant patches) and habitat modification (changes to shrub and ground cover).

Grazing effects: Overgrazing by stock can result in habitat degradation through soil compaction, erosion and alteration of the vegetation community. Small remnants and isolated unconnected strips of vegetation are often used as areas of shade for cattle. The isolation of remnants combined with heavy grazing pressure may result in significant changes to remnant vegetation condition such as loss of plant material and ground cover.

Removal of wood debris and rocks: This species is threatened by the removal of its microhabitat, which includes shrubs, partly buried rocks, fallen logs and leaf litter.

Feral animals: Poisoning through ingestion of cane toads has been recorded to have caused the death of common death adders. Continual spread westward of cane toads into the Brigalow Belt is a major concern, as poisoning has had a marked effect on coastal and island populations of the common death adder.

Inappropriate fire regimes: Fire frequency, intensity, season, type and extent of fires over time, influence biodiversity and ecosystem processes. Inappropriate fire regimes can potentially alter ecosystem structure and impact on the species habitat requirements i.e. by removing food sources and shelter.

Did you know?

In contrast to its stout body and sedentary habits, the common death adder can strike its prey so fast that the human eye can scarcely perceive the movement.

How to help

- Maintain large, healthy, connected patches of native vegetation and avoid ploughing remnant strips/patches of native grassland or woodland.
- Avoid “tidying up” shrubs and removing fallen logs, leaf litter and rocks in common death adder habitat as this disturbs and diminishes refuge sites.
- Undertake cane toad control measures where practicable.
- Ensure grazing practices are sustainable, maintaining greater than 70% ground cover.
- If burning, use cool burns in a mosaic pattern that promote patchiness and leave areas of ground cover unburnt. If possible, leave stick-raked timber piles unburnt.
- Consider entering into a conservation agreement (e.g. Land for Wildlife, Nature Refuges or incentive agreements through grant programs) for conservation and land management assistance.
- Report sightings to WWF-Australia, the Queensland Museum or the EPA/QPWS.

To find out more about saving threatened species check out www.wwf.org.au/tsn or contact the Threatened Species Network at tsn@wwf.org.au.

Threatened Species Network

Australian Government

WWF

The Threatened Species Network is a community-based program of the Australian Government and WWF-Australia.

Queensland Murray Darling Committee

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