

Pseudechis porphyriacus

Justine Crema, 2001

Authority: Shaw, 1794

Common Name: Red-bellied Black Snake

Description (people.hws.edu/fieldguide/list.asp; Gow, 1982; Cogger, 2000; Cronin, 2001): A large snake: 1.5-2m in length, with a maximum recorded length of 2.5m. The small flat head is slightly distinct from the neck and accommodates small eyes consisting of a black iris and a round pupil. The dorsal side of the snake's body, including the entire surface of its tail, has a glossy purplish-black colouration, except for the tip of the snout which is often light brown. The marginal scales of the ventral surface and extending to the lower sides of the body are bright red to orange, usually edged behind with black, and fading to a dull creamy pink colour towards the centre of the belly in North Queensland populations. The dorsal scales are smooth and arranged into 17 rows, and 180-210 scales cover the ventral surface. The subcaudal region has 40-65 scales, in which the anterior scales are single and the posterior scales and the anal plate are divided.

Similar species (Cogger 1978; Wilson and Knowles, 1988): *P. porphyriacus* is closely related to *P. australis* even though they differ markedly in colour. Although *P. australis* also has a uniform colour, its dorsal scales are pale to dark reddish brown and its ventral scales are salmon coloured. *P. porphyriacus* is sometimes mistaken for *Cryptophis nigrescens*, *Notechis scutatus*, and *Austrelaps surperba* due to morphological and behavioural similarities.

Range (people.hws.edu/fieldguide/list.asp): Predominantly found along the east coast of Australia from southern Cape York Peninsula to parts of south-eastern South Australia.

Ecology and behaviour (Cogger,2000; Gow, 1982; Shine, 1987; Cronin, 2001; www.pharmacology.unimelb.edu.au/pharmwww/avruweb/Blacks.htm; Wilson and Knowles, 1988): A diurnal snake usually associated with riparian and well-watered areas throughout its range, where it may be found living in abandoned animal burrows, hollow logs, rock crevices or in leaf litter. Their diet consists mainly of frogs and small mammals, however they will prey on other reptiles including those of their own species, and due to their ability to swim, often eat fish and eels. This species is not renowned for being aggressive and is quick to retreat if disturbed. However when threatened or provoked it will raise its fore body off the ground, flatten its neck and hiss before performing a series of feinted strikes in an attempt to escape. Its venom is the least potent of the genus *Pseudechis*, however it is still dangerous, with the capability of delivering a painful and potentially fatal bite.

Breeding biology (people.hws.edu/fieldguide/list.asp; Mattison, 1995; Cronin, 2001): The mating season begins in spring and *P. porphyriacus* has a unique reproductive biology in that it is the only viviparous species of the genus *Pseudechis*. Between 5 and 40 young (average 12) are produced from January to March, and the offspring emerge from membranous sacs within minutes of being born. During the breeding season combat between rival males to determine mating rights is prevalent and

pregnant females have been observed by Cronin (2001) to bask in small groups and share burrows.

Literature cited:

Cogger, H.G. 2000. *Reptiles and Amphibians of Australia*. Reed Books, Chatswood, NSW.

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Gow, G.F. 1982. *Australia's Dangerous Snakes*. Angus & Robertson Publishers, Sydney, NSW.

Mattison, C. 1995. *The Encyclopedia of Snakes*. Blandford, London.

Shine, R. 1987. Intraspecific Variation in Thermoregulation, Movements and Habitat Use by Australian Blacksnakes, *Pseudechis porphyriacus* (Elapidae).

Wilson, S.K., and Knowles, D.G. 1988. *A photographic reference to the terrestrial reptiles of Australia*. Collins Publishers, Australia.

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