

ELAPIDAE



Elapids are front-fanged venomous snakes. They probably evolved in the Northern Hemisphere where fossils dating to the early Miocene were found. Fossils discovered at Riversleigh, north-west Queensland, indicate that elapids were present in Australia in the mid-Miocene when our continent had long been separated from Gondwana. This suggests that elapid snakes arrived from the north. During their subsequent long adaptation to Australia's environments, predators and prey, they became diverse and distinct.

There are some 250 species of elapids around the world and Australia has a good share of them – 91 described species. This is the largest and most diverse family of Australian snakes, ranging across all habitat types on the continent, in Tasmania and on many offshore islands.

In fact, Australia has more species of elapids than any other country or continent, and is home to the world's most venomous species. When the venom toxicity of Australia's taipans, tiger snakes and brown snakes is compared with that of the better known cobras, the latter pale in significance.

Because of the enormous diversity of the group and the existence of morphological similarities with species in most other families, there is no single feature that would easily distinguish elapid snakes from harmless snakes. It is best to treat all snakes with caution, unless absolutely certain about identification.