



## AN ISLAND OF BLACK GIANTS

My first trip to Chappell Island in 1983 was inspired by Eric Worrell's book *Song of the Snake*. Described as a small, uninhabited island densely populated by huge black tiger snakes, it sounded exciting, almost too good to be true. Perhaps it was like that in the 1950s when Eric wrote his book but I wondered 'what would Chappell Island be like in 1983?'

Not much has changed, except that a few brown rats and domestic mice have found their way onto the island's shores to unwittingly enrich the tiger snake's diet. The island is now declared a protected area and entry to the public is restricted.

Tiger snakes were once described into several species and many subspecies depending on their geographical distribution.

However, in recent times, taxonomists have lumped them all into a single species, *Notechis scutatus*. Whatever their taxonomic status, the tigers on Chappell Island are the biggest and they are also quite docile.

This race of tiger snakes apparently evolved into one of giants because their only available food source is muttonbird (also known as short-tailed shearwater) chicks – sizeable tucker even when newly hatched. What is really interesting is the fact that these snakes feed for only a few weeks each year. During muttonbird season they literally gorge themselves before the chicks grow too big to swallow.