



THE MASTERS OF CAMOUFLAGE

DEATH ADDERS

Although the name brings to mind the adders and vipers of Africa, the Middle East and Europe, there is only a superficial resemblance between these and Australia's death adders. Along with all other Australian front-fanged terrestrial snakes, death adders belong to the family Elapidae. They successfully radiated across the Australian continent all the way to Papua New Guinea where one species is found. There are at least four generally recognised species of death adders. Although additional species have been described in recent years, their status is yet to be validated.

Death adders are distinct from the rest of Australia's elapids both in general appearance and in behaviour. Their short, stout bodies are capable of flattening to twice their normal width when they are disturbed. Although they move slowly when foraging on the ground, death adders can strike with lightning

speed and impeccable accuracy, delivering a lethal bite with their relatively long fangs.

They are well camouflaged ambush hunters with the ability to lure their prey close. The tip of the death adder's tail ends in a small worm-like structure with a spine. The snake conceals its body in leaf litter or sand with the tip of its tail in front of its head or sometimes on top of it. When the death adder sees a lizard nearby, it either frantically flicks or waves its tail-tip, simulating the movement of a worm or grub. Once the unsuspecting lizard gets within striking distance, the death adder lunges, bites, holds its prey, then swallows it.

Past generations firmly believed that death adders sting with the little spine on their tails which is what made them really dangerous. Nothing could be further from the truth.