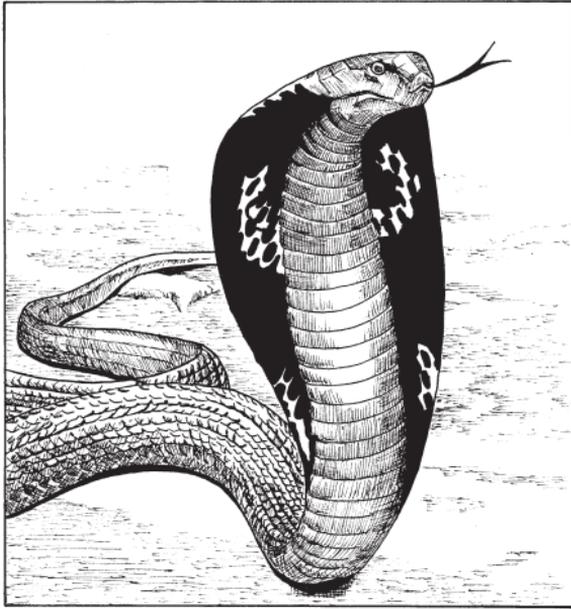




## **AROUND THE WORLD WITH SNAKES**

### ***Preview***

Snakes slither through nearly every country on Earth. Most snakes are harmless, but some of them are anything but. In this chapter, we will travel from India to Australia to Africa. The scariest, the deadliest, and the most feared snakes—they're all here!



## **AROUND THE WORLD WITH SNAKES**

**I**n a rice field in India, a young worker named Abhay stepped carefully around the plants he tended. As always, Abhay listened for any quick rustling through the leaves or, worse yet, a sudden hissing. But as the sky began growing dark with rain clouds, Abhay became careless in his hurry to finish his job. He moved quickly through some taller plants that blocked his view of the ground. Then, just at the edge of the field, Abhay felt something very strange. It was as if a thick cord of rope had been yanked beneath his left foot.

In that same instant, Abhay saw a flash of brown and gold rise up before him—the dreaded Indian cobra. It was not the first time he had seen this terrifying snake. From the time he was a young child, Abhay had often seen these 6- to 10-foot snakes slithering through the village where he lived. They hunted the mice that the village's stores of rice and grain attracted. A cobra was not necessarily dangerous to humans unless it felt threatened or was suddenly surprised. Then it would rear up nearly three feet, flatten out its scaly neck to form a wide "hood," and utter a low, hair-raising hiss. This hiss was the only warning a cobra gave before attacking.

In horror, Abhay now realized he had not only surprised the cobra; he had stepped on it. Everything that happened next seemed to be in slow motion. The long snake sprang up quickly and jerked itself away from under Abhay's foot. Then the cobra reared up and hissed as its dark forked tongue darted in and out. Its black eyes, unblinking and cold, locked onto Abhay's face.

A cobra can lunge more than ten feet. Now it was barely five feet away, and it was poised to strike. Abhay knew his only chance was to remain absolutely still. If a snake no longer felt threatened, sometimes it would just calm down and move on.

Not this time.

Abhay heard the cobra make a strange blowing sound as it suddenly sprang toward him. He reacted by leaping backward and covering his face. A spray of venom spewed out of the cobra's mouth and shot directly toward Abhay's eyes. Abhay had protected his face just in time. If the venom, some of the most poisonous on earth, had hit his eyes, he would have gone blind. Abhay's own uncle had been blinded by a cobra when he was barely 15. It had taken fewer than ten minutes for the venom to destroy his uncle's eyes. The venom had literally burned the eyeballs in their sockets. Nothing had been left but two gaping holes.

Now the cobra backed away. It still stood at attention, but it was no longer poised to strike. It was the break Abhay needed. He backed away slowly until the cobra was more than 20 feet away. Then he sprinted toward the village. Abhay knew that these deadly snakes never chased after humans, but he didn't care. He wasn't about to slow down.

That very same night, a young boy in Abhay's village would not be as lucky as Abhay had been. The boy, named Bai, had gone to bed, as usual, on a grass mat on the floor of his family's small dwelling. Like all the houses in this village, Bai's home was constructed of mud and a loosely

thatched roof. Windows had no glass; blankets covered the doorways. For a hungry snake looking for mice, entry into the village's homes was no problem.

In the middle of the night, Bai felt something cold sliding across his cheek. Still half asleep, he reached up to brush it away. Suddenly, Bai felt something puncture his wrist. Then a loud rustling and swishing filled the room. Bai sat up and grabbed a lantern. In its dim light, he saw a long black and yellow snake slithering out the door.

“Mother! Come quickly!” Bai shouted. “I have been bitten by a snake!”

Bai's mother rushed outside to see if she could see what kind of snake had bitten her son.

“The snake climbed up the mud wall of the house and crawled in a hole in the brickwork,” Bai's mother recalled. “I knew this was terrible. I recognized that snake at once.”

Bai had been bitten by a krait, a snake whose venom is twice as deadly as a cobra's. Though the villagers went into the woods to gather herbs for a paste to put on the bite, it would not do any good. Within an hour, Bai's breathing became a heavy wheeze. Next, his entire body turned a sickening yellow, and his bitten arm swelled to three times its normal size. Just before dawn, he turned to his mother.

“I know you will not be able to save me now,” he whispered. “Goodbye.”

By the time the first rays of sun crept into the village, Bai was dead.

It may seem shocking to think that in the very same evening, two people from the same small village in India were attacked by deadly snakes. However, the facts about deaths by snakebite in India are even more appalling. It is estimated that somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000 Indians die *every year* after being bitten by cobras, kraits, and vipers. It is hard to know exact numbers, since many deaths are not reported. And of the thousands more who are bitten and don't die, the effects of the venom are often crippling. Cobra venom is often compared to battery acid. It eats away at skin and muscle and turns limbs black and lifeless.

Still, to many living in rural India, snakes are simply an everyday fact of life. Cobras and kraits are, in some areas, nearly as common as squirrels or chipmunks in many parts of the United States. But the high numbers of snakebites are not a result of Indian people being careless or unconcerned about snakes. Most of these victims live in poverty. They work barefoot in fields and live in poorly built homes. Making matters worse, many of these Indians have no access to the kind of medical care needed when bitten by a snake.

“We say our goodbyes when the cobra has made its mark,” one villager explained.

Nearly 5,000 miles away from India, on the continent of Australia, there are snakes that put the cobra to shame. Around the world, there are more than 3,000 different kinds of snakes, but less than ten percent of them are poisonous. However, in Australia, of the 130 different snakes that live there, more than half are deadly—very deadly.

Consider a snake that reaches ten feet in length and carries around enough venom to kill 60 to 100 grown men. This is the Australian inland taipan. The taipan has often been labeled the most poisonous snake on earth. Its half-inch fangs (huge for a snake!) are curved so that when it bites, it holds on. Even a quick nip from a taipan can deliver enough venom to kill. A milligram of taipan venom is enough to kill a dozen people. How much is a milligram? Imagine crushing a peanut into seven hundred pieces. Then take just one of those pieces. That is a milligram.

And like many Australian snakes, the taipan is unusually vicious when cornered. Most snakes, even the cobra, will retreat after striking a victim. But the taipan seems to have a pretty bad temper. It will strike and bite over and over again,

refusing to back down or move away. And once its venom mixes with human blood, a terrible thing happens. The toxins in a taipan's bite turn blood into a kind of thick mud that can't move through veins. No blood flow means a quick and very painful death, usually in less than an hour.

But there's good news when it comes to the taipan. There is no record of an inland taipan ever having killed a human. The reason is simple. Very few people live or visit the remote area in central Australia where most inland taipans live. It is a hot, rocky area that extends for hundreds of miles. Scientists have captured and studied inland taipans, and, in fact, a few scientists have been bitten. But these researchers have always had a supply of anti-venom close by.

Sadly, a young man who was interested in the coastal taipans, which live near the ocean, was not as fortunate.

"I just wanted to collect a specimen."

These were some of the last words that 20-year-old Kevin Budden ever spoke. Budden had always been fascinated by the dangerous taipans, but he had never captured one for his snake collection. Once in a very great while, there were reports of people being bitten by these coastal taipans, the close cousins of the inland taipans. No one ever survived. This fact only increased

Budden's curiosity. Finally, in the summer of 1950, Budden followed up on some news of taipan sightings along the Australian coast near Queensland.

Budden searched for days with no luck. Then, one morning, as he wandered through rubble piled up near a construction site, he heard the loud squeal of a rat. Knowing that snakes eat rats, Budden quietly walked to the source of the squeal. Then, lifting an old piece of plastic, he uncovered a 5-foot-long brown snake with the rat halfway in its mouth. In a flash, Budden placed his foot over the snake's neck, forcing it to spit out the rat. Then he reached down and grasped the snake tightly around its throat with both hands so that it couldn't bite him.

Now Budden was in a bind. He couldn't reach the specimen bag lying nearby, and even if he could, he didn't have a free hand. His only option was to walk to the main road. Once there, Budden hoped someone would give him a ride back to the house of a friend who was also a snake collector. It's hard to believe that anyone would stop to give a ride to a stranger holding a 5-foot snake, but someone did.

"What have you got there?" the driver asked somewhat casually, assuming this was just some kid who liked to collect harmless snakes.

“Not sure,” Budden responded. “But I’m sure hoping it’s a taipan.”

The driver slammed on the brakes and shouted for Budden to get out of his car immediately. But Budden pleaded with him.

“It’s for research,” he added, exaggerating just a bit. “And I have a firm grip on it. There’s no way it can hurt us.”

Reluctantly (and very quickly), the driver drove Budden the ten miles to his friend’s house. By the time Budden got out of the car, his arms were shaking with nervousness and fatigue. His hands were covered with the snake’s saliva and, possibly, venom. But he had succeeded. His friend confirmed that what Budden held was indeed a coastal taipan.

“Quick,” Budden said excitedly. “Get a specimen bag. I can’t hold on much longer.”

Just as his friend returned with the thick sack, Budden’s grip failed. Like the quick snap of a whip, the taipan sunk its fangs repeatedly into Budden’s left hand. Budden looked at his friend in terror. He knew all too well what the bite of a taipan meant. Even so, as the two men waited for the ambulance, Budden made his friend promise that he would not kill the snake. After all, it had only done what any frightened and cornered snake would do. It wasn’t the taipan’s fault.

In spite of the best medical care and doses of anti-venom, the multiple bites had taken their toll. There was just too much poison in Budden's body. Little by little, his blood thickened, and his organs shut down. By the next morning, he was dead—one of the few recorded victims of the world's most venomous snake.

If India has the deadliest snakes and Australia has the most poisonous, Africa might win the prize for having the most feared snake. What makes one snake more frightening than another? It's hard to say, but some Africans will tell you that it has to do with a snake's size, speed, intelligence, and appearance. And East and South Africa's black mamba snake gets top marks in all these areas.

It's certainly true that the black mamba is a scary-looking serpent. Reaching lengths of nearly 15 feet, this slender snake has a thick coffin-shaped head and large black unblinking eyes. Its body is gray, not black, but it came by its name because of its mouth. When the black mamba feels threatened, it opens its unusually large jaws to reveal a jet-black tongue and mouth. Some say that the hiss that comes out of this inky mouth sounds like low thunder from a dark cloud.

Adding to this snake's fearsome appearance is

its ability to “stand up” nearly four feet high and move quickly through the grasses in the African savannah. The black mamba stands to get a better view of the mice and other rodents it hunts. But to the Africans who have suddenly come face to face with the mamba, it seems as though the snake is looking for humans instead.

And it’s definitely true that the black mamba is fast. Most snakes can’t move much faster than 5 to 7 miles an hour. The black mamba, however, has been known to cruise along at speeds of nearly 12 miles an hour. This makes it the fastest snake on earth. While the mamba usually uses its speed to catch prey or flee from humans, it has been known, on very rare occasions, to rush after those who accidentally corner it. But these extremely rare instances of mambas chasing down humans have been exaggerated again and again in stories. Over time, a great deal of the fear connected to the mamba has grown out of myths about this snake.

It is most certainly *not* true that the black mamba plots revenge on humans who take over its land. Or that it bites its tail to make a loop so that it can roll quickly down a hill, and then flattens itself into an arrow shape that speeds through the air at 30 miles an hour. It does not create whirlwinds that can be seen from half a

mile away. Nor does it ambush people by curling into a circle around car tires, waiting to bite the driver as soon as he or she steps out of the car. And while some Africans swear that the black mamba waits in treetops, plotting to jump onto the heads of unsuspecting passersby, this is pretty unlikely. The mamba is mostly a ground dweller and generally avoids trees.

The bottom line is that the black mamba is simply a very fast and poisonous snake with a scary face. Like any dangerous snake in any corner of the world, the mamba would heartily prefer to avoid humans altogether. It will go to great lengths to stay out of people's way. However, when it is forced into contact, it will fight back. Such behavior is expected of any wild creature, but when the creature is as creepy-looking as a snake (No legs! No eyelids! Forked tongue!), its natural behavior is looked at as evil and super-dangerous.

But truth be told, we would sorely miss snakes, even the dreaded mamba, if they weren't around. Snakes keep the mice and rat population from overwhelming many parts of the world. Millions more people have been killed by diseases carried by rats and mice than will ever be killed by snakes. Furthermore, many non-poisonous snakes are a main source of food for birds and

other small mammals. Take away snakes, and the entire food chain would begin to break down.

“Some people think that the only good snake is a dead snake, and that’s really too bad,” a snake expert (known as a “herpetologist”) once explained. “If all the snakes in the world were suddenly dead, humans would not be far behind them.”