Common snakes of the Pilbara.
A guide for identification and First aid
The Mulga Snake which is also called the King Brown, may grow to more than 200 cm (300 cm in Kimberley). A bite causes local pain and a general feeling of unwellness, but is unlikely to be life threatening, although an envenomation requires treatment with Blacksnake Antivenom to alleviate possibility of ongoing muscle destruction.

The most recent death attributed to a mulga snake was in 1969. In 2004 an adult male had a severe reaction requiring hospitalisation after a bite from a neonatal Mulga Snake.

The Mulga shelters in burrows, logs, rock piles, etc. Prey consists of small mammals, birds, snakes, lizards, and frogs. King browns are often found active just on dusk and in the hotter parts of the year become nocturnal. Mating occurs around late spring here in the Pilbara and they lay on average nine eggs.

Relative scale size showing the much larger Mulga scales compared to the small olive python scales.
DANGEROUSLY VENOMOUS

This slender snake grows to 160 cm and varies tremendously in colour and pattern, it is active day and night dependant on temperature. A bite causes little local pain and may go unnoticed by victim if bitten at night.

The western brown shelters in ground burrows, under rocks, soil cracks, inside logs, and will readily take refuge under rubbish or tin piles. They prey upon rodents, small mammals, small birds, mice, snakes, and lizards. Mating seems to occur around spring and the female can lay up to 38 eggs.

Gwardar or Western Brown Snake. Pale form with indistinct neck Chevron

Distinct under belly pattern of brown snakes
Gwardar or Western Brown Snake. Part of a clutch of immature sibling snakes showing polymorphism and typical neonatal head markings in brown snakes.

Gwardar or Western Brown Snake. Banded form with indistinct bands

Gwardar or Western Brown Snake. Banded form with distinct bands
Gwardar or Western Brown Snake. Pale form with distinct neck chevron.

Gwardar or Western Brown Snake. Black-headed, orange form.
DEATH ADDERS
DANGEROUSLY VENOMOUS

These stout snakes grow to 90cm. They are mainly active at night but may be encountered during the day in cooler weather. Their diet consists of small lizards, frogs, and a particular favourite food item is the fat tailed gecko. They bear up to 13 live young during Autumn.

Pilbara Death Adder, Black headed form

Pilbara Death Adder, Pale form
Dangerous Examples of Mistaken Identity

In 1999, a thirty-five year old Broome man died after a bite from a Gwardar (also called Western Brown Snake). He was handling the snake when bitten, believing it was a nonvenomous Black-headed Python. Several people, including snakebusters, have been bitten by venomous Rosen’s Snake they had handled after mistaking it for a nonvenomous python.

*Left:* Harmless Pygmy Python. *Right:* Venomous Rosen’s Snake

The triangular-shaped head in death adders has caused people in the Pilbara to pick them up believing they were harmless pythons, resulting in bites and serious envenomations.

*Dangerously Venomous Desert Death Adder*
WHIP SNAKES
VENOMOUS

Fast slender snake grows to 100cm. Very common throughout the pilbara. Very active in early spring. The Yellow-faced Whip Snake feeds mainly on small diurnal lizards, as well as frogs and lizard eggs. They have good eyesight, and can chase and capture lizards on the run. During winter it may shelter beneath rocks. It lays eggs in early summer, with clutches of 5-20 eggs.

Red or Rufous whip snake (above) Yellow faced whip snake (below)
Ringed Brown Snake

VENOMOUS

The smallest member of the brownsnake group grows to 60 cm and varies considerably in colour: young snakes are salmon pink to orange with widely-space narrow black bands; adult snakes are monotonal olive green. It is active day and night dependant on temperature. A bite causes little local pain and may go unnoticed by victim if bitten at night.

By night it shelters in ground debris or abandoned animal burrows. It is diurnal but may forage during warm nights. Feeds predominantly on small skinks and occasionally small mammals. Lays from 11 to 20 eggs.
ROSEN’S SNAKE
MILDLY VENOMOUS
A nocturnal snake to 62 cm that is common in the Pilbara. It is often mistaken for a Stimson’s or Pygmy Python (bottom left), but has round pupil versus elliptical. They feed on small skinks and geckos

ORANGE NAPED SNAKE
The orange-naped attains 65 cm. Also known as a ‘moon’ snake, this is due to them being very active on bright moonlit nights when other nocturnal snakes are inactive. They feed solely on small skink lizards.
**NORTHWESTERN SHOVEL-NOSED SNAKE**

A small, nocturnal snake to 36 cm that feeds on soft-shelled reptile eggs. Occurs in the Pilbara.

**PILBARA BANDY BANDY**

This strikingly marked bandy bandy attains 50 cm and is a burrower that feeds solely on blind snakes. It only occurs in the more stony parts of the Pilbara.
The following species all lack venom glands and fangs as such, but may cause a false positive for venom in the VDK if a bite site swab is used. The treatment of a wound caused by a python bite should include cleaning with antiseptic solution and a tetanus booster if required.

Pythons are primarily nocturnal, although considerable diurnal behaviour occurs during the cooler months of the year.

**PYGMY PYTHON**

This is the world’s smallest python, attaining only 60 cm in length. It occurs commonly throughout the Pilbara. Adults may lack body pattern and have been mistaken for death adders. Pygmy pythons are often found living in termite mounds and commonly found near rocky areas or water ways. Their prey consists of small geckos and skinks and when they are big enough, small mammals. They lay 4-6 eggs which they incubate for about 50 days.
This member of the Children’s Python Group attains 105 cm in length. It occurs extensively throughout the Pilbara. They are commonly found in rocky outcrops and also can be found in termite mounds. Their prey consists of small mammals, birds, frogs, and lizards. They can lay anything from 2 to 15 eggs. The egg incubation time is approximately 55 days.
The Black Headed python grows to 300cm in length
And occurs throughout the northwest south to the 26th parallel
They shelter in hollow logs, burrows, deep soil cracks, inside termite mounds,
under rocks and crevices. Black headed Pythons predominately feed on
reptiles including other snakes but will eat mammals. Clutch numbers
on average is about 8 eggs.
This is one of Australia’s largest pythons attaining 650 cm in length. It occurs in the Pilbara, south to Mount Augustus. This snake is often killed by mistake for a king brown, however it is easily recognised as a python on its numerous, small, glossy scales. They are found in rocky areas or gorges and especially rocky habitat associated with water courses. Olive pythons prey upon mammals, birds and reptiles. Breeding usually occurs in late winter and their average clutch size is about 19 eggs.

Relative scale size showing small olive python scales compared to the much larger Mulga snake scales.
These small worm-like snakes are easily recognised and all are completely harmless. They spend most of their life underground feeding on various ant eggs and larvae. This is Australia’s largest family of nonvenomous snakes.

Pilbara Flat-headed Blind Snake

Black-tipped Blind Snake
LEGLESS LIZARDS

When is a snake, not a snake? These snake-like reptiles display a wide variation in size and behaviour, including some that actually mimic snakes by raising the forebody and moving in a threatening fashion.

All species have a broad, fleshy tongue compared to a very narrow one in snakes and all those illustrated here have ear openings represented by a hole behind each eye. They spend most of their time hidden beneath cover becoming most active in the early evening and at night. Dense low vegetation, particularly hummock grasses are favourite shelter sites. Apart from the lizard-eating Burton’s Legless Lizard, most feed on insects, while the Common and Hooded Scaly Foot prefer spiders. Legless lizards have fragile tails that break readily when roughly treated.

Burton’s Legless Lizard Length to 65 cm
Excitable Delma Legless Lizard Length to 35 cm
Hooded Scaly Foot. Length to 45 cm
Body Pattern as an Indicator of Snake or Legless Lizard

(Australia only)

When a uniform and regular body pattern is present it can allow for a quick confirmation of snake or snake-like lizard. No Australian snake has a body pattern consisting solely of multiple longitudinal stripes, only crossbands; and no Australian legless lizard has a body pattern consisting of multiple crossbands, if a body pattern is present it consists of longitudinal stripes, which may be continuous or broken into a series of dashes.
Venomous land snakes all have a single row of broad belly scales, almost as wide as body.

Figure 6. Venomous snake

Harmless pythons all have more than one row of belly scales with the large central ones being less than two-thirds width of body.

Figure 7. Python

Harmless legless lizards and blind snakes all have more than one row of belly scales.

Figure 8. Legless lizard
First Aid for Australian Snake Bite

Immobilization/Pressure Bandage Technique Principle

Injected venom is mainly distributed by the body’s lymphatic system, which is heavily influenced by patient movement. Decreased patient movement = decreased venom distribution. Recent medical research shows that the speed of effective immobilisation and application of pressure bandage & splinting influences patient outcome and survivability.

1. Ensure that patient (& other people) are no longer at risk
2. Reassure patient. Ensure they lie down & keep still. It is critical that bitten part & patient do not move
3. Monitor airway, breathing & circulation & support as necessary
4. First aid MUST be started immediately a. Do not ignore a trivial bite, especially if suspected to be from a species of Brown Snake b. Don’t interfere with the bite in any way c. Don’t remove any clothing d. Remove all jewellery from bitten limb
5. Apply heavy weight crepe bandage(s) with even pressure a. Bandage over clothing or cut up seam to allow access to skin b. Start at extremity & work up arm or leg. c. Include fingers or toes to minimise movement d. Use same pressure as to bandage a sprained wrist or ankle. e. Be careful not to apply bandage too loosely f. Mark location of bite on bandage (for venom detection in hospital)
6. Immobilise limb with splint or improvise as necessary a. Ensure that joints (of arm or leg) are effectively immobilised b. Use second bandage to keep splint in place
7. Contact Ambulance emergency number – 000 or 112 from mobiles (RFDS in remote areas)a. Follow professional advice regarding transport of patient
8. Patient must remain still. Bring transport to patient if possible
9. No food or drink except sips of water (only on victim’s request)
10. Patient must be transported quickly & passively to hospital (preferably by ambulance)
11. Where possible, let paramedics be in total charge of extrication planning. Better to stay quiet & let them arrange transport


Information in this booklet has been sourced from “Snakes and Snake like Reptiles of the Pilbara and Goldfields” a handout by Brian Bush and Brad Maryan Copyright 2004