

## **The Tiger Snake *Notechis scutatus* in Captivity**

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### **Introduction:**

The Eastern tiger Snake *Notechis scutatus* is an elapid from Southern Australia (From near Perth across the cooler wetter environments of South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. They are found in Queensland in the cooler regions around the Gold coast hinterland, Brisbane and Sunshine Coast with an isolated population in the Carnarvon Gorge National Park).

It has a highly toxic venom and until recently held the record for most Australian snakebite fatalities (now overtaken by the Eastern Brown Snake *Pseudonaja textilis*).

It a medium sized elapid generally reaching about 3.5 feet in length but has been known to reach 6.5 feet.

In the wild they are mainly feed on frogs and mice, as adults but will take the odd bird or lizard, as juveniles however skinks make up a large portion of their diet.

They are active mainly by day (Diurnal) but on excessively hot nights (over 34 degrees Celsius) they become semi nocturnal.

In the wild they are mainly swamp dwelling species often found around waterways, rocky grasslands, highland regions and some subspecies are found on small offshore islands. Often found while basking on paths or under both natural and man made cover. They have also been known to climb into surrounding vegetation to a height of 1 metre.

They have probably become more common with the arrival of people in Australia with it not being uncommon to find them in and around houses in the Melbourne area.

I have kept *N. scutatus* on and off for 25 years and the following is a general keeping guide and also talks about my breeding success with these incredible elapids.

### **Housing:**

My adult snakes are kept in front opening hinged cages (the dimensions are as follows 600mmLx 650mmDx350mmH). I have found cages of this size to be most suitable however I also use Plastic boxes of a similar dimension with success. Juveniles and Sub-adults (to 600mm) are kept in smaller cages made of plastic measuring 300mmx190mmx150mm.

The substrate used is butcher's paper or newspaper for the adults and paper towel for the juveniles. Other substrates such as paper pellets, coarse gravel and soil have been used with varying degrees of success.

*N. scutatus* are a temperate species so they require relatively cool enclosures I personally keep them a room temperature (about 20 deg C) but at night the temp falls sharply occasionally down to 8 deg C. They are on a 10 /14 night day cycle in winter and a 14/10 cycle in summer. This is very similar to what we have here in Melbourne at that time of year. The snakes also have access to warm spot via a spot lamp or a via heat cord beneath the enclosure, set at 28 deg C. Juveniles and sub-adults have access to heat via heat pad which is under half the cage again set at 28 deg C.

*N. scutatus* love to soak so a large enough water bowls that is sturdy will be used a plenty!

### **General Captive Care:**

These snakes are very easy to keep as adults, all you have to do is feed them a couple of decent sized adult mice (or rats for very large specimens), keep the cage clean and the water fresh. The only thing that you need to keep an eye on is when they get ready to slough...they can be bad shedders so keep that in mind if the cage is too hot.

Tiger snakes are notoriously unpredictable. Some can be quiet, easy to handle snakes while others are nervous, jumpy snakes. Animals up to 80cm in length are strong and muscular and yet very agile. They can also be extremely food conscious, a usually quiet individual becoming fast and somewhat aggressive towards any movement, the snake perceiving that movement as a potential meal.

Juveniles are small (about 200 mm at birth and 16 grams) and delicate. They often want to eat skinks or frogs rather than pink mice so scenting is the prefer method however I force feed until they take mice voluntarily which is usually within 4-5 feeds.

### **Breeding:**

I have bred my *N. scutatus* in a pit so they where subjected to the joys of Melbourne weather the averages temps are as follows about 28 in Summer (December to February), 22 in Autumn (March to May), 13 in Winter (June to August) and 20 in Spring (September to November). On the 28<sup>th</sup> September the female and male where mating this was observed for an hour and also on the 30<sup>th</sup>. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of December the female was well and truly gravid so she was brought indoors, 2 weeks later she gave birth.

The 12 juveniles where all similar to the adults however the extent in which banding was present varied. Size ranged from 178 mm and 12 grams to 237 mm and 17 grams.

The sex ratios were 7 females to 5 males (determined by tail shape and then confirmed later on by probing). All bar 1 of the litter survived to adulthood at which point in time they where distributed to other collections. (I now believe this incident was a result of an earlier mating in autumn and she over wintered the young.)

I have also bred them in plastic tubs, without heat. The males where introduced to the females in early September and removed from the enclosure at the start of October,

they were separated during feeding to prevent accidental cannibalism. By Late December the females went off their food and refused food (except one female) until giving birth in early February (around 140 days gestation) The litter sizes were 9 to 27 with a average of 14 (number 6 litters).

For Krefft's Tiger Snakes *N. scutatus ater*, litter sizes range from 6 to 15 but tend to average about 11 neonates. Neonate sizes are unknown.

For Tasmanian Tiger Snakes *N. scutatus humphreysi*, litter sizes range from 8 to 64 but tend to average about 20 neonates. Neonates are about 230 mm long and weigh 4 grams.

For Peninsula Tiger Snakes *N. scutatus niger*, litter sizes range from 6 to 38 but tend to average about 17 neonates. A litter of 12 neonates were born after a gestation of between 121 to 145 days. Neonates are about 238 mm long and weigh 6.8 grams.

For Western Tiger Snakes *N. scutatus occidentalis*, litter sizes range from 15 to 35 and tend to average 28 neonates. A litter of 25 neonates was born after a gestation of between 136 to 145 days. Neonates are about 245 mm long and weigh 6.7 grams.

For Chappell Island Tiger Snakes *N. scutatus serventyi*, litter sizes range from 10 to 31 but tend to average about 19 neonates. Neonates are about 277 mm long and weigh 7.9 grams (Eipper, 2012).

### **Venom:**

Mainly neurotoxic with some cytotoxins and myotoxins present, a strong coagulant with some haemolytic activity. Ld 50 of 0.0118 and an average yield of 35 mgs. If bitten by *N. scutatus* get the hospital quickly with multiple vials Tiger Snake anti-venom (manufactured by the Commonwealth Serum Labs). A friend was recently bitten required 14 vials from a bite that only had 1 fang puncture. He was treated promptly in the Hospital where he was given the treatment and was discharged after a week.

### **References:**

Eipper S.C (2012) A guide to Australian Snakes in captivity Elapids and Colubrids, Reptilekeeper Publications

Mirtschin P, Davis R: (1983) Dangerous Snakes of Australia, Ure Smith Press.



