

Illustrated Guide to the
Venomous Snakes
of Hong Kong

by J. D. Romer

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TO THE
VENOMOUS SNAKES OF HONG KONG**

**With Recommendations
for
First Aid Treatment of Bites**

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FOREWORD

THE considerable demand for the previous booklet on this subject (*Aid to the Recognition of Venomous Snakes in Hong Kong*: Government Printer, Hong Kong, 1959) is the reason for the present revised publication. It has been prepared in simple form for the layman—for use by local residents generally, including especially youth organizations, teachers, students, and those who live or work in rural areas.

In order to facilitate identification of the various species of snakes described, all of the illustrations have been reproduced from colour photographs of living specimens. A folding chart, for use in distinguishing a venomous from a non-venomous Hong Kong snake, has been incorporated primarily for use by medical officers or others who may require to confirm the identity of a *dead* snake by an examination of the scales. Opportunity has also been taken to revise the recommendations on first aid treatment of snake-bite to conform with the latest medical opinion, although it may be noted that the views held on this subject in different countries often vary.

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ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO THE VENOMOUS SNAKES OF HONG KONG

With Recommendations for First Aid Treatment of Bites

THIS booklet is intended for use only in respect of venomous snakes found in the Colony of Hong Kong or in the adjacent sea. The primary object is to provide information useful to the layman, in consequence of which descriptions are confined to coloration, markings, length, etc. As the correct identification of an unfamiliar snake is normally a matter for specialized knowledge and a close examination of scale characters, it is necessary to use the following descriptions with due caution, remembering that species are variable and occasionally produce individuals showing extreme variation in colour, markings, or both. Moreover, when the time approaches for a snake to slough (cast its skin) its general coloration may be appreciably duller than usual. The term 'venomous snakes', as used in the title of this booklet, means *snakes dangerously venomous to man* (i.e., excluding certain back-fanged species which, though technically venomous, are not dangerous).

In the event of a bite, if the snake responsible for it has been killed it should be taken to the hospital or clinic with the patient. Its identification can then be determined or confirmed by an expert, and may prove of great assistance to the doctor in deciding on the most suitable treatment. Nevertheless, as the action of killing a snake can be dangerous, no such attempt should be made by an inexperienced person.

The bites of some venomous snakes, as for example the 'Bamboo Snake' and Chinese Cobra, are likely to produce effects immediately or within a short time of the bite. Bites by other species (e.g., sea snakes and kraits), however, may not give rise to any symptoms for some time—perhaps not until half to one hour or more after the bite.

It should be remembered that a great majority of the snakes occurring in Hong Kong, both in species and numbers, are harmless. It is also important to remember that the numbers of known bites by highly venomous snakes, and of deaths from snake-bite, are very few. *Even bites by highly venomous snakes are by no means always fatal*; it is the amount of venom actually injected and certain other factors which determine the severity of effects and final outcome.

SEA SNAKES

Description: Sea snakes can be distinguished from other local snakes by the shape of the body and tail. The posterior part of the body of a sea snake is more or less flattened from side to side, with the tail strongly compressed and like the blade of an oar. In coloration the commonest species here is usually marked above with a series of dark bands or bars on a lighter background; it grows to about 6 feet in length. A much smaller species, rarely if ever attaining 3 feet in length, is often yellow in colour with a wide black band along the back.

Occurrence: These marine reptiles live in the sea and in river-mouths, all the local species being entirely aquatic in their habits. They are caught by fishermen and may occasionally be found on the shore (e.g., if stranded, sick, or dead). Sea snakes are very rarely seen at our beaches. The five species known beyond any reasonable doubt to occur within or near Hong Kong territorial waters are *Hydrophis cyanocinctus* Daudin (by far the commonest), *Hydrophis ornatus ornatus* (Gray), *Microcephalophis gracilis* (Shaw), *Pelamis platurus* (Linn.), and *Praescutata viperina* (Schmidt).

Disposition and Venom: As far as is known there are no cases of bathers ever having been attacked by sea snakes in Hong Kong. If handled, or if a stranded specimen were trodden on, there would be every likelihood of a bite occurring. In general, sea snakes are highly poisonous and their bites sometimes prove fatal.

LAND SNAKES

There are seven species of land snakes occurring in the Colony which are dangerously venomous to man, and notes on these follow.

Banded Krait (金脚帶) *Bungarus fasciatus* (Schneider)

Description: Entire length alternately banded with broad black and yellow, or buff, transverse bands. These bands either completely, or almost completely, encircle the body. A large black mark on the neck extends forward onto the head. Along the centre of the back and tail there is a ridge, the body being more or less triangular in cross-section. End of tail blunt. Grows to about 6 feet in length.

Occurrence: Known from various parts of the Colony, though not common on Hong Kong Island and very rare or absent in Kowloon. It occurs in the New Territories but its status there is not known. This species is largely nocturnal.

Disposition and Venom: The Banded Krait is remarkably inoffensive. Little is known regarding the effects of its venom on man, but if a bite should occur it should be treated as a serious matter.

Many-banded Krait (銀腳帶) *Bungarus multicinctus* Blyth

Description: Black or bluish black above, with more than 30 (sometimes over 40 or 50) narrow, white or creamy white, transverse bands throughout the entire length. Head black, bluish black, or dark brown above. Lower parts of body white or cream. Lower surface of tail white or cream with black or dark brown markings. If the end of the tail is undamaged it is not blunt like that of the Banded Krait (金腳帶). The Many-banded Krait grows to about $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length.

Occurrence: Uncommon, possibly rare, on Hong Kong Island, and may very rarely be found in Kowloon. Its status in the New Territories is not known, although the few available records indicate a wide distribution and include Lantau Island. It is normally active at night.

Disposition and Venom: The Many-banded Krait can be described as inoffensive in disposition, though if touched or interfered with it is liable to bite. Its venom is extremely virulent and fatalities have occurred.

Maclelland's Coral Snake (珊瑚蛇)

Callophis maclellandi (Reinhardt)

Description: Body and tail reddish brown above, with a series of narrow, black, transverse bars throughout the entire length. Head black above, with a broad, white or cream, transverse bar behind the eyes separating the black area into two parts. A small area at or near the tip of the snout often pale in colour. Lower surface of body and tail yellowish or white, with conspicuous, clearly defined, black markings. Head small, not distinct from neck. Body elongate and of almost the same diameter throughout. Grows to about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length.

Occurrence: Occurs in hilly, usually well wooded, localities. Known from Hong Kong Island (especially The Peak District) and Kowloon T'sai, and is probably to be found in the New Territories where conditions are suitable. A rarely-seen, nocturnal species.

Disposition and Venom: This is a very inoffensive snake and little or nothing is known regarding the effects of its venom. As it belongs to the same family (Elapidae) as the cobras and kraits, however, it should be regarded as highly venomous.

Chinese Cobra* (飯鏟頭) *Naja naja* (Linn.)

Description: Usually black or blackish brown above, with or without a number of narrow, pale, transverse lines. Specimens in which the general coloration is lighter may sometimes be found. In the defensive attitude, with the forepart of the body raised, the characteristic hood is expanded and frequently displays one of three basic whitish markings: (1) the well known spectacled (binocellate) pattern, (2) a monocle-like (monocellate) pattern, or (3) a complete 'mask', by which is meant a wide transverse band completely crossing the hood and containing within it a large central dark spot with a smaller one on either side. However, the hood-markings of Chinese Cobras from Hong Kong are extremely variable, and the basic patterns just described may be modified, incomplete, or occasionally absent. Among Hong Kong snakes the hood is present only in this species and in the Hamadryad or King Cobra, but when the snake is undisturbed or dead the hood is retracted and is then not apparent. This species grows to about 4½ feet in length.

(*Note:* The non-venomous Common Rat Snake (水律), which grows to about 7 feet in length and is usually predominantly brown in colour, has the lip-scales edged with black so as to form a series of distinct vertical black bars on both the upper and lower lips. When it is possible to examine the specimen dead this characteristic, which is not present in the Chinese Cobra, will help to avoid confusing the two species.)

Occurrence: Widely distributed and fairly common on Hong Kong Island, also occurring on other islands and on the mainland. It occurs both at sea level and in the hills, and is sometimes found in gardens or situations close to residential premises. This species may be found moving about both by daylight and at night.

Disposition and Venom: Although not aggressive, this snake will defend itself courageously if cornered or molested. Its bite is very dangerous and occasionally proves fatal.

Hamadryad or King Cobra (過山鳥) *Naja hannah* (Cantor)

Description: Coloration varies much with age. The young are black or dark brown above, with many narrow, white, buff, or yellow transverse bars; the latter are chevron-shaped or more or less straight, and may be margined with black. As age advances these bars gradually disappear, and

* The Chinese Cobra is usually considered to be a subspecies (geographical race) of the Indian Cobra, but the differences between them are still insufficiently understood.

on the head and forepart of the body may be entirely lost; on the hindpart of the body at least a trace of them, with or without black margins, always remains. In the adult the ground colour above is blackish brown, brown, or olive brown, but on the tail may be almost entirely black. The hood in this species, when expanded, is relatively narrower and extends farther down the neck than that of the Chinese Cobra. The Hamadryad rarely exceeds 15 feet in length.

(Note: Please see note under Chinese Cobra regarding distinguishing characteristics of Common Rat Snake.)

Occurrence: Found sporadically in the New Territories, where it does not appear to be common anywhere. This species is known from Lantau Island. It has occurred very rarely on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon. It is markedly diurnal in habits.

Disposition and Venom: Although having a reputation for unprovoked aggression, such behaviour is fortunately rare. Nevertheless, this is an extremely dangerous snake and should be treated accordingly. Its bite may prove fatal.

White-lipped Pit Viper or 'Bamboo Snake' (青竹蛇) *Trimeresurus albolabris* Gray

Description: Usually uniformly green above, rarely with indistinct dark cross-bands. Pale greenish yellow, yellow, or whitish below. Tip and at least part of upper surface of tail reddish brown. Head roughly triangular in shape and very distinct from neck. Maximum length about 3 feet, the majority of specimens being smaller.

Occurrence: A fairly common species, widely distributed in the Colony. It occurs on Hong Kong Island, the mainland, and on at least some of the other islands; specimens have been found on Stonecutters, Cheung Chau, and Lantau Islands. It is found from sea level up to 1,500 feet or more in the hills. In habits it is predominantly nocturnal, but may be seen resting in bushes or other situations during the day.

Disposition and Venom: Compared with many other species, this snake is slow in its movements. When approached it seldom moves out of the way, and for protection is largely dependent on the camouflage afforded by its foliage-green coloration. If not closely approached it remains quiet, but if an intruder comes within 2 or 3 feet it is likely to strike. Due to these habits, and because it is not easily seen amongst vegetation, most of the snake-bites in the Colony are inflicted by this species. Fortunately, however, death from such bites is extremely rare.

香港市政事務署防治蟲鼠組

主任 J. D. 羅馬編著

香港毒蛇圖解指南

並附被蛇咬傷後急救法

一九六五年

香港政府印務局印行

序言

本書爲「辨別香港毒蛇指南」的修訂本。原書於一九五九年由香港政府印務局刊印；年來銷路甚廣，因有出版修訂本的需要。

本書的編寫，係採用顯淺的手法，藉以適合本港一般居民之用。對於青年團體、教師、學生和在鄉村地方居住或工作的人們，尤爲合用。

爲易於鑑別書內所述各種蛇類起見，所有彩色插圖均攝自活標本，并附摺式圖表以供醫生及各界人士從蛇鱗以鑑別死蛇所屬種類是否有毒。趁此機會修訂前冊所載的急救辦法，以配合最近醫療上的發展。然所應注意者爲各國人士對急救方面所持的見解，是常有紛歧的。

香港市政事務署署長 景 韓

事務署防治蟲鼠組

J. D. 羅馬編著

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