

Australian Death Adders in Captivity

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Introduction:

The Death Adders *Acanthophis* are (in my opinion) a large group of snakes numbering 14 species in total (7 in Australia, 4 in Papua New Guinea and 3 on neighbouring islands.) (Hoser, 2002).

All are highly venomous; their venom is mainly made up of neurotoxins. I have personally been the unfortunate recipient of a bite from a small *A. praelongus* which resulted in minor effects (swelling, pain, nausea etc) in which I did not seek out medical attention. I do know however of some bad bites that fellow keepers have had. One large female *A. hawkei* bit a colleague, which required a large amount of Antivenom to reverse the effects of the venom.

The type of Antivenom is Death Adder monovalent and the initial dose is 6, 000 units. The Antivenom is made in Australia at the Commonwealth Serum Labs however I am unsure if it is available for sale overseas.

That being said these are great elapids. I have only kept **AUSTRALIAN** species these are *A. antarcticus*, *A. rugosus*, *A. hawkei*, *A. cf. rugosus* and *A. praelongus* and have looked after for short periods *A. pyrrhus* and *A. wellsei*.

I kept all of the *Acanthophis* I kept the same way with relative ease in which I will break up into more detail further on.

Housing:

I have 2 methods of caging that I use for *Acanthophis* they are as follows:

I use sliding glass fronted cages (2 feet long (60 cm) X 1 foot high (30 cm) X 1 and 1/2 feet deep (45 cm). Those are heated to 27 to 31 degrees Celsius by way of thermostatically controlled light bulbs (40 watt).

I also use opaque "sweater" type boxes. These I have found are better and have now changed to these. I also use heat mats rather than light bulbs with these sorts of containers.

I have experimented with a few types of substrates for these snakes and I have come to the conclusion that either newspaper or paper towel, are the best for the job.

Others have had considerable success with gravel and clay. However I prefer a faster and more hygienic substrate.

The enclosure is simple with a half-hollow log or small ice cream container up turned with a hole cut in it to allow for access. This is placed under the heat source (in the sliding glass cages) or above the heat mat. The cages do have a somewhat small gradient but this is still utilised by the snakes. At the cool end the water bowl is situated. This is a low bowl so the snakes can drink out of it. Remember these are not like Cobras *Naja* or Mambas *Dendroaspis*

These are very lazy elapids. Some Wild Caught specimens tend to only drink initially with misting.

Death Adders are nocturnal so a standard 12h light 12h dark regime is fine.

The "Basking" spots are around 29 degrees Celsius while the rest of the cage is kept around room temperature.

Feeding:

Death Adders are usually fairly tricky snakes to get to feed, as they are mainly lizards (Skinks) or Frog feeders.

However, once they are eating mice or weaner rats they are good.

My adult Female *A. cummingi* was one such snake. A friend, who in turn got her from a Dealer in Darwin, gave her to me. She was not eating and was starting to lose condition. I left her a week to settle in and started leaving small mice near the Entrance to her hide. After a week of this I had no luck. I then decided to scent a small fuzzy rat with skink urine unfortunately same story. I was get frustrated by this point and needed to get some food into her. I assist fed (head of a fuzzy rat into mouth and let the snake do the rest) her, and had success. Now she is a great feeder, eating both rats and mice.

Juveniles are I have found somewhat harder. I now offer a pink mouse to them when I get them, I leave it in the cage for an hour if its not gone I try to slap her with it (get a defensive bite) until its held. If all this fails I force feed drumsticks (pinky rat legs) or rat tails until such time that the snake starts to eat on its own.

Female Death Adders tend to eat year around (except while gravid) where as the Males do go off their food and occasionally for extended periods. This is something that should be kept in mind but not worried about because if the snake was previously a good feeder it will generally still be so, It just needs sometime.

As for feeding rates with a Death Adder of 45 cm (18 inches) I roughly feed them 2 mice every 3 weeks in one sitting. Photos of *A. antarcticus* feeding can be seen in (Hoser, 1989)

Breeding:

As a group once the husbandry problems are solved, Death Adders are a fairly easy group of elapids to breed.

I cool mine at the start of October and have them warm again by December. The female is placed into the males cage and they are left together for about a week (care should be noted as some species especially *A. pyrrhus* are ophidiophagus (cannibalistic) (Hoser, pers comm).

Care of gravid females is much the same as any other gravid snake (keep the cage clean and warm and keep handling to a minimum) (Eipper, 2000).

Litter size varies from species to species so below average Litter sizes are given:

Acanthophis antarcticus (Common Death Adder): Average 18 (Greer, 1997)

Acanthophis hawkei (Barkly Tableland Death Adder): 20 (Barnett and Gow, 1992.) to 27 pers ob

Acanthophis lancasteri (Hill Death Adder): average 18 up to 27 (pers.ob)

Acanthophis praelongus (Northern Death Adder): 6 to 8 (Hoser, 2002.)

Acanthophis pyrrhus (Desert Death Adder): 11 to 13 (Greer, 1997.)

Acanthophis wellsei (Pilbara Death Adder): 12 (Hoser, 2002.) to 18(pers.ob)

Acanthophis woolfi (Dajarra Death Adder): (18 pers.ob)

Average gestation period across the board seems to be between 140 to 170 days. With juveniles having their first slough around 15 days after birth. Most young are around 12 to 13 centimetres (S.V.L) at birth and around 10 grams.

Further Notes:

Sloughing can be a major problem with these snakes, I have found misting the cage just after the snake has gone through the "Blue" stage (eyes have cleared after turning milky blue) is very effective. Usually sloughing problems can be related to a previous history of mites after one or two sloughs however this can usually be overturned. Mites themselves are probably one of the hardest parasites to get rid of in snakes and this in turn can cause further problems. Pest strips left in the cage for a couple of hours once a week for three weeks will get rid of these effectively however as these are now off the market aircraft insecticide (Top of Desent) is now used.

Conclusion:

I have been keeping *Acanthophis* for around 10 years they are a great group of snakes to keep but they are not in my mind a great beginner venomous species due to their unpredictable nature and toxic venom. Further Notes on rearing of *Acanthophis* can be found in Valentic, 1998.

References:

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