

## A TIGER SNAKE GOES TROUT FISHING

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At around 6.00pm on the evening of the 9th of March 1992 we were on a forestry road where it crosses the Wentworth Canal (AMG 4432 502243; altitude 670m), 11 km north of the township of Tarraleah on the Central Plateau. The water in the canal was shallow (20 cm) and fast flowing. An open slashed strip is maintained either side of the canal which passes through alpine ash (*Eucalyptus delegatensis*) dominated scrubby montane forest. The canal batter is formed from Jurassic dolerite rock.

We heard splashing from amongst the rocks forming the canal batter about 10m upstream from where the road crosses the canal. On closer investigation a small rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), approximately 15cm in length, was found poking out from under a rock near the edge of the canal. On attempting to shift the fish back out into the canal, it was found difficult to dislodge. It was soon discovered why; a snake had the tail and part of the rear of the fish in its mouth. We let go of the fish and the snake disappeared back under the rock. The snake had been holding the fish while submerged under the rock. No part of the snake was visible from above. The rock was dislodged and a black Tiger snake (*Notechis ater*), approximately 1.2m in length, emerged and swam under some rocks nearby. It emerged again and swam downstream for 10m or so where it sought refuge in rocks on the opposite bank.

Tiger snakes inhabit the margins of watercourses and swamps. They prey mainly on vertebrates associated with these habitats, namely frogs, lizards and small mammals (Cogger 1983; Wilson and Knowles 1988). They have not been recorded preying on fish in the wild although they are known to take eels (P. Whittaker, Zoology Department, University of Tasmania, pers. comm.). The closely related mainland tiger snake (*Notechis scutatis*) preys on fish (Wilson and Knowles 1988). Worrell (1963) reported that Chapell Island tiger snakes (*Notechis ater serventyi*) kept in captivity ate "mice, fish, rats, strips of liver and horse meat, and sausages". Populations of tiger snakes which inhabit islands with mutton bird colonies feed on the young chicks (Worrell 1963). They also prey on petrel chicks on some islands off the coast of South Australia (Wilson and Knowles 1988). The King Island race of tiger snake (*Notechis ater humphreysi*) is cannibalistic (Worrell 1963).

The temperature of the water in the canal was measured on the 11th of March at 11.00am and found to be 11°C. Daily fluctuations in water temperatures of

streams on the Central Plateau can be of the order of 5°C in summer (Peter Davies, Inland Fisheries Commission, pers. comm.). Thus it is likely that the water was warmer on the evening of the incident after a warm day. Tiger snakes have been recorded active at temperatures as low as 12°C on the Central Plateau (P. Whittaker, pers. comm.). However, they were generally active during the middle of the day when they had had the opportunity to bask. Tiger snakes are shuttling heliotherms (Rawlinson 1974), that is they will bask to raise their body temperature until it reaches their normal activity range. Once they have achieved this they can forage in shade, or the water as described above, where ambient temperatures are lower than their normal activity temperatures.

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