



DEADLIEST
Predators

Deadliest Snakes

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Chapter 2



Black Mamba

Over two hundred different species of snakes lurk in the wild heart of Africa. Of these, the most feared by far is the black mamba—and this reputation is well deserved. The black mamba is notoriously venomous, aggressive, and ill-tempered. It slithers with terrifying speed, fast enough to overtake a fleeing person. It injects venom with virtually every bite. And worst of all, this deadly creature's home range overlaps with human communities, so it comes into fairly frequent contact with potential victims.

With all of these deadly characteristics, the black mamba is widely considered to be the world's most dangerous snake. People who receive the mamba's kiss of death, as this snake's bite is often called, are unlikely to survive the encounter.

Body Basics

The black mamba is not actually black. Its body ranges from olive brown to gray or sometimes light tan, with a pale yellow to cream-colored belly. This snake gets its name from the inside of its mouth, which is inky black in color. Even the snake's forked tongue is black. Two needle-sharp fangs, each up to .75 inches (2 cm) long, are found at the front of the mouth. The head is often

described as being coffin shaped—a suitable description considering this snake's killing power. The eyes are round, medium in size, and dark brown in the center, with pale yellow rings along the outer edges.

In terms of its overall build, the black mamba's body is rounded, with a tapering tail, and it is frighteningly long. This snake's average length is about 8 to 9 feet (2.5 to 3 m), but some individuals are much bigger. The largest recorded black mamba was nearly 15 feet (4.5 m) long, or about the length of a car, making this reptile Africa's longest venomous snake and the world's second longest, after the king cobra.

Despite its intimidating length, the black mamba is not bulky. This snake has a slender build that makes it surprisingly lightweight for its length. Even the longest black mambas usually weigh less than 4 pounds (1.8 kg). This slim, light frame lets the black mamba slither easily across tree branches, slip into cracks and crevices, or travel anywhere else it wants to go.

Home and Habits

Black mambas are found across a large part of southeastern Africa. They have been occasionally reported in western Africa as well, although scientists have not confirmed these sightings. Within their known range, black mambas are fairly common and in no danger of extinction.

Black mambas are found in dry regions and are mostly ground dwellers. They prefer low, open areas such as savannas, but may settle in woodlands and forests as well. They are sometimes found in hilly areas at higher altitudes, up to a maximum of about 6,000

feet (1,829 m), but this is much less common. Wherever it settles, a black mamba creates a lair inside a safe, enclosed spot, such as an old termite mound, an abandoned animal burrow, or a rocky crevice. It will live in this lair for a long period, perhaps even for years, if its environment is not disturbed and it is able to find enough food.

Black mambas stick to their lairs during the nighttime hours. They emerge during the daytime, when the sunlight can warm their bodies. They are sometimes seen basking on rocks before the day becomes too hot. Occasionally they may also climb into trees and rest on high branches. Climbing behavior is more common among young black mambas, which are smaller and more vulnerable to ground-dwelling predators. Slithering into tree-tops helps them to stay safe as they grow and develop.

On the Hunt

A big part of the black mamba's day is devoted to hunting. This snake eats mostly small mammals, such as rock hyrax (furry, rodent-like creatures about the size of guinea pigs), bush babies, and bats. It will also eat birds or other snakes.

The black mamba is an ambush hunter. This means that instead of chasing prey, it settles into a hidden area and stays very still. It patiently watches and waits. If the snake is lucky, a small animal will eventually wander too close. When this happens, the black mamba reacts with lightning speed. It lunges into the open, its black mouth gaping to expose its sharp fangs. It buries these fangs in the prey's body and injects a killing dose of venom.

When the strike is complete, the black mamba pulls back to a safe distance, where it will not be bitten or



The black mamba (pictured) is aggressive, bad-tempered, and lightning fast. Because its habitat overlaps with human communities, this highly venomous snake represents a grave threat to people.

scratched. It watches the prey as the venom, which is loaded with deadly neurotoxins, takes effect. The prey starts to lose control of its body as the brain and nerves shut down and the muscles stop working. The snake follows the rapidly weakening animal if it tries to escape and strikes again, if necessary, to inject more venom. It varies this technique just a bit when it comes to small

THE BLACK MAMBA AT A GLANCE

- **Scientific name:** *Dendroaspis polylepis*
- **Scientific family:** Elapidae
- **Range:** Southern and eastern Africa
- **Habitat:** Savannas, woodlands, and forests
- **Average size:** 8 to 9 feet (2 to 3 m)
- **Diet:** Small birds and mammals
- **Life span:** Up to eleven years
- **Key features:** Black inner mouth
- **Deadly because:** Fast and aggressive
- **Conservation status:** Least concern

birds, which can fly away. In these cases the black mamba clamps its jaws tightly, using its teeth to hold its prey until the unfortunate animal stops struggling.

When the prey finally collapses, paralyzed, the black mamba moves in at last to enjoy its meal. The snake usually swallows its prey headfirst and whole. An especially large meal can create a visible lump in the black mamba's body. The lump disappears quickly, though, as the mamba digests its food. These snakes can completely digest a small animal in eight to ten hours. After the prey has been absorbed, the snake is ready to hunt once again.

Defensive Display

Despite their fearsome reputation, black mambas do not use their ambush techniques on people. They would

rather slither away, unnoticed, than attack. As one snake catcher explains, “Mambas . . . are very secretive. They don’t want to be stopped or confronted. They’re extremely nervous and alert and they’ll be gone at the slightest hint of danger.” However, he cautions, “they’ll be aggressive in a very small area.”⁵ These snakes are known to be fearless if cornered or threatened, during

The gaping mouth of a black mamba reveals a black interior. After injecting a paralyzing dose of venom into its prey, the snake often pulls back and waits to eat until the prey can no longer move.





A SPEEDY SNAKE

When it comes to speed, the black mamba is the undisputed champion of the snake world. Many sources claim that this reptile's top speed is about 12 miles per hour (19 km/h). Some experts believe that this is an exaggeration and that the real number is closer to 10 miles per hour (16 km/h). But either way, it is fast. In the open, a person could probably outrun a black mamba in full slither—but this snake is not usually encountered in the open. It lurks in areas full of bushes, trees, and undergrowth that prevent top running speeds. The black mamba could easily overtake a fleeing human in these conditions.

Luckily for its potential victims, the black mamba uses its frightening speed mostly to escape from danger, not to attack. If cornered, though, the snake can and will do anything necessary to protect itself—and it will do it quickly. No one is safe when the black mamba puts its terrifying speed to work.

breeding season, or when defending their territory. They will also become aggressive toward anyone or anything that blocks the path to their lair.

It is not hard to tell when a black mamba is upset. An angry mamba turns to face any threat head-on. It raises the front one-third of its body off the ground and spreads the skin of its neck slightly to make itself seem larger. It opens its black mouth wide and hisses. It may even move toward the intruder in this position. Extremely upset black mambas have been known to move forward with their heads and bodies raised high above the

ground. It is a terrifying sight and one that signals the gravest danger for the object of the snake's fury.

If an intruder ignores these signs and fails to flee, the snake takes bold action. It thrusts itself forward and upward to strike. Because its head is already 3 to 4 feet (.9 to 1.2 m) off the ground at this point, the black mamba is capable of burying its fangs in a person's chest or head—perilously close to the vital organs.

No matter where it lands, the black mamba's bite is potentially lethal, delivering up to 400 milligrams of venom. This is enough to kill dozens of adult humans. Even worse, though, is the fact that this snake can strike multiple times in a row, up to an incredible twelve times in a single second. The attack happens so quickly that a person may think he or she was only bitten once. But the many puncture wounds left on the victim's skin reveal the deadly truth.

The Kiss of Death

Once a person has been bitten, the clock is ticking. The black mamba's venom is extremely fast acting and spreads rapidly through the person's system. The first symptoms, which include dizziness, headache, a racing heart, and breathing trouble, appear within fifteen to thirty minutes. Convulsions, paralysis, and unconsciousness soon follow. The symptoms progress until the victim dies of suffocation or heart collapse, generally between seven and fifteen hours after the bite occurs.

In some instances, though, the process can be much faster. A particularly gruesome case occurred in March 2008, when a British student was bitten by a black mamba at a safari guide training school in Hoedspruit,

Source Notes



Introduction: Feared but Fascinating

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2. Quoted in Clara Moskowitz, “Why We Fear Snakes,” LiveScience, March 3, 2008. www.livescience.com.

Chapter 1: Inland Taipan

3. Quoted in Dan Proudman and Stephanie Gardiner, “Snake-Bite Victim Could Have Been Dead in 45 Minutes,” *Sydney Morning Herald Online*, September 28, 2012. www.smh.com.au.
4. Brandon Cornett, “Most Venomous Snake—Meet the Inland Taipan,” Reptile Knowledge, 2015. www.reptileknowledge.com.

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5. Quoted in Duncan Guy, “The Man Who Loves Deadly Black Snakes,” IOL SciTech, March 23, 2103. www.iol.co.za.
6. Quoted in *Telegraph*, “Student Dies After Being Bitten by Snake,” December 13, 2011. www.telegraph.co.uk.

Chapter 3: Saw-Scaled Viper

7. Quoted in Paul Bentley, “The Viper on My Drive: Gran Captured Deadly Foot-Long Snake from India

Glossary



ambush: A type of hunting in which the hunter hides and waits for prey to approach rather than actively pursuing prey.

antivenom: A medicine that counteracts the effects of snake venom. Also called antivenin.

camouflage: Colors or patterns that help an animal to blend into its surroundings.

cold-blooded: Having a body temperature that varies with the environment; unable to internally regulate body temperature.

constriction: Using the body to squeeze prey to death.

constrictor: A snake that uses constriction to kill prey.

crepuscular: Active mostly at dawn and dusk.

dry bite: A bite from a venomous snake that delivers no venom.

habitat: The natural home or environment of an animal.

hood: The spread neck flaps of a snake.

keeled: Having a raised ridge running down the center.

nocturnal: Active mostly during the nighttime.

For Further Research



Books

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Mark Siddall, *Poison: Sinister Species with Deadly Consequences*. New York: Sterling Signature, 2014.

Marilyn Singer, *Venom*. Minneapolis: Millbrook, 2014.

Websites

Exotic Pets: Snakes (www.exoticpets.about.com/od/snakes). Explore various snake-keeping topics on this informative site.

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