

# ON A COMMON NAME FOR THE SNAKE, *PSEUDECHIS BUTLERI* WITH A DESCRIPTION OF A COLOUR VARIANT FROM THE EASTERN GOLDFIELDS

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Although *Pseudechis butleri* was only described in 1982 various vernacular names have already been ascribed to it, i.e. Butler's Snake (Gow, pers. comm.) Butler's Black Snake (Chapman, 1985), Yellow-bellied Black Snake (Storr, 1983) and Spotted Mulga Snake (Bush, 1985). The first 2 names are derived from the scientific name, the 3rd refers to diagnostic colouration, and the 4th to the dorsal pattern which distinguishes it from the common Mulga Snake (*P. australis*). I believe a common name should be primarily descriptive and secondarily convey a relationship to closely allied forms. Therefore, omitting the first 2 names because they are not or only partly descriptive and thus convey little to the uninformed layman, we move onto the last 2 mentioned. 'Yellow-bellied Black Snake' is an ideal common name, but it is already widely used on the coast, to the south of *P. butleri*'s geographic range, for the Tiger Snake (*Notechis scutatus*). If it is also used in literature (especially anecdotal) for *P. butleri* then it can only cause confusion to those residing on the coast where the western colour-phase of the Tiger Snake is found. I first heard a common name used to describe *P. butleri* in 1983. While visiting Laverton and conversing with the local constabulary they referred to a 'spotted mulga snake' they had recently killed near town. Though I was unable to examine the snake they had despatched their description was of *P. butleri*. This name is most suitable as many residents of and visitors to the Goldfields are familiar with the Mulga Snake (*P. australis*), and it is already in use by the locals, at least in Laverton.

With the current state of flux in taxonomy and corresponding nomenclature instability in Australian elapid snake classification (compare Storr, 1983b and Cogger, 1979), standardised common names will alleviate much of the confusion experienced at present by the layman. Therefore I propose 'spotted mulga snake' as the common name for *Pseudechis butleri*.

## Colour variation in *P. butleri*:-

Smith (1982: 43) in his description of this species refers to the pale intrascalar dorsal spotting, basal parts of ventrolateral scales and ventrals as yellow. Glauert (1957: 32) described the lighter parts of a freshly dead specimen assigned to *butleri* by Smith (1982) as 'primrose yellow'. This colouration is typical of specimens examined by me from 46 and 51 kilometres south of Leinster, and from Kookynie. Recently Brad Maryan and I collected an aberrant adult female from the Leonora rubbish tip (28°53'S, 121°20'E) on 29 September, 1985. This locality is situated about halfway between the northern and southern localities mentioned above from where typical specimens have been observed. The ventral and subcaudal counts of this snake reflect the means given by Smith for this species (means in brackets): ventrals 211 (211.4), subcaudals 60 (59.6).

This specimen is typically black with dark reddish-brown intrascalar dorsal spotting and brown to bluish-grey ventrolateral scales. The belly is off-white or creamish with the anterior edge of each ventral black. Although Smith (*supra. cit.*) refers to the dorsal spotting as ' . . . yellow (rarely brownish)' he does not mention any variation from yellow in the ventrolateral scales or ventrals in the series of specimens lodged in the WAM examined by him.

It is interesting to note that the greyish-blue ventrolateral colour tends towards the Blue-bellied Black Snake (*P. guttatus*), a congener of similarly restricted distribution in New South Wales and Queensland, however *P. butleri* is distinguishable from it on geographic distribution (western v. eastern) and number of midbody scale rows (17 v. 19).

How widespread the above colour variant of *P. butleri* is will not be known until more similarly coloured specimens are collected, however to date it appears to be rare.

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