

The Book of Indian Snakes

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and
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juggernaut



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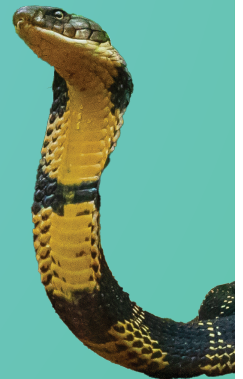
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Introduction

India has an amazing diversity of snakes – at least 350 species and counting as new ones are still being discovered. That puts India in the top five when it comes to snake species. You can find snakes in almost every habitat, including in your garden flowerpot!

Snakes have been a part of life in India for thousands of years. Hindu, Jain and Buddhist mythologies are populated with powerful serpents. They are a part of the Mahabharata, Puranas and other ancient texts, and their stories are narrated and celebrated in poojas, festivals and gatherings.

Snake myths

Snakes also feature in many superstitions (all untrue of course!) – for example, they drink milk or cause diseases when touched!

There are also plenty of stories about vengeful cobras that come after those who kill their mates. A modern version of the same tale relates how the cobra, before it dies, clicks and saves the killer's image and "forwards" it to its mate, who then does the revenge part. The digital age comes to snake mythology! Don't believe a word of it.



Western Ghats king cobra

Respect, don't fear snakes

Rom became a student of snakes at the age of four, while Zai began learning about them at the age of 20 when she moved to Chennai, and started working at the Madras Snake Park with Rom. Like you readers, we are students of snakes and, adding up our ages, have been at it for over 100 years!

One of the first things we learnt was that most Indian snakes are harmless, and only a few are dangerous. A good step towards being safe from snakebite, is to recognise the Big Four: the four species of common venomous snakes in India.



Snakes are super important

But also remember that snakes are super useful to us because their main prey – rodents – are the enemies of farmers, who grow our food. A healthy snake population in the fields is a much better way to control rodents than the poisonous pesticides that cause so much harm to our environment and wildlife.

So, let's explore the world of snakes together, with curiosity and wonder, and a healthy dab of respect for the venomous species.



Large-scaled pit viper

All About Snakes

Are there many kinds of snakes in India?

Yes! But please don't ask for the exact number. It's hard to tell, since one or two new species are being discovered almost every year, because herpetology (the study of reptiles and amphibians) is becoming popular and there are more and more herpetologists.

Fifty years ago, books told us there were 200 Indian snakes. Today we know there are at least 350 . . . and counting! Sixty of these are venomous.

Spectacled cobra

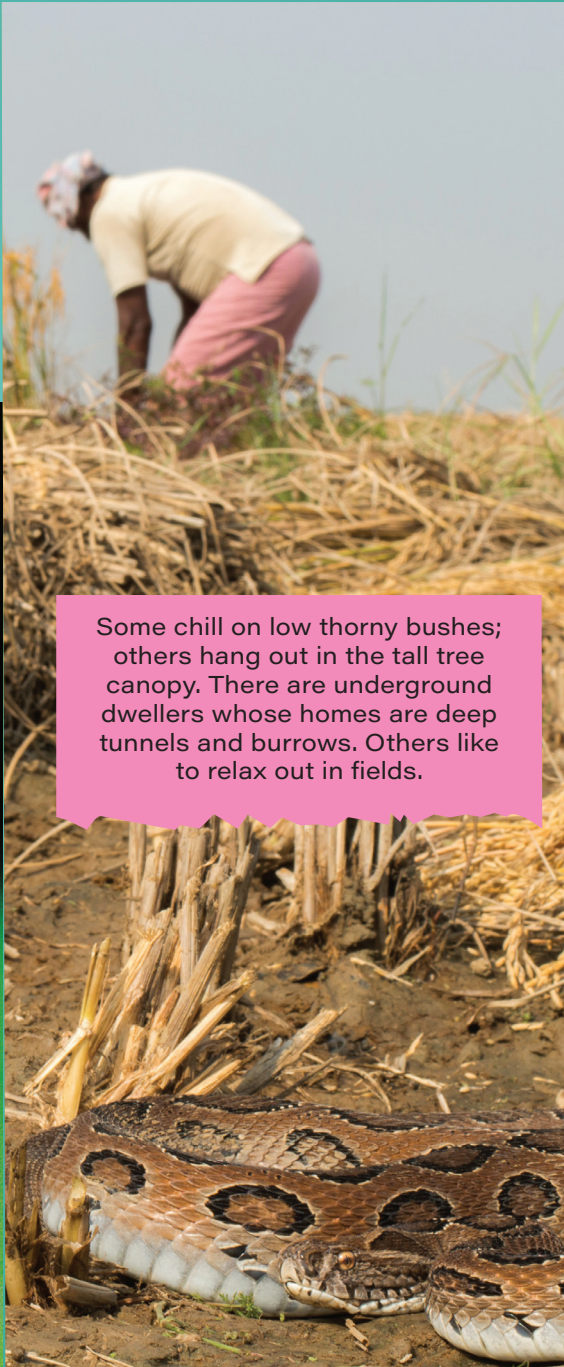


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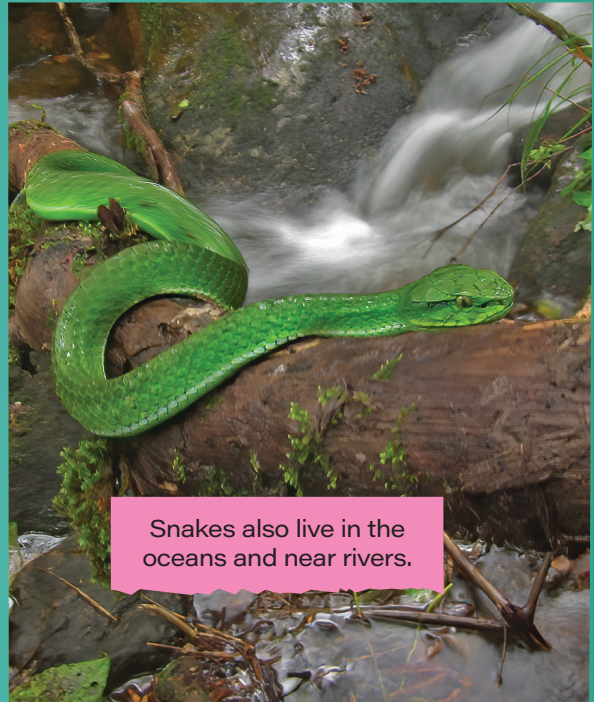
There are over 3,000 species of snakes worldwide. These are found on every continent except Antarctica.

Where do they live?

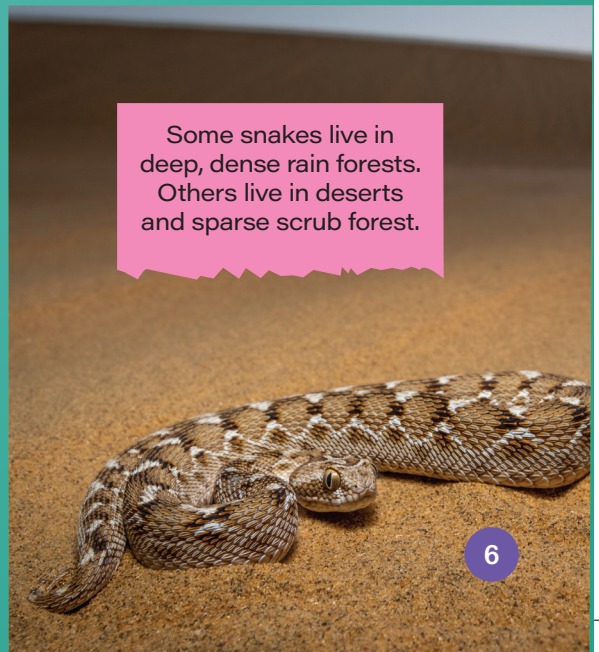
The answer is – everywhere! They live in many habitats, but many species are always on the move from one landscape to another, tracking prey and water.



Some chill on low thorny bushes; others hang out in the tall tree canopy. There are underground dwellers whose homes are deep tunnels and burrows. Others like to relax out in fields.



Snakes also live in the oceans and near rivers.



Some snakes live in deep, dense rain forests. Others live in deserts and sparse scrub forest.

Can we find snakes in cities?

Fifty to sixty years ago, India had a lot of forests and natural habitats, and this is where snakes lived (in peace!). Things are different now – our population has doubled, and a lot of forests have been cut to make space for homes and offices. In effect, we humans have moved into the habitats of snakes.

So how have snakes adapted to their new neighbours? Many have accepted this change and become city dwellers. Their needs are few – water, hiding places and prey – and these are amply supplied in cities.



The bigger land snakes, like cobras and rat snakes, are living the dream life. There's a whole banquet of rodents for them to feast on, thanks to the piles of garbage we dump.