



What's that **Snake?**

A starter's guide to snakes
of southern Africa _____



Johan Marais

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What's that **Snake?**



*To Usha and Mac Madhav,
for freeing me from the shackles of society.*

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Warren Schmidt

Johan Marais

A word from the author

Snakes are fascinating creatures that have been misunderstood and feared as a result of ignorance, superstition and myth. Recently, however, public interest in snakes has grown due to an increase in wildlife programmes and literature on the subject.

Snakes are fairly widespread in most regions, and you may wish to learn about the snakes in your area. If you regularly encounter snakes where you live, it is likely that there will be four or five common varieties.

Many species hunt actively for food, resulting in their occasional appearance in suburban gardens. There is no question that some of our snakes are potentially lethal because of their venom, but they are a minority. When faced with a dangerous species, never tamper with the snake or try to handle it. The majority of southern African snakes, however, are either harmless or possess mild venom. The symptoms from such a bite are less painful and threatening than those of a bee sting.

Snakes can be observed at national parks and game reserves. In arid regions you can spot them in trees, hunting for birds' eggs and hatchlings, and if you visit a waterhole you should keep an eye on communal weaver nests. Unfortunately, snakes are masters of disguise and are very quick to disappear, resulting in rather brief sightings. If you come across a snake, especially in a game reserve, try not to disturb it, and take lots of photographs. There is little doubt that such photographs will elicit more attention from your friends than most 'big five' photographs.

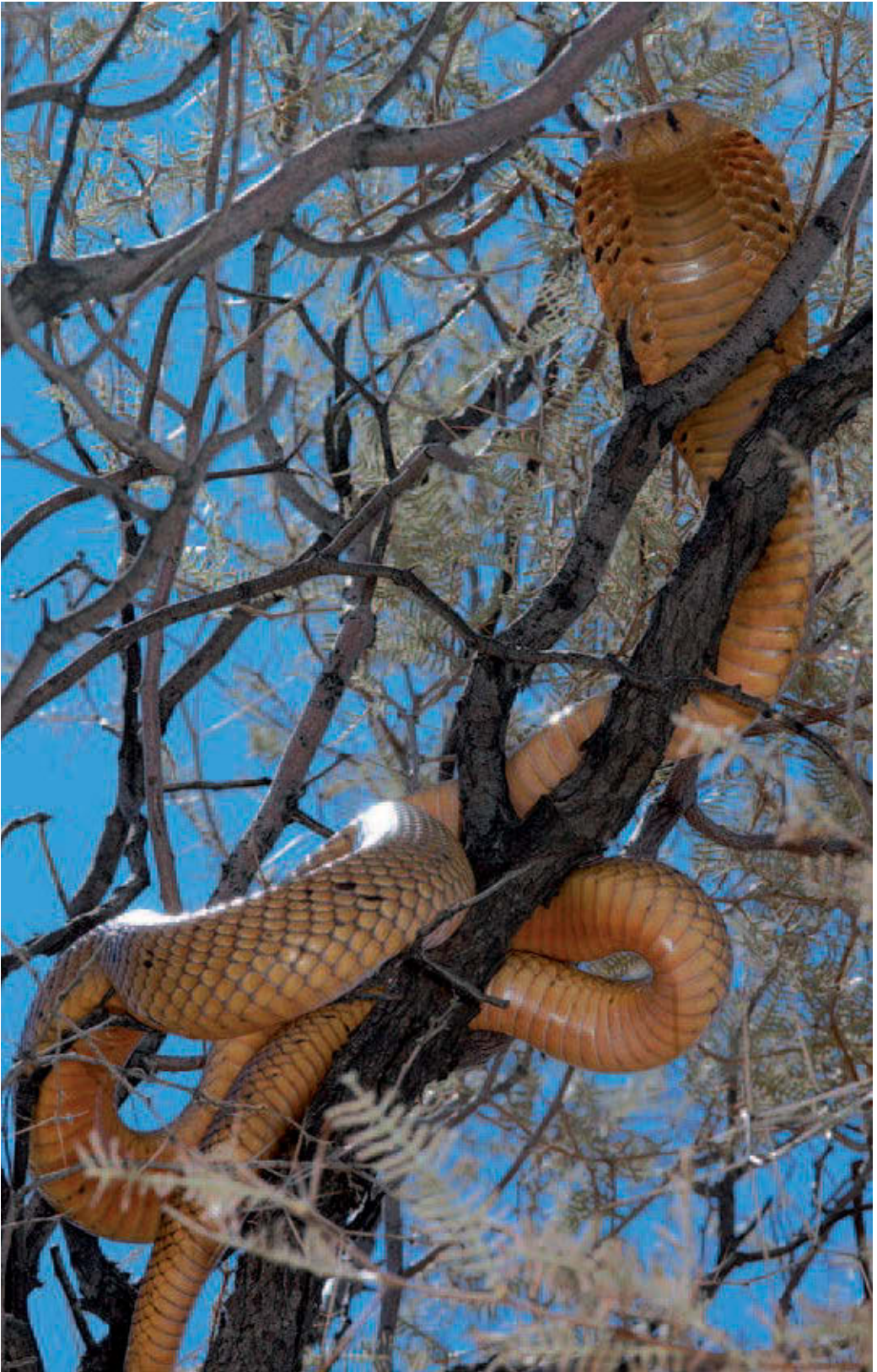
An ongoing Reptile Conservation Assessment, funded by the South African National Biodiversity Institute, accepts and collates digital photographs of snakes received from members of the public. These photographs are being used to confirm the presence of snakes in well-defined localities, and will be of value in future conservation programmes.

It can be quite difficult to identify southern African snakes, as coloration of species can vary significantly. This book deals with the more common groups of snakes – those you are most likely to encounter. The species are placed in 28 groups: some according to family; others according to common behaviour or appearance. The aim of this book is to help you identify group characteristics before identifying individual species. A field guide is a valuable companion to this text, and more detailed information on southern African snakes can be found in *A Complete Guide to the Snakes of Southern Africa* and *Field Guide to Snakes and other Reptiles of Southern Africa*.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Johan Marais". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'J'.



A Puff Adder moves through the sand, south of Windhoek, Namibia.



Marius Burger

Cape Cobras may climb trees in the early evening to search for prey.

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JOHAN MARAIS
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Front Cover (bottom): Coral Shield Cobra
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