

## The Learning Center: Cobras

<http://www.thecaravanoflight.com/learningcenter/cobralearningcenter/cobras.html>

### Hypnotizing cobras



“Cobras are one of the most poisonous snakes we will meet on our trip. They are easy to recognize when they flatten their rib cage and look like a long-handled tennis racket with fangs. When people think of cobras in India, they often think of snake charmers, the flute players who cause a snake in a basket to rise and sway to the music. Actually the snakes don't move to the music. When I was in Africa a friend caught a cobra and then demonstrated how the snake would sway just as readily to the movement of a stick. It's the motion of the flute moving back and forth that mesmerizes the cobra. I've been told that as long as you keep an object, like a flute, moving in front of a cobra, they delay or strike ineffectively. But once you stop moving, the snake may take aim and bite. We will check this out when we visit with a snake charmer during our journey.

### One big snake

The king cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*) is the longest venomous snake in the world. It can grow up to 16 feet long (4.88 m). When threatened it rises to 5 feet (1.5 m). This would be pretty scary if you were facing the snake. Fortunately, this cobra rarely attempts to bite people. In fact it shuns human contact. Of the 10,000 deaths every year in India due to snake bite, only small percentages are caused by cobras. The king cobra spends much of its time hunting other snakes. “



<http://www.india4u.com/wildlife/snakes.asp>

**Poisonous Snakes of India** (specifically  
the Himalayas)

**Indian (Spectacled) Cobra – Naja**



**Distinctive Features:** Medium-sized to large; smooth, shiny scales; wide head and neck; wide black band on underside of neck; distinctive hood marking on top of neck.

**Description:** The Spectacled Cobra is a smooth-scaled snake with black eyes, wide neck and head and medium body. Colouring varies from black or dark brown to yellowish white. The underside is usually white or yellowish with a wide dark neck band. The body is generally covered with a speckled white or yellow pattern, sometimes forming ragged bands. The famous hood marking of the classic design, shows a connected pair of rings. Occasionally, it may not even resemble spectacles, or may be altogether absent. The cobras of northwest India are blackish and have a barely distinguishable hood marking. Cobras are often confused with the Indian rat snakes, which have a much thinner neck and head, and become 3 metres long, a metre more than do the biggest Indian cobras.

The Spectacled Cobra is the most widely distributed of the generally accepted 3 sub-species of cobras in Indian and is one of the big four dangerous snakes, 6 species of cobras occur in Asia and 9 in Africa. The jet black cobras occur in Asia and 9 in Africa. The jet black cobra of northwest India and Pakistan is another sub-species or geographic race. Except for its colour and absence of hood marking, it is very similar to the spectacled Cobra.

**Distribution:** Throughout India, sea level upto 4000 m (in the Himalayas)

## King Cobra - *Ophiophagus Hannah*

**Distinctive Features:** Large; smooth, shiny scales; distinct light cross bands mainly on the forebody; large head scales edges with black.

**Description:** The large head of the giant King Cobra is little wider than the neck. The head scales are edged with black and the overall colour varies from yellowish to deep olive-green but the tail is often jet-black. The underside is a lighter shade of the body colour. The yellow bands on the snake's back are more obvious in the light coloured specimens from Orissa and Uttar Pradesh. King Cobras are the largest venomous snakes in the world.

**Distribution:** Rare in India, King Cobras are confined mostly to the dense forests of the Western Ghats and the northern hill forests. Nilgiris, Plains and Western Ghats upto Goa, the Himalayan foot hills (upto 2000 m) starting near Lahore in Pakistan through North Indian to Assam. Forests of Orissa, Bihar, [West Bengal](#) and the Andamans.



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## Slender Coral Snake - *Callophis melanurus*

**Distinctive Features:** small, slender; smooth, shiny scales; blunt, black head; tail black, scarlet and blue.

**Description:** The Slender Coral Snake is light brown and finely speckled. The head and neck are black with two conspicuous yellow spots on the top of the head. There is a ragged black ring at the tail-base and at the tail-tip. The underside is uniform pinkish-red (coral), bright scarlet at vent, and the underside of the tail is bluish. The head is blunt and has the same width as the neck; the scales are smooth and slightly glossy. Slender Coral Snakes are one of the 5 Indian coral snakes. The other 4 are hill forest species of the Western Ghats and eastern Himalayas.

**Distribution:** Reported from the most parts of India on the plains, except central and northwestern India. MacClelland's Coral Snake is found up to 4000 m in the Himalayas.

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**A Cobra**

## **Snakes And More Snakes**

**By James E. McEldowney**

Have you ever seen a snake? There are good snakes and bad ones. Snakes do not have legs but they can slide across the grass very fast. They are different than other creatures. Would you like to hear some of my snake stories?

The earliest snake I can remember was called a garter snake. It doesn't hurt people and may help them because it catches rats and mice and other pests. I found this snake in my yard when I was nine years old. Somehow I caught it and carried it to school. You should have heard the girls yell and run when I chased them with it.

Not long after that I went with my father out to the high hills along the Missouri River. The hills were called bluffs. We climbed almost to the top of the bluffs to a place called Rattle Snake Den. Rattle Snakes are bad snakes. A person can even die from a snake bite. My father said he did not think there were any snakes there so we walked right through the den and came out on top of the hill. He was right. We didn't see any snakes.

When I was 12 I worked on a farm and one of the things I did was to drive horses that pulled what they called a mower. It cut the grass to make hay which was fed to cattle and other animals. A man was also mowing, just ahead of me. All of a sudden my mower stopped mowing. I got off the mower to see what was wrong. There where the cutter cut grass was a large snake. It must have been hiding in the grass and as I came along it must have lifted up its head and wham! the mower cut it on the neck. It was a very big snake, so big that the cutter couldn't cut through the neck and it got stuck in the mower. That was what stopped my mower.

The snake was a long one, about nine feet long. It was what they called a bull snake. It was a good snake and I was sorry it got caught in my mower. It lived in the field and caught animals that dig holes and mess up the field. My horses knew something was wrong so they did not want to stand still. What could I do?

The other man and I were going in a circle, cutting the grass. I decided to wait until he came up behind me with his mower. I held the horses while he pulled the snake away from the cutter. It had been hurt so badly it surely must have died later.

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After I grew up and went as a missionary to India I heard many snake stories. Once night when I was in the hospital, sick with malaria, I heard someone crying. A little boy had been bitten by a snake, called a [krait](#). That is a bad snake and there is no cure for the bite of that snake. The father and mother had brought the little boy to the hospital. A doctor and a nurse were trying to keep him alive but it was no use. He had just died and the mother started to shout and cry. I had killed a krait right on my back steps some time before. That made me a bit afraid of snakes.

Sometime later, about the middle of the night, a student came to my door and woke me up. "Miss Becker wants you to come quick," he called out. I quickly slipped on some clothes and rushed across the campus to her place. She had a number of girl students living in her house. When I got there this is what she said. "I was asleep when my dog came into my room and began to bark. I told him to be quiet but he kept on barking and snarling at something. Then I pulled up my mosquito curtain and stepped out to turn on the light at the foot of my bed. When I turned around here was a large [cobra](#) with its head raised ready to strike at me and bite me. That was why the dog was making such a fuss. The dog kept barking and I rushed into the other room to a doorway. I called out to the student's dormitory and two of the students came right away. I sent one of them to call you. Will you kill the cobra for me?" The cobra is a bad snake and its bite is so full of poison it can kill a person.

I was able to find a long bamboo stick and went back into the room where the cobra was. I tried to strike it but it kept coming at me. Then the cobra tried to get away. It went into a closed-in place where Miss Becker kept her shoes. I could see it. Every time I tried to strike it it would start toward me and that was not good. Finally I said to one of the students, "Go across the street and get a gun from Mr. . . who is a famous hunter. Tell

him why we need it. Bring the gun quickly." I waited until the student brought the gun. Then he went to a place where he could look right into the closet where the snake was. The snake started after him just as he fired the gun. That killed the snake. It was a big one. It could have killed Miss Becker.

I had many experiences with cobras after that but I was very careful and never got bit. Every time any of us went out of the house at night we always carried a flashlight to light the pathway. One afternoon I worked in my office until after dark. That didn't [++**Page 76**] happen very often. I had to walk home in the dark but all the way across the campus I walked very carefully hoping and praying I would not step on a snake.

Now I live in Florida. There are good and bad snakes here, too. One day two little snakes got into one of my rooms. I saw that they were common black snakes, good ones. They were lively little things. Finally they went out through the open door. Very often I see larger ones of the same kind crossing my yard. I am not afraid of them. They catch rats and mice and keep them away from my home. You will want to learn how to tell good snakes from bad ones. When you do you will enjoy watching good snakes. If you see a bad snake you should get someone to kill it, like I did. Even now when I go out at night I remember how in India I needed a flashlight. Snakes are fascinating creatures. As soon as you can read, read all about them, then go where they keep snakes and see some for yourself. [by **James E. McEldowney**, Spring 1997]