

Southern Stiletto Snake

Atractaspis bibronii

OTHER NAMES

Bibron's Stiletto Snake (E)
Southern or Bibron's Burrowing Asp (E)
Side-stabbing Snake (E)
Previously known as Mole Viper
or Burrowing Adder (E)
Suidelike sypikslang (A)

Length: Adults average 30–40 cm but may grow to 70 cm.

Scale count: Midbody scales are in 21–23 rows (rarely 19 or 25), with 196–260 ventrals and 18–28 single subcaudals. The anal shield is entire. There are 5 upper labials with the 3rd and 4th (sometimes only the 4th) entering the eye, and 5 or 6 lower labials, as well as 1 preocular and 1 postocular (sometimes 2). Temporals are 1 + 2 or 2 + 2.

Colour: Above, uniform purple-brown to black, except before sloughing, when it may have a bluish appearance. Below, creamy white or dark brown to black, with or without dusky or light mottling.

Preferred habitat: Found in a wide variety of habitats including fynbos, the Namib Desert, karoo scrub, grassland, arid savanna, moist savanna and lowland forest. A burrowing species usually found in deserted termite mounds, under rotting logs or beneath sun-warmed rocks.

Habits: Previously called the Mole Viper or Burrowing Adder, this nocturnal snake usually emerges on warm, wet summer evenings, especially after heavy rains. Individuals are often exposed during excavations. An irascible snake that bites readily. The fangs are positioned horizontally, facing towards the back of the upper jaw, and are not movable as are adder fangs. This makes it impossible for this snake to be held in the usual way. If gripped behind the head, it merely twists its head sideways to pierce a finger. It may also press the sharp tip of its tail against a person holding it, creating the impression that it is biting. To inject venom into its prey, it protrudes a fang, then moves its head over its prey while stabbing downwards.

Similar species: Often confused with a variety of other inconspicuous species including the purple-glossed snakes (*Amblyodipsas* spp.), the Natal Black Snake (*Macrelaps microlepidotus*) and the harmless wolf snakes (*Lycophidion* spp.).

Enemies: Other snakes.

Food and feeding: Preys upon a variety of burrowing reptiles, frogs and small rodents, most of which are taken while in their burrows.

Reproduction: Oviparous, laying 3–7 eggs (27–36 x 10–12 mm) in midsummer. The young measure 15 cm.

Danger to man: No fatalities have been recorded. However, this snake delivers an extremely painful

bite and envenomation has led to the loss of fingers. Most victims are snake handlers. Bites are quite common in KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga Province. People often incorrectly assume that because a snake is small and somewhat drab in colour, it is harmless. Be very careful.

Venom: Bite victims experience intense local pain, swelling and often necrosis. In the early stages mild neurotoxic symptoms such as nausea and a dry throat may be present. Antivenom is not effective against the venom of this snake and should therefore not be administered.

First-aid procedure: If you are certain that a Southern Stiletto Snake was responsible for the bite, get the victim to a doctor or hospital where the bite must be treated symptomatically. Administer painkillers. Otherwise see first-aid treatment on page 42. This snake cannot be held safely and you will, in all likelihood, get bitten if you attempt to hold one.

Information courtesy of *A Complete Guide to the Snakes of Southern Africa*, written by Johan Marais and published by Random House Struik. For more information visit www.reptileventures.com

