

Vine Snake

Thelotornis capensis

OTHER NAMES

Twig Snake (E)

Bird Snake (E)

Savannevoëlslang (A)

Ukhokhothi (Z)

Length: Adults average 80 cm to 1,2 m and reach a maximum length of 1,47 m.

Scale count: Midbody scales are in 19 rows (rarely 17), with 144–162 ventrals and 127–155 paired subcaudals. The anal shield is divided. There are 8 (sometimes 7 or 9) upper labials, the 4th and 5th (rarely the 3rd and 4th, 5th and 6th or 3rd, 4th and 5th) entering the eye (variable), and 9 or 13 lower labials. There is 1 preocular and 3 (rarely 2 or 4) postoculars.

Temporals are 1 + 2 (very rarely 1 + 1 or 1 + 3).

Colour: These snakes are cryptically coloured and, when motionless in a tree, they resemble branches or twigs. Above, ash grey or grey-brown with darker and lighter blotches and flecks of black, orange and/or pink. On the sides of the neck there are usually 1 or 2 dark blotches. The head above is pale blue-green, heavily speckled with dark brown, black and sometimes pink. A wide pinkish white black-speckled band runs along the upper lip from the snout to the back of the head, passing across the lower half of the eye. A dark, oblique band radiates from each eye to the upper lip. Both chin and throat are white, speckled with black. Below, pinkish white to light grey, speckled and streaked with brownish black. The tongue is bright yellow to orange-red and black-tipped.

Preferred habitat: Trees and shrubs in lowland forest to moist savanna and arid savanna.

Habits: A slender, mostly tree-living snake that prefers low shrubs, bushes and trees where its cryptic coloration blends so well with the background that it is seldom seen.

It moves gracefully and swiftly when disturbed. It may remain in the same position for several days if not disturbed. Though timid and retiring, it will inflate its neck to display the bright skin between the scales when threatened. Lunging strikes usually follow this, while the bright tongue flickers in a wavy motion. It actively hunts for food during the day, first approaching its prey in short spurts, then darting forward to seize it. The prey is held firmly in the jaws while the venom takes effect. Terrestrial prey is hunted from low shrubs.

Males engage in combat, intertwining their bodies while attempting to push one another's heads down. Snakes of this genus are sexually dimorphic in that the males have much longer tails than the females and the latter are more heavy-bodied than males.

The common name 'Bird Snake' appears to be inappropriate, as birds do not make up the bulk of this snake's diet, probably because they are not easy to capture. Previous reports of this snake using its brightly coloured tongue to lure birds closer seem unlikely to be true.

Similar species: Some of the whip, grass or sand snakes (*Psammophis* spp.). Vine Snakes, however, are usually found in shrubs and trees and have unique cryptic coloration.

Enemies: Birds of prey and other snakes. **Food and feeding:** Lizards, including chameleons (*Chamaeleo* and *Bradypodion* spp.), and frogs. Snakes and birds are also taken on occasion. This snake usually strikes from above and often swallows its prey with the anterior part of its body hanging downwards.

Reproduction: Oviparous, laying 4–18 eggs (25–41 x 12–17 mm) in summer. The young measure 22–37 cm. Females may produce more than 1 clutch of eggs in a season.

Danger to man: Like the Boomslang, the Vine Snake is very shy and the chance of being bitten by it is remote.

Subspecies: There are 2 subspecies.

The Southern Vine Snake (*Thelotornis capensis capensis*), discussed above, is the smaller, reaching a maximum length of less than 1,5 m. It occurs in the southern parts of the range, usually has fewer than 160 ventrals and has speckling on the head.

Oates' Vine or Twig Snake (*Thelotornis capensis oatesii*) is the larger subspecies, reaching nearly 1,7 m and usually has more than 160 ventrals. The top of its head is blue-green and generally lacks speckling, except for a dark Y-shaped marking. It occurs in northern Namibia, northern Botswana, Zimbabwe, western Mozambique and elsewhere.

Venom: Dangerously haemotoxic and very similar in effect to the venom of the Boomslang (*Dispholidus typus*). Bites are rare, which is fortunate because at present there is no antivenom (the monovalent Boomslang antivenom does not neutralize the venom of this snake). Victims must be hospitalized as soon as possible. Human fatalities are rare.

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

