The cobras of Africa and Asia are among the most famous, and most intimidating, snakes in the world.

Cobras have thin bodies and short, wide heads. When a cobra hunts or senses danger, it raises its head and part of its body. It then spreads the flaps of skin on its neck (called the hood) and hisses. From this position it can either defend itself or capture prey by striking and injecting venom.

Cobras can rise up in a standing position as much as one third of their body length. This means a six foot cobra can rise two feet. This also means that a large 18-foot king cobra (the longest venomous snake in the world) could look a six-foot tall animal or person in the eye!

Being able to rise up like this not only makes cobras scary, it also helps them search for food. Cobras are good hunters. Like all snakes the cobra “smells” with its forked tongue. First it flicks the tongue out to capture odor particles. Then it pulls the tongue in, carrying the odor particles with it to a special sense organ called the Jacobson’s organ.

Cobras hunt rodents such as rats, mice and squirrels and also lizards, frogs, fish, birds, and even other snakes. They will also feed on other animals’ eggs.

A cobra will only attack a person if it feels threatened. Their venom is dangerous, and can be fatal if not treated. Usually, however, cobras try to hide from people.

Cobra venom is powerful, but there are some snake venoms even more potent. However, cobras can inject a very large amount of poison into its prey, even enough to kill an elephant!
Cobras do have predators. People are one. Another is a weasel-like carnivore called the mongoose. Birds of prey such as hawks and secretary birds are also predators.

King cobras are the only snakes that make an actual nest of leaves and twigs. Mothers lay 20 to 40 eggs once a year. The mother stays with the eggs until they hatch. The hatchlings are ready to be on their own from the beginning. They can even strike with their fangs on the day they hatch.

There are many kinds of cobras beside the king cobra. In fact, there are over 2700 cobra species in all. One particularly dangerous species is the spitting cobra. Not only does it have a venomous bite, but it can also spray venom – at its prey's eyes! If not washed out the venom can cause blindness.

About the Author

Guy Belleranti works as a docent at Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes from his experiences working with wild animals and teaching others.
Cobras
By Guy Belleranti

1. Which statement about cobras is true?
   a. Cobras mostly live in cold climates.
   b. Cobras usually live in swamps.
   c. Cobras usually hide from people.
   d. Cobras mostly eat elephants.

2. List five animals mentioned in the article that are hunted by cobras.

___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________

3. List three animals mentioned in the article that are a cobra's predators.

___________________________________________________________________________________________

4. How are cobras and birds alike?
   a. They are both herbivores.
   b. They both use venom to protect themselves.
   c. They are both types of reptiles.
   d. They both protect their eggs.

5. ~PREVIEW~

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6. ~PREVIEW~

The scrambled words below are vocabulary words from the article. Unscramble each word and write it on the line. Please be sure each word is spelled correctly.

1. ________________ i h s s s e
   hint: makes a sound like the letter S

2. ________________ g i n t d a m i t i i n
   hint: frightening

3. ________________

4. ________________

5. ________________ o o n g m o s e
   hint: weasel-like mammal

6. ________________ s f g a n
   hint: sharp, pointed teeth

7. ________________ n e d n b s s l i
   hint: state of not being able to see
1. Which statement about cobras is true?  
   a. Cobras mostly live in cold climates.  
   b. Cobras usually live in swamps.  
   c. Cobras usually hide from people.  
   d. Cobras mostly eat elephants.

2. List five animals mentioned in the article that are hunted by cobras.
   Lizards, frogs, fishs, birds, and other snakes.

3. List three animals mentioned in the article that are a cobra's predators.
   Mongooses, hawks, and secretary birds (also accept: humans).

4. How are cobras and birds alike?  
   a. They are both herbivores.  
   b. They both use venom to protect themselves.  
   c. They are both types of reptiles.  
   d. They both protect their eggs.

5. What does a Jacobson's organ do?  
   a. It helps a snake smell.  
   b. It helps a snake see.  
   c. It helps a snake move faster.  
   d. It helps a snake grow new skin.

6. On which two continents would you most likely find wild cobras?  
   Africa and Asia.
ANSWER KEY

Cobras
By Guy Belleranti

The scrambled words below are vocabulary words from the article. Unscramble each word and write it on the line. Please be sure each word is spelled correctly.

1. **hisses**
   - i h s s e
   - hint: makes a sound like the letter S