

Sea Snakes and



Sea snakes and turtles are actually native animals in New Zealand, writes TONY WHITAKER.

Aptly named, the yellow-bellied sea snake is easily distinguished from other marine snakes by its black on yellow colouration, flattened head, and large mouth.

TONY WHITAKER

Above: Banded sea snake.

Every year a surprising number of sea snakes and marine turtles — many more than most people realise — turn up on New Zealand's shores. Far from being waifs and strays, their frequency and occurrence show they are a regular part of the New Zealand fauna.

Worldwide there are around 70 species of sea snakes and seven species of marine turtles. Although these are all primarily tropical and subtropical animals, two of the snakes and five of the turtles have distributions extending to New Zealand, where — as native animals — they are fully protected under the Wildlife Act.

The two most frequently occurring species here are truly ocean dwellers — the leathery turtle and yellow-bellied sea snake.

The leathery turtle, a veritable behemoth that can reach 2.8 metres in length and weigh up to 900 kilograms, occurs in all the world's oceans and is the most widely distributed marine reptile. These ancient creatures, unchanged for 100 million years,



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are unique in lacking the bony plates of other turtles and in having a blood supply that keeps them several degrees warmer than the water. The warm blood allows them to forage to much higher latitudes than other turtles and to dive to over 1000 metres in search of their prey of squid, salps and jellyfish. Leathery turtle records occur all around New Zealand.

In decreasing order of frequency the other

turtles seen in New Zealand are the green, loggerhead, hawksbill and olive ridley — all bony-shelled species that reach around 0.8-1 metres in length when fully grown. They can be distinguished from each other on the number, shape and arrangement of the scutes — armour plates which make up the 'shell'.

These are coastal-water species of the tropics and subtropics, and most of the