

This report was requested by Terry Hales, CALM's Volunteer Coordinator, in correspondence to me dated 23 June 1995, for the SGIC in relation to insurance for CALM registered Snakebusters carrying out their voluntary duties removing snakes. Terry has advised me on 26 November 1997 that registered personnel are insured with the SGIC.

*Although most reptiles are removed under **Open Season (Government Gazette No. 41 of 22 June 1984)** and therefore licensing is not a requirement, the benefit of being licensed and registered with CALM is the peace of mind of being insured. The downside is, once licensed, you are exposed to prosecution when a clerical error on your part is deemed non-compliance with the conditions attached to the above licences. This could make life difficult for the most honest person. The Western Australian Wildlife Conservation Act, 1950-1979 is a criminal act so a minor clerical error can result in a criminal record. Further compounding the negatives associated with the criminal record, any wildlife licences issued can be rescinded and, at the end of the day, it is doubtful that future applications for licences would be successful.*

*Regarding non-compliance offences and wildlife crime - I recently completed reading a report by Don McDowell entitled, Wildlife Crime Policy and the Law. An Australian Study (1997. Aus. Gov. Publ. Ser.). Although the author attempts to portray wildlife crime in Australia as a problem, all he succeeds in doing is convey to the reader that the reverse is the reality. He also states that by far **the most common recorded wildlife 'crime' in this country is of the minor, non-criminal, non-compliance type.***

It is interesting to compare the number of Australian animals saved from illegal export with the number that are killed on the road, or taken by the feral cat. In the twelve year period between 24 July 1984 and 10 July 1996 successful prosecutions involved (Australian) 670 reptiles, 226 birds, 187 birds' eggs and one mammal totaling 1084 individuals or about 90 saved each year. When compared with a conservative five million [reptiles and frogs] estimated by Cogger and Ehmann (1985) to die on the roads, or 2 billion [includes invertebrates] killed by feral cats (Mirtschin, 1994). "Why bother with all the regulation?" I hear you ask, "No answer" I reply. Money used detecting, apprehending and prosecuting these types of offences would be far more beneficially spent installing drift walls and culverts along roads, or to employ people to shoot cats. Surely we need to reduce domestic wildlife regulation, especially if we are fair dinkum about conservation.

With regards to snakebusters being 'registered' this refers to Regulation 4 & 15 licence holders who have completed the appropriate notification - to do this contact Terry Hales on 93340251 to obtain the relevant form.

SNAKE REMOVAL FROM PRIVATE PROPERTY IN THE PERTH METROPOLITAN AREA

Prepared by BRIAN BUSH, 9 Birch Place, Stoneville WA 6081, for the Department of Conservation and Land Management in June 1995.

INTRODUCTION

Snakes are an integral part of the Australian bush with 110 species being known from Western Australia. Twenty four occur in the Perth Metro. area, of which 19 are technically venomous, 9 dangerously so to humans. Four of these are sea snakes and are of little concern here as they are unlikely to be found in a

backyard situation. Only two of the five large venomous land snakes found locally are common, ie Dugite (*Pseudonaja affinis*) and Tiger Snake (*Notechis scutatus*).

The highest incidence of snakebite in humans is a result of the victim treading on a snake. The second highest

incidence is during attempts to kill snakes (see Figure 1).

The Dugite is an especially mobile snake that will forage widely into backyards and buildings in search of mice. The potential for snakebite is far greater in the backyard. A feeling of security and a reduced awareness of snakes in this

environment increases the chance of treading on one that maybe there. Also, if a snake is seen the resident often feels obliged to kill it. The snake removal service, *Snake Busters*, provides volunteers licensed by CALM to remove pest snakes. These volunteers are generally proficient in the safe handling of venomous snakes. They require an endorsement from a person recognised by CALM as a specialised live snake catcher prior to being issued with a Regulation 4 licence for this purpose.

The service was set up primarily to reduce the likelihood of accidental snakebite, but also provides 'pest' snakes for research, education, etc. This reduces the pressure on wild populations occupying natural areas by alleviating the need to remove individuals from these.

REGISTERED VOLUNTEERS

See above and list provided by CALM.

FREQUENCY OF ASSISTANCE

Each volunteer may receive in excess of 50 calls yearly to remove snakes from private or public property. In approximately 40% of these cases the snake has vanished prior to the snake-catcher arriving. Between 15 and 30 snakes may be bagged by a single volunteer each year. Figure 2 shows the monthly frequency based on a single volunteer's records for the past 5 years.

HISTORY OF ASSISTANCE and ACCIDENTS

History:

Snake Busters was set up in 1987 to provide a volunteer service to the public, and also allow for an increased opportunity to impart positive educational information to those needing the service. Duty CALM personnel, Police Communications, the Poisons Information Service, local shires and their rangers are all provided with a *Snake Busters* list. This allows a member of the public to access a telephone number of a snake-catcher when required.

Snake-catching is a specialised activity with few people being psychologically suited. Snakes are very aware of their surroundings and have an uncanny ability to detect nervousness in an individual person. This manifests itself in the snake with a rapid and pronounced behavioural change to defensive readiness. A common comment after a 'pest' snake has been bagged is "I could have done that myself. It looked so easy." It is far better for someone proficient in snake-handling to undertake this chore than someone with a dislike or fear of snakes!

Accidents:

In my position as coordinator of *Snake Busters* and president of the Western Australian Society of Amateur Herpetologists (WASAH) I am unaware of any serious accidents¹ involving registered snake-catchers responding to snake-removal calls in the past 5 years. The most serious accidents to date

¹ Oct '95 Dongara District High School - catcher hospitalised in CGH

involve occasional scratches experienced scrambling beneath bushes.

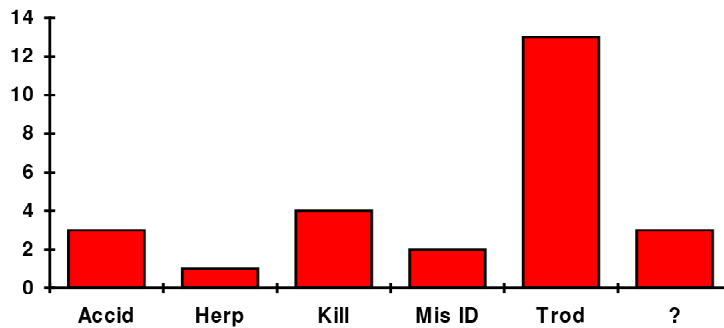
SUPERVISION BY CALM OFFICERS

As a government wildlife authority's resources are limited, it is not feasible to have officers situated in various suburbs waiting by the telephone day and night to respond to snake-removal calls. On occasions wildlife officers have accompanied and assisted snake-catchers. On other occasions a snake-catcher and a wildlife officer have responded to the same call. There have also been occasions where a wildlife officer has had to bag a 'pest' snake because no one else is available, although these occasions are not common. The ability to catch snakes appears to be a natural attribute rather than something that can be taught. Many wildlife officers would prefer not to have to catch snakes.

The Western Australian Society of Amateur Herpetologists, formally recognised by CALM, have at times carried out training on the safe catching of large venomous snakes. However, as mentioned above, not everyone is suited to this.

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CAUSES OF SNAKEBITE
(resulting in death 1980-1995)



Explanation of Causes:

Accid - unavoidable without exceptional awareness.

Herp - herpetologist bitten while handling snake.

Kill - bitten while killing snake.

Mis ID - bitten while handling venomous snake believing it to be harmless.

Trod - bitten after treading on snake.

? - insufficient data to determine cause.

Figure 1. Graph showing the relative frequency of causes of snakebite in Australia resulting in the deaths of 26 people over a 16 year period (from Bush, BG, 1995. Australia's venomous snakes: the modern myth. *Monitor* 7 [1]: 12-18).

MONTHLY FREQUENCY OF SNAKE REMOVALS

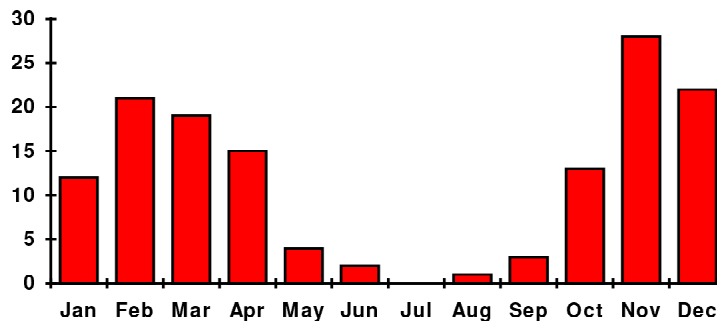


Figure 2. Graph showing monthly frequencies of venomous snake-removal compiled over a five year period for one snake-catcher in the Perth area. A total of 142 snakes were removed involving 119 Dugites, 13 Tiger Snakes, 2 Death Adders, 2 Gwardars, 2 Black-naped snakes, 2 Gould's Hooded Snakes and 2 Half-girdled snakes.

REFERENCES

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