

INTERVIEW with a LEGEND



Brian Bush and Shingleback Lizard. The lizard is on the right. All photographs supplied by Brian Bush.

BRIAN Bush

In roughly six decades of involvement with herpetology, Brian 'Bushy' Bush has done it all. He has tirelessly trained and educated on the safe handling of reptiles, assisted research institutions, authored numerous publications, discovered new species, and even appeared with Sir David Attenborough in a television documentary. In this special interview for Scales & Tails, old mate Neville Burns asks some pertinent questions of the man who now describes his appearance as, 'similar to beef jerky or road kill'!

How old were you when you started with herps?

Where has the time gone? I was born in Sydney (Brighton Le Sands) on 16 June 1947 and grew up in the suburbs of Lugarno, Peakhurst and Penshurst, within walking and bike riding distance of the bush. I was the second eldest of seven kids, but the only one with a leaning towards herpetology. Menai was one of my main stomping grounds as a youngster and, much to Mum and Dad's disgust, I was always dragging reptiles home by the tail. I was doing reptile presentations with live examples in front of the class at Peakhurst Primary School in the mid-fifties and selling Copper-tailed Skinks to my classmates for two shillings each.

I took my first bite when I was ten years old – turning over a rock, I uncovered an aggregation of three Yellow-faced Whip Snakes that I was not going to allow escape. I grabbed the lot and believe all three in turn grabbed me! With extremely stiff and swollen hands, I arrived home and had great difficulty convincing Mum that I was not going to die. You see, I knew from my favourite book, a 1956 second edition copy of the well-illustrated *The Snakes of Australia* by J.R. Kinghorn, that a bite from the Yellow-faced Whip Snake causes no more harm than the sting of a bee.

As I go through that book today, I find an old 1962 newspaper clipping showing Sir Edward Hallstrom taking delivery of a Crocodile Monitor (*Varanus salvadorii*) for Taronga Park Zoo that was collected on the River Fly in New Guinea. This is arguably the biggest lizard currently

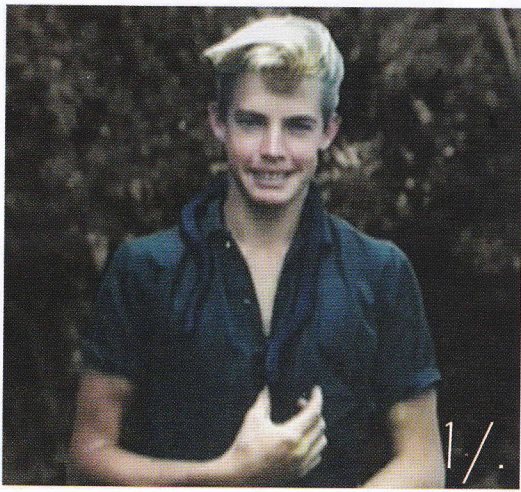
in existence, with claims it can attain 4.75 metres in length.

How did your interest in herpetology first start - is it just part of your DNA?

I describe my herpetological interest as genetic. Many of my contemporary family had an interest in natural history, although most were into parrots. My paternal grandfather was one of a few licensed bird trappers and exporters, while an uncle was employed by Sir Edward Hallstrom to travel the world seeking and transporting animals back to Australia. Dad definitely contributed to my interest too. He was a stonemason and regularly cut his own sandstone near Sydney – everything was far less regulated those days. On his excursions into the bush, he would often find reptiles, particularly geckos and dragons, and bring them home to show me. I started accompanying him on those trips when I was just out of nappies.

Jokingly, I tell school kids that I hatched out of an egg, crawled out from under a rock, was hit by a bolt of lightning and morphed into a human to spread the word about herps. One look at my weather-beaten, wrinkled, scaly skin and it definitely appears feasible – these days I look more reptilian than human! My nickname amongst my mates in WA is 'Old Man Perentie'.

I also fell out of the back of Dad's utility as a four-year-old and landed on my head – the family reckon I have never been the same since!



1/. Brian Bush at 14 years of age.
 2/. Brian Bush and Brad Maryan.
 3/. Doing what Brian does best - relaxing in the Pilbara. 4/. Sir Edward Hallstrom and a Crocodile Monitor, circa 1962.

Were there other herpers you mixed with in those early days or older guys who inspired you?

I had a few mates with similar interests - Bob Mercier, Paul and Rod Scott, Julian White, Neville Burns, Richard Bradbury and Chris Peck, to name some I can recall. I am sure the list is longer, but I cannot quite pull their names out of the cobweb-ridden closet at the back of my mind. I met several more like-minded youngsters once I started to attend the Australian Herpetological Society's monthly meetings. I also met Robert Mackay, Bill Irvine, David McPhee, Graeme Gow, Harold Cogger and many other herpetologists at these meetings.

The blokes that inspired me and that I worshipped were the late Eric Worrell and George Cann senior. The Gosford Reptile Park and La Perouse were both visited as regularly as possible. They were great locations to combine your own field herping with the possibility of seeing these great snakemen. Eric Worrell's book, *Song of the Snake*, was my next best favourite after Kinghorn's *The Snakes of Australia*.

Today, the book I promote the most during my courses/presentations is Gerard Krefft's 1869 *The Snakes of Australia*. I especially love page seven of the introduction to snakes, where he talks about the schoolboy pastime of snake hunting in Sydney. Krefft could not find a publisher back then, so self-financed 700 copies of his book, which is now extremely rare. I was fortunate to obtain a facsimile reprint produced to celebrate the 1994 Herpetological Congress in Adelaide.

Krefft lists about 78 snake species in Australia back then, but today over 202 are known. In 1970, we recognised a total of about 700 species of

reptiles and frogs, however today that has increased to over 950 reptiles and 250 frogs. The contributions to this knowledge by non-professional naturalists cannot be overstated.

Where did you collect and how often did you go collecting?

I collected in my childhood days around Lugarno, but mostly across the punt at Menai. Apart from a couple of farmhouses and the atomic reactor, Lucas Heights, the rest of the country over the Georges River was bush. It is a little different today with the urban sprawl overwhelming the area. My weekends and high school sports days were usually spent in the bush on my own, or sometimes with a mate or school friend. The mode of transport was the trusty pushbike.

I collected as often as possible. Even when the family went mushrooming out Campbelltown way, I would be looking for reptiles while they were gathering the mushrooms - I didn't eat them as a young bloke, but love them now straight out of the can. They are one of the staple stores I carry in the field today, along with Weetbix, sardines and beer!

Once you started driving, how far afield did you go? I seem to remember an Austin with a sunroof that you used to stick an umbrella up through.

My first vehicle was a 1948 Hillman sedan that had the sunroof. I re-sprayed it black with Mum's vacuum cleaner and it had the true orange-peel finish. That old car got me much further afield to go herping - including the western parts of New South Wales and southern Queensland. My next vehicle was a 1955 FJ Holden, but it was around this time that I got a

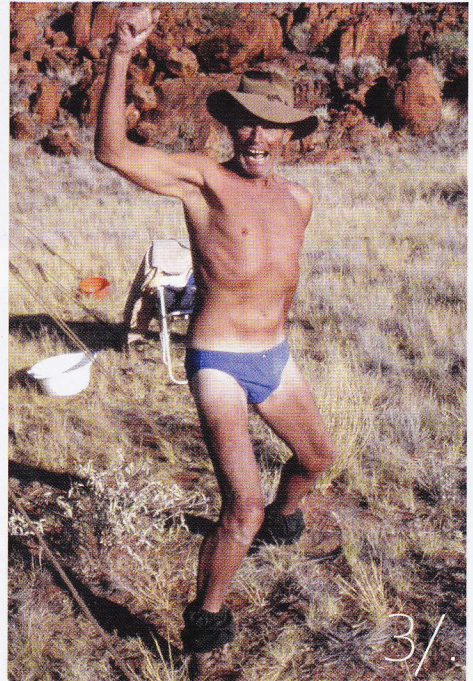
little distracted by women, which slowed down my herping as my mates and I hit the dance halls and pubs. I never gave the herping away entirely and that FJ took me to north Queensland, Victoria and South Australia. I met my wife Judy around then too, but initially we were mates amongst the mob.

National service in 1968 again brought a temporary stop to my herping and shortly after discharge, in 1970, I married Judy. She is still putting up with me today and is one tough woman! Judy was one of thirteen children and most of her family had moved to Western Australia. In late 1976, we followed so she could be close to them - in any case I needed a change from my job as an electrical fitter. We moved to a property on the Esperance Sandplain where I took up a position as windmill mechanic which I occupied for the next ten years.

What equipment did you use back then and when did you first start using hoop bags?

Until I moved to Perth to develop Snakes Harmful & Harmless (my reptile education and consultancy business) in 1987, I did my snake catching the old way - grab it by the tail and chuck it in a bag! The large venomous individuals usually required some pinning (with whatever was available) to allow the neck to be grasped so some control of the snake was ensured. Fun and fancy footwork was often the result when releasing the snake into an old pillowcase and having it immediately exit the bag. By then it was well aware of the game and doing everything in its power to avoid being bagged and, dependant on species, trying to bite at every opportunity. A bloke had to get smarter, hence in the late 1980s I developed a universal snake

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1/. *Varanus bushi*. 2/. *Western Desert Taipan (Oxyuranus temporalis)*. 3/. Brian has never really been considered 'normal' - here he is in a typical pose in the field.

catching kit and technique I use to this day. Based on Charlie Tanner's round hoop, the triangular-framed 'hoop' with black bag and manipulating hook works well. I instil into my students; if it cannot be bagged safely, it cannot be bagged at all!

The now defunct Western Australian Society of Amateur Herpetologists Inc. (WASAH) was formalised in 1990, although a few Perth herpetologists and I had set up a network of volunteers in 1987 and we called ourselves snakebusters. These people, namely Brad Maryan, Robert Browne-Cooper and David Robinson, formed the nucleus of our society. Keep in mind that at this time there was a prohibition on keeping herpetofauna in WA. It was not until after we formed a WASAH-WA Government liaison group (Simon Ball, Mike Lynch and Jamie Stuart) that we were eventually successful in getting a keeping system in place in 2003. Previously, however, people with a non-professional herpetological interest could participate in snakebusting as volunteers. Hence, I started running snake catching courses, and that side of my work snowballed; it continues to do so in conjunction with the mining and exploration boom. It has become an industry standard today, particularly in WA, with big companies and those they contract being required to have personnel on hand to manage (by relocation) reptiles that may pose a hazard in the workplace and mine villages. Training people without a pre-existing interest in snakes to catch wild blacks, browns, tigers etc, while complying with the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Act

and the requirements of Lloyds of London (my public liability insurance company) means the catching techniques employed have to be safe.

Have you suffered any serious bites and from what species?

I suppose it needs to be said that I walked a little on the wild side in my younger days and have been fortunate enough to survive - grabbing every snake I saw by the tail was reckless. At fifteen years of age, I spent a few days in a coma and a week in Kogarah Hospital after a bad reaction from a black snake bite. I spent several more days in hospital over the ensuing years after bad bites from Tiger Snakes, brown snakes and black snakes. It is a wonder that I never married a nurse; I had plenty of opportunities to chat them up, but was usually too crook! Although I took several bites due to the use of an antiquated snake catching technique, I have not been hospitalised since 1998.

One has to realise that continual exposure to snake venoms often increases one's response, with the development of an increased sensitivity being the norm, culminating in serious anaphylaxis. This has possibly resulted in two recent deaths of snake people from Eastern Small-eyed Snake (*Cryptophis nigrescens*) and Little Whip Snake (*Parasuta flagellum*) bites. Although there are many venomous snake species referred to in the literature as of little medical significance, it is best to treat all venomous animals as potentially dangerous. Considering human fatalities resulting

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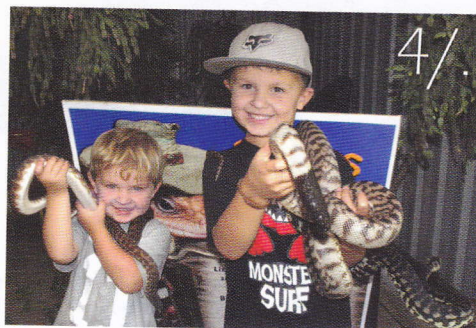
1/. Good word: Brian Bush had no hard feelings for the snake which landed him in hospital and into the care of nurse Jacquie Brooksbank and Dr Gerry MacQuillan yesterday. PICTURE: BARRY BAKER



2/



3/



4/

1/. King Brown Snake bite report in the West Australian, 11/2/97. 2/. Got you! This Tasmanian copperhead tried to escape into a dam. 3/. Brian and Judy Bush in 2012. 4/. Natural history - the kids love it!

from envenomations, it is the European honeybee, because of individual victim-sensitivity, that ranks as Australia's deadliest venomous animal.

What is your opinion of the growth in interest in herpetology amongst the public? What do you see as the positives and negatives?

I believe it is great. There are always going to be dickheads with an interest in herpetology - heaven knows, I am probably considered one of them by my competitors - but if a positive interest in natural history or native animal husbandry can be instilled in people, especially youngsters, it gives them direction and personal rewards. It adds quality to their life and is far better than sitting about getting bored, or wreaking havoc vandalising private and public property. I reckon I would have been a bum without my herpetological passion.

WASAH was initiated in WA so that the public could participate in all levels of herpetology and I believe that those with an interest should be given a go. There is far too much government bureaucracy involved today, with environment and conservation departments believing they are protecting and conserving the fauna. In fact they contribute very little, with many of their wildlife management programs wreaking more havoc on the natural processes than they are willing to admit. I describe myself as a biodiversity environmentalist - my motto is to observe, but do not disturb! The environment and existing biodiversity is not static, but an organismic soup, with extinction and speciation as closely entwined as birth and death. Anyway, who would want to be an organism that existed purely on the whim of a politician? Not me! Sustaining a species past its 'use by' date is analogous to putting a brain-dead person on a ventilator indefinitely - a waste of resources. We need to look upon the environment far more pragmatically than is happening today. We also need to limit our population, so demand on biodiverse areas is minimised.

Professional herpetologists often have a degree, however this does not preclude all of them

from stupid behaviour. All it means is they have an ability to absorb theory and are often poor at pursuits that are more practical. From experience, I know it generally pays to play things close to the chest until adequate information is available before speaking out. A couple of recent comments by academics that jumped the gun regarding the Western Desert Taipan (*Oxyuranus temporalis*) need to be mentioned. When Brad Maryan discovered this taxon after it had been incorrectly identified as a brown snake amongst a series of reptiles collected on an expedition manned by WA and South Australian Museum staff, there was some negative feedback directed at him, suggesting he would not have a clue about reptile identification (Brad has no formal qualifications, but he re-catalogued the reptile collection at the WA Museum and is probably the foremost practical herpetologist in Australia - he had good teachers such as the late Dr Glen Storr and Dr Ken Aplin). The other related comment to come out of eastern Australia after the snake's description was published in 2007 was that it was a 'temporary taipan' inferring that its recognition was flawed. Well, if you are fortunate enough to see this beast, you will quickly appreciate that it is difficult to understand why its significance wasn't appreciated when first collected in 2006.

I know you have done many strange things, but tell us about sumo wrestling in Japan.

Thanks, Nev, for getting me off my political soapbox. Back in 2003, I was involved in a National Geographic Television (NGTV) series called Snake Wrangler. One episode was on the Japanese Habu (*Trimeresurus flavoviridis*). This snake and the Brown Tree Snake (*Boiga irregularis*), which was inadvertently introduced to Guam from Australia during the Second World War, are the most persecuted snakes on the planet. Attempts to control the Habu have seen the introduction of the mongoose to southern islands such as Amamioshima, but some boffin failed to do the research; the mongoose is diurnal and the snake is nocturnal. Now the mongoose is devastating non-

target endemic mammals and reptiles. Although fatalities from Habu bites are uncommon (an antivenom was first produced in 1905) the venom of this snake causes such severe necrosis that it can cripple victims. Because of this, much of the medical research being conducted when I was over there was directed at producing antivenom that would neutralise the venom's necrotic effect.

To add a Japanese flavour, the producer had arranged to take the crew along to a sumo wrestling competition to obtain some footage. Unbeknown to me, he had set it up so that I was to participate in a couple of events. I might add, there is nothing about me that resembles a sumo wrestler. In fact, because of my extremely slender morphology, there are those that reckon I need worming. Add to this the fact that I had no idea what I was doing and it is easy to understand why I took such a flogging. I had left my undies on and I looked like I was wearing a nappy, but this was of benefit in the end because I am sure I experienced a little leakage. Afterwards, the wrestlers told me that the anchor-rope-like thing they wear is never washed, so there would have also been a benefit to those donning it after me too!

Can you tell us about some of the publications and television productions you have been involved with?

I consider myself fortunate to have the opportunity to contribute to our knowledge of Australian herpetofauna. Writing books and sharing information helps to remove the fear some people experience of this group, but it also whets the appetite of those that may have been insulated from reptiles and frogs to seek more information, leading them into the rewarding world of herpetology. Rather than list all the articles I have been involved in, I have just included the books here. Some are probably out of print today.

Reptiles of the Kalgoorlie/Esperance Region (1981). Self-published, but more recently produced by Snakes Harmful & Harmless, Stoneville, WA as a 2004 facsimile reprint.



1/. Brian with Sir David Attenborough during a break in filming. 2/. Brian Bush preparing to sumo wrestle in Japan.



- NGTV's *Snake Wrangler - Odyssey in Western Oz* about collecting venom for the Australian Venom Research Unit.
- NGTV's *Snake Wrangler - Copperhead Cannibals Down Under* on cannibalism in Tasmanian copperheads.
- NGTV's *Snake Wrangler - Honour of the Habu* about a large pit viper and the Japanese culture surrounding it.
- Yorkshire TV and Mark O'Shea's *Big Adventure - Pilbara Cobra* concerning a snake seen by locals that is described as 'cobra-like'. The producers decided not to title the documentary using the local Aboriginal name, 'One-eyed Snake', for obvious reasons.

In 2006, I got the opportunity to work Sir David Attenborough, the iconic natural historian, in what was considered to be his last work at the time – *Life in Cold Blood: Evolution of Snakes*. This series was televised here in late 2008, but I reckon he will continue to indulge his passion for producing great documentaries until he falls off the perch.

I have been extremely lucky to have been able to generate a decent income because of a life-long interest in herpetology. My reptile consultancy business has served my family and I well these past twenty-five years. The luck was being involved at the opportune time – the commencement of the mining boom.

The popularity of dancing and cooking shows in Australia suggests to me that few of us have a decent life anymore. I tell people at every opportunity to grab a camera, get out of the house and test your skills at natural history photography. If your forte is reptiles and frogs, remember – **herpetology is far more addictive than heroin, but much more positive!**

Guide to the Reptiles and Frogs of the Perth Region (1995).

Co-authored with Brad Maryan, Robert Browne-Cooper & David Robinson. Published by UWA Press, Nedlands, WA. ISBN 1 875560 42 4

Snakes and Snakelike Reptiles of the WA Pilbara & Goldfields - a guide to their identification and medical significance for industry in remote regions of Western Australia (2004). Co-authored with Brad Maryan. Published by Snakes Harmful & Harmless, Stoneville, WA. ISBN 0 646 43709 7

Snakes and Snakelike Reptiles of the WA Kimberley - a guide to their identification and medical significance for industry in remote regions of Western Australia (2005). Co-authored with Brad Maryan. Published by Snakes Harmful & Harmless, Stoneville, WA. ISBN 0 646 44936 2

Snakes and Snakelike Reptiles of Southern Western Australia - a guide to their identification and medical significance for outdoor workers (2006). Co-authored with Brad Maryan. Published by Snakes Harmful & Harmless, Stoneville, WA. ISBN 0 646 46440 X

Reptiles and Frogs in the Bush: Southwestern Australia (2007). Co-authored with Brad Maryan, Robert Browne-Cooper & David Robinson. Published by UWA Press, Nedlands, WA. ISBN 978 1

920694 74 6

Field Guide to the Reptiles and Frogs of the Perth Region (2010).


Co-authored with Brad Maryan, Robert Browne-Cooper & David Robinson. Published by WA Museum, Welshpool. ISBN 9781920843410 (pbk)



Field Guide to the Snakes of the Pilbara Western Australia (2011).

Co-authored with Brad Maryan. Published by WA Museum, Welshpool. ISBN 9781920843670 (pbk)

My exposure on television has been spasmodic, with segments on numerous shows and features such as:

- ABC's *Snakeman Goes to Snake Heaven* on the Tiger Snakes of Carnac Island, near Perth.
- BBC's *Australian Life* for European viewing showing snakes as everyday occurrences in many of our schools.
- Germany's Cable One TV also for European viewing showing snake management in domestic and workplace environments. This one was dubbed in German.
- NGTV and Brady Barr in *Outback Venom* about sampling venom for Bryan Fry and Queensland University.





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