



WESTERN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY of AMATEUR HERPETOLOGISTS (Inc)  
(Member of the Australasian Affiliation of Herpetological Societies)

# NEWSLETTER

30 September, 1997  
(12)

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## HELLO MEMBERS

A letter has recently gone off to the Honourable C. L. Edwardes, Minister for the Environment, seeking a meeting to appraise her of our negotiations with CALM regarding the implementation of a system to allow the keeping by hobbyists of reptiles and amphibians in Western Australia. A second WASAH submission suggesting how this may be put in place is just about completed and will be available at the September meeting for perusal by members.

I have included a heap of news stories from around the world in this issue of the *WASA Newsletter*. Those members interested in frogs will have something to read

too, although not specifically regarding Australian frogs.

Also the spring meeting is going to be something different. It will be a day meeting on Sunday 21 September (for details see meeting information) and will include an introduction to some of our snakes with a bit of hands on.

We must thank Bob Cooper for inviting us to have this meeting at the UWA Harry Waring Marsupial Reserve, a facility he looks after.

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## June '97 MEETING REPORT

Forty one members and guests attended the June meeting to experience Dave

Pearson's presentation on his work with pythons. From many of the slides depicting engorged carpet pythons we can safely assume that this snake has eyes far too big for its stomach - big meals being the downfall of the occasional hungry python.

Again we must thank the Perth Zoo for making a facility available to us. The only drawback in the cosy room is the interrupted vision during guestspeaker segments and the likelihood of it being too small during the warmer months when we can expect a bigger turnout at the WASAH meetings.

Anyway, at the end of the night it was another successful meeting.

**Thanks a million  
Dave!**

## IMPORTANT NOTICE!

*The views expressed by contributors to the WASAH Newsletter are not necessarily those of the Executive, the Society or its members. As editor I tend towards minimal censorship as I believe everyone's opinions should be heard, but I will exercise this if I believe an article's content reflects poorly on WASAH.*

*Brian Bush*

## HARARE SNAKE PARK TO BE RESTOCKED

The snake park in the Zimbabwean capital, Harare, is to be kept open and restocked after all the snakes were sold to another park a few kilometres away.

The sale of mambas, cobras, puff adders and pythons took place after a decision to redevelop the old snake park site. However it has been decided to keep the facility open and a restocking operation is now in progress.

Geoff Hill, a native Zimbabwean who spent 15 years in Sydney and who now lives back in Harare is catching for the park and is supplying the snakes free of charge.

The other snake park is about 23 kilometres from Harare on the Bulawayo and has a large

collection of central African herps.

Geoff is always interested in hearing from anyone keen on African Herps and can be contacted by email on:

[pamperi@baobab.cszim.co.zw](mailto:pamperi@baobab.cszim.co.zw)

or by mail at:

**African Safari Magazine  
PO Box BE 746  
Belvedere  
Harare  
Zimbabwe  
Africa**

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## STUFFING THE STUFFED or GET STUFFED!

An amateur Australian taxidermist who kept a dead koala in his freezer for two years has been fined \$925 for having a threatened species in his possession, a local newspaper reported Wednesday.

Malcolm Boyle, 31, obtained the koala, a cuddly, slow-moving teddy bear-like animal, from an animal protection officer after it had been killed in a road accident north of Sydney, The *Daily Telegraph* reported.

The newspaper said a Sydney court on Tuesday heard that Boyle had a fascination for native fauna and his hobby led him to collect "roadkills," animals accidentally killed by motorists, and stuff them.

Boyle's collection of stuffed animals included birds such as a sulphur-crested cockatoo, an eastern rosella and a galah, as well as a diamond python and a red-bellied black snake - all kept in his freezer.

In fining Boyle, the magistrate said there was no suggestion Boyle had been cruel to the animals.

The newspaper said Boyle left the court accompanied by his dog Mitch and a duck named Daisy.



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## UN-NAMED VIETNAMESE FROG

A knobby, green tree frog so rare that it lacks a name has been bred by a reptile museum in Windsor. For now, curators call the toad-like critter the Mossfrog, because it looks like a 31/2-inch tuft of moss. The shy inhabitant of little pools inside rotting stumps also changes its colours, depending on where it's standing. By day, it floats in dark spaces with only its speckled, chartreuse eyes above the waterline. By night, it feeds on insects. Robert Murphy, a curator for the Royal Ontario Museum's Centre for Biodiversity, found 17 of the frogs on an expedition to northern Vietnam in 1995. He loaned six of them last fall to his

friend Blue Enright, owner of Windsor Reptile World.

The two-week loan became several months, and “lo and behold, we had eggs and then tadpoles,” said Enright, a rough-hewn character with a snake tattoo on his arm. In late June, one or two females had laid 51 eggs on a vertical piece of slimy wood above a pool of water in the tank. Over the next 10 days, the eggs slowly slid down toward the water, hatching into tadpoles over the July 4 weekend. Enright hopes all 14 tadpoles will mature. Any surplus frogs might be sold to other museums for display. Murphy is doing DNA analysis in his Toronto lab to ensure that this is, indeed, a new species in the genus *Theioderma* - and then the name is up for grabs.

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## DEFORMED FROGS

The Associated Press  
Friday, June 20, 1997

WASHINGTON (AP) - Seen any deformed frogs lately? Government researchers want to hear about it.

Reports of deformed frogs, toads and salamanders have increased sharply since 1995, and scientists want to find out what's going on.

“We need rigorous scientific investigations as well as observations from the general public to understand the observed decline in North

American amphibian populations and the increase in reports of deformed amphibians,” said Denny Fenn, chief of the Biological Resources Division of the US Geological Survey.

Reports of frogs with misshapen limbs, missing or shrunken eyes and smaller sex organs have been received from areas including Minnesota, Wisconsin, South Dakota and Vermont and from Quebec in Canada.

Theories range from pesticides to parasites to radiation because of ozone depletion. And until the cause is understood, scientists won't know whether humans face a risk.

So the North American Reporting Center for Amphibian Malformations has been established at the survey's Northern Prairie Science Center in Jamestown, ND. It is asking the public to report sightings of deformed frogs.

The center has established a Web site to collect reports, including a form to fill out and submit.

The center is also planning to open a toll-free telephone number on July 1 to accept reports from individuals without access to computers.

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## DNR to hold state frog census

By Douglas Ilka / The Detroit News

Donning waders and heavy boots, a group of volunteers is heading into Michigan's wetlands to listen for the mating calls of toads and frogs.

The state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has set up 438 routes in 78 counties in the first statewide survey of the 13 species of toads and frogs that are native to Michigan.

Two survey groups will monitor 20 sites located near the EL Johnson Nature Center in Bloomfield Township. “We feel a responsibility to help monitor these amphibians,” said Dan Badgley, manager of the nature center.

“They are sensitive to changes in the habitat and toxic materials, and are a good indicator species. Plus, doing the survey will be fun and we are curious.”

Frogs and toads are especially vulnerable to toxins because they absorb oxygen and water through their skin, Badgley said. The survey groups will listen for the various mating calls of the amphibians and compile an index of abundance, said Lori Sargent, a DNR wildlife biologist who is coordinating the study.

“An index number of one indicates the volunteers only heard one or two calls while an index of three means they heard a whole chorus of frogs or toads,” Sargent said.

“In recent years, there has been a worldwide decline in

the toad and frog population. We don't know why and that is why we want to survey Michigan to see what is happening here. Among scientists, the gut feeling is that the decline may be caused by habitat loss or by people collecting them to use as food or pets, which are both factors in Michigan."

Sargent said she hopes to conduct the survey for the next three years and release a preliminary report each fall.

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## Educating the Youngster!

By Brian Dickerson  
Free Press Staff Writer

Even before I began smuggling frogs, crossing the Canadian border always made my heart race.

In the '60's, when my family passed through Ontario each summer on the annual pilgrimage from our home in upstate New York to my Great Aunt Mae's place in Detroit, the perfunctory interrogation at the border was fraught with suspense.

"Where were you born?" the customs inspector would ask each of us in turn. My sister and I terrorised my parents by threatening to invent a more provocative birthplace, such as Moscow or Havana. But the inspector's stern glare always sobered us, and we answered, "Rochester, New York," which was the pedestrian truth.

Nowadays my 5-year-old son looks forward to border crossings with the same exaggerated expectation of drama.

Or at least it seemed exaggerated until last week, when my childhood nightmares of detention by immigration officials came true.

With my wife scheduled to work all weekend, Zack and I had set out for my parents' home in Rochester. Idling in the customs checkpoint line at the Blue Water Bridge I realised I'd left his birth certificate at home.

It wasn't the first time I'd neglected to bring my son's identification, and I steeled myself for another lecture from the customs inspector. But this time we would not get off so easily.

My son, who relishes any encounter with uniformed authority, was at first delighted when we were ordered to park and report to the Canadian immigration office. But he turned apprehensive when the examining officer declined the family photos and medical insurance card I volunteered and turned toward Zack.

"Where are you and your dad going, Zachary?" she asked pleasantly.

"To my grandma and grandpa's," he answered brightly. "In Florida!"

"New York!" I hissed.

"Where's your mom?" the guard continued, ignoring me.

"At work," Zack replied, shooting me an anxious glance.

"Does she know you're taking a trip with your dad?"

"Yes."

"Do you live with your mom and dad?"

"Yes."

"Your mom and dad live together in the same house?"

"Uh-huh."

My irritation was ripening into indignation. But before I could protest, the guard cut the interview short, apologised for the inconvenience, and dismissed us.

On the way to the parking lot, I tried to explain to my son why we'd been detained. I want him to respect authority, and I was careful to commend the examining officer's motives even as I privately chafed over her means.

"The important thing is that you told the truth," I concluded. "The truth works every time."

Re-entering the United States near Niagara Falls proved far less eventful, as did passing back into Canada for the return trip a few days later.

It was only when I spotted the baby frogs on my son's lap that I became anxious about making the final crossing at Sarnia unmolested.

The frogs - seven in all, each the size of my thumbnail - were the most prized souvenirs of Zack's visit, captured at a duck pond near my boyhood home. I'd doubted their ability to survive the trip to Michigan and ventured that the three frogs already living under our roof were sufficient for any home. But I'd relented, persuaded in part by Zack's proven success at frog husbandry.

Now, as we approached the border, a new frog peril - US Customs - came to mind. "You might want to put the frog container under the seat when we get to the border," I said. "Otherwise the customs inspector might want to keep them."

Zack paused, torn between his desire to defend frogs and his instinctive sense that the opportunity to expose a bit of adult hypocrisy lay close at hand.

"What if they ask me if I have something to DECLARE?" he demanded.

"That's for when you buy something," I snapped.

"You have nothing to declare."

"What if they ask me if I have any amphibians under the front seat?" he parried.

"If they ask you that," I said, "you look 'em in the eyes and tell the truth."

But the inspector didn't ask - not about Zack, not about amphibians - and we didn't

tell. As we regained US soil, my son raised his fists above his head in triumph. "YES!" he exulted. I smiled and drove on uneasily, wondering exactly what he'd learned on this trip.

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## **WIDESPREAD ABNORMALITIES STUMP SCIENTISTS**

### **Pesticides, parasites among explanations**

By Scott Allen, Globe Staff

WATERBURY, Vt. - Eight tiny three-legged frogs hopped about awkwardly in a terrarium at the state lab here last week, right next to a tank of bullfrog tadpoles that have bizarre airsacs on their sides that cause them to float sideways.

Two years after reports of deformed amphibians surfaced in the Midwest, the animals are being spotted across the country, from Massachusetts to California, as researchers focus on one of the most puzzling wildlife mysteries in years. And with the first reported deformities in Massachusetts this spring - three five-legged salamanders - the concern has broadened beyond frogs.

Researchers admit that they are not much closer to explaining all the missing legs, extra eyes, and other abnormalities found in the animals than they were in 1995 when Minnesota schoolchildren found deformed frogs on a field trip. Possible causes range

from a naturally occurring parasite to pesticide run-off ultraviolet light penetrating the Earth's ozone layer.

"At this point, all the theories have equal weight," said Kathy Converse of the National Wildlife Health Center, as she loaded Vermont frogs into a cooler to be shipped to her lab in Wisconsin. "Until we have some concrete evidence, we have to assume all theories have equal merit."

To date, the North American Center for Amphibian Malformations, a federally backed group that runs a web page on the amphibian issue, has reports of deformed amphibians in 10 states and two Canadian provinces. Most of the sightings have been in Quebec, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Vermont.

In Vermont last week, teams of researchers, including Converse, found unusual numbers of deformed Northern leopard frogs in more than half a dozen marshes and meadows around the state. Fifty of the 115 young frogs found along the Poultney River in West Haven had some physical abnormality, a startling 45 percent deformity rate. Biologists consider 1 percent to be normal.

The only Massachusetts sighting occurred when two students from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, collecting specimens for an elementary school class, found three yellow-spotted salamanders with an extra hind leg.

“It was smaller than the normal leg, and yet the toes could wiggle and move and the leg itself could move,” said Scott Jackson, wildlife biologist for the Cooperative Extension Service in Amherst, who saw two of the animals.

The concern behind the intensifying frog search, including a statewide survey launched by a Vermont environmental group last week, has more to do with human health than the frogs themselves. Because frogs metamorphose from egg to adulthood outside the womb, they may be indicators of environmental contamination.

“The deformities we’re seeing may well be caused by human degradation of the environment,” said Barbara Ripley, secretary of the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources. “Unless we learn that this is a naturally occurring problem, we should be deeply concerned about the deformed frogs.”

Unfortunately, every theory that scientists have advanced to explain the deformities seems unable to explain such a variety of deformities over such a large area.

Several researchers have suggested that pesticides or other man-made chemicals could cause deformities by mimicking the frogs’ growth hormones. But abnormal frogs have been found in places with very different histories of chemical use, from farmland to protected state forests. Moreover, some

reports of deformed amphibians date back to the 1940’s, before many of the modern pesticides were heavily used.

“It’s hard to explain how one contaminant could cause all this,” said Greg Hellyer of the US Environmental Protection Agency, who helped look for frogs in Vermont last week.

The idea that the thinning ozone layer could have caused deformities is even less plausible. Theoretically, the damaged ozone layer allows more ultraviolet light to reach the Earth than in the past, which could in turn photoactivate chemicals and make them toxic. However, the actual increase in ultraviolet rays reaching the Earth is controversial, and their role in causing developmental defects is unproven.

Stanley Sessions, a biology professor at Hartwick College in New York, has emerged as the leading defender of the theory that the deformities are a natural event. But his views, too, have come under attack.

Sessions argues that a parasite called a trematode causes the extra legs, forming a cyst in the tadpoles’ leg buds that disrupts normal growth. The missing legs, he argues, were bitten off by predators.

“This whole deformed frog incident has been blown way out of proportion,” argues Sessions. “We have been primed to think in terms of environmental pollution, and so that’s the first thing we thought of in this case.”

Most researchers agree that some of the extra legs, such as those on the Massachusetts salamanders, could be caused by parasites. But they scoff at Sessions’ claim that predators are suddenly eating frog legs and not the rest of the frog. The eight deformed frogs in the terrarium at the Agency of Natural Resources, each missing part or all of a hind leg, had only been out of the water for a few days, leaving little time for predators to eat them.

“They’ve only been out for a week. They all have missing legs and they have no sign of fresh trauma,” said Richard Levey, aquatic biologist at the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources.

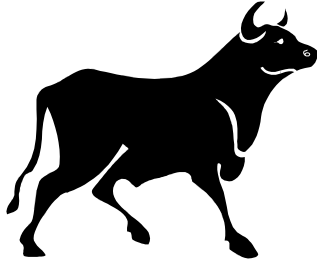
Consequently, researchers are beginning to suspect that the deformed frog phenomenon could be sort of an amphibian Gulf War Syndrome with no obvious single cause.

“We’re probably lumping a whole slew of things together under a common end point,” said EPA’s Hellyer.

But researchers’ first concern is simply determining the extent of the abnormalities. The data still consists mainly of anecdotal reports in most states. Until last week, the main information on deformities in Vermont had come from a one-day outing last October in which state officials found that 13.1% of the frogs they collected had abnormalities.

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# HERPTALES



The following short stories were provided by Rod Jacobson and are from: **Brundvand, J.H.** (1988). *The Mexican Pet - More "New" Urban Legends and Some Old Favourites.* W.W. Norton & Associates, New York. 221 pages. ISBN 0-393-30542-2

## The Can Of Snakes

A couple of men walking along a stream bank to do some fishing see a little boy sitting there with his fishing line in the water and a can of bait on the ground next to him. One of them asks the lad how the fish are biting, and he replies "Well, the fish aren't biting so well, but the worms sure are." The men chuckle about his odd answer as they continue along their way, but coming back later in the day they notice the boy slumped down in the same place he had been sitting before. He is unconscious, and they see that his hands and forearms are full of bite marks. Checking the bait can, they discover that he has been using baby copperheads for bait, thinking them to be worms. They rush him to hospital in their car but arrive there too late to save his life.

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## A Snake Story

A large bushy potted palm is delivered to a private home. The lady of the house signs for it, and the delivery man departs. As she takes it into the kitchen the woman screams when she sees a snake slither out from among the leaves. Her cry brings her husband running out of the bathroom, where he has been showering. He has only a towel draped around him.

"There! There! Under the sink!" the woman screams. Her husband drops the towel as he gets down on his hands and knees for a better view under the sink. Then the family dog - excited by all the commotion - comes into the room to investigate. Seeing its naked master in this odd position, the dog curiously puts its cold nose against the man's rear end. The man starts up abruptly, banging his head on a pipe and knocking himself out cold.

His frantic wife is unable to revive him. Thinking that he may have had a heart attack or have been bitten by the snake, she calls an ambulance. As the paramedics load the unconscious nude man with the bumped head onto the stretcher, they ask her what happened, and when she explains the whole thing they laugh so hard that one man loses hold of a corner of the stretcher. Her husband is dropped to the floor and breaks his leg.

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## The Snake-caused Accident

A woman got in her car to drive somewhere one day, and before she had gotten very far from home, felt something tickling her ankle. She looked down and saw a snake sticking out of the bottom of her pants leg.

The woman screamed, slammed on the brakes, skidded to a stop at the side of the road, and threw herself out of the car. She lay on the ground screaming in revulsion and kicking her legs about in an effort to dislodge the snake since she couldn't bring herself to touch it.

A man driving by saw her and thought "Oh, my God, that poor lady is having a seizure or something!" He stopped and ran over to her to try to find out what was wrong. Another man driving by saw the first man bending over this kicking, screaming woman and thought "Oh, no! That guy's attacking that woman!" He stopped, ran over, and punched the first man in the face. And all of that happened because of a harmless little snake.

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## IDIOT

*What about the building worker that tried to sue his boss for not warning him that snakes bite if grabbed. Fair dinkum! This occurred recently when this idiot was bitten by a snake he grabbed on a Wanneroo Building site.*

# ***GENERAL MEETING***

**27 June 1997**

## **MINUTES**

1. **Convene Meeting** - 7.35pm, previous meeting (21 Mar. '97) minutes accepted by Brad Maryan seconded by Robert Browne-Cooper.
2. **Attendance** - 27 members, 10 visitors signed but 41 present on head count.
3. **Apologies** - Nil
4. **Correspondence Tabled**
  - Sun Rover Expeditions advertising an Australian Herpetological tour of Queensland for \$1,750
  - Application for grants from the Peter Rankin Trust Fund through the Australian Museum.
5. **President's Report** - Nil
6. **Vice-President's Report**
  - Informs members of a new publication available entitled *Fauna*.
7. **Treasurer's Report - Reminds**
  - **Outstanding membership fees for 1997 is a problem. members that subscriptions should be paid at the start of the calender year not financial year.**
8. **General Business**
  - WASAH Subcommittee report by Jamie Stewart Re. licence negotiations with CALM. Jamie circulates progress report based on their previous meeting with CALM. Questions regarding the negotiations were answered by Jamie, and a suggestion was put forward that political lobbying was the most effective tactic at present for changing CALM's keeping policies.
  - Brian Bush asked for a show of hands of people present wanting to keep reptiles or frogs. Twenty hands were raised (about half those present).
  - Jamie Stewart mentioned that communications had improved since last meeting between WASAH subcommittee and CALM.
  - Brian Bush displays the WASAH Herp Keeping Kit and invites members to peruse it, comment and happy to field questions regarding it.
9. **Editor's Report**
  - Commercial printer, Snap Printing, now used to produce newsletter as personal photocopier unserviceable.
  - As usual, calls for more articles to be submitted by members other than the usual ones.
10. **Call for further business**
  - Brad Maryan asks about "hands on" activity/meeting and BB suggests late September or early October tentatively.
  - BB introduces guest speaker, Dave Pearson and his talk on pythons.
11. **Meeting Adjourned** - 8.45pm.



# Letter to the Editor

## *supporting our primary objective*

Well, it has been seven months since we've been back in the USA, and Australia, sadly, seems like a million miles away. There is scarcely any news whatsoever concerning the 'Land Downunder' on the telly - it's good that, in a sad sort of wistful way. The pain of being gone isn't felt so keenly, I suppose. But let me quit whingeing and get down to brass tacks.

It's summer now and here in southeast Alabama it is hot as an oven and very humid. **Great** for snakes, lizards, turtles, toads and frogs. I've been out in the woods a great deal, day and night, and there's no shortage of good stuff. There is a network of trails behind my father's house way out in the boondocks, and I usually head out on them after sundown in my six-wheel-drive amphibian (one bad-ass piece of equipment; something I should have had years ago). It's got great lights, and I usually encounter several eastern box turtles on each excursion. There, way out in the middle of the woods, I'll kill the engine and lights, and let the night music take over. The katydid make one hell of a racket, let me tell you! It's usually very muggy and warm; a bit like the Philippines.

I've seen more bid grey rat snakes than I have ever seen in one summer thus far (unfortunately most have been in the "flattened fauna" form), and king snakes, timber rattlers and black racers as well. There are also lots of Fowler's toads, bullfrogs, green tree frogs, barking tree frogs and bronze frogs about. They make good music together too!

One of the first things we did when we got back to Alabama was to start up the collection again. I've always been a lad for the exotics, and thus far have accumulated a beautiful little Solomon Islands boa (4 foot), a great, robust Egyptian cobra (7 foot, 2 inches) and a six-foot red-tailed boa constrictor from South America. I have captured and released too many specimens of local snakes to mention of late. I could have kept any of them - having spent a year in your country (Oz), I now do not take for granted the fact that I (and any other Alabamian) may keep whatever he or she wishes to keep as far as reptiles and amphibians (both exotic and native) go. It is indeed something akin to a tragedy that Western Australians who have a desire to keep reptiles as pets in their homes cannot do so without the requisite permits that are almost impossible to obtain. If the laws are relaxed, so many more youngsters (and people of **all** ages) would be exposed to, and thus come to appreciate, these lovable scaly and slimy beasts. The only danger I can conceive of by acquiring an appreciation for herptiles is the potential for having a prang trying to avoid killing them on the road! Seriously though, it is my fervent wish that your attempts to have those grossly restrictive and wholly unreasonable laws relaxed are triumphant.

The year Helen and I spent in Australia was the fulfilment of a lifelong dream for me and it was even better than I could ever have imagined. The birds, snakes, lizards, 'roos, sunsets, sunrises, people, beaches, trees, flowers..... I could go on all night! I miss the lads at the SAS Regiment too. A lot of potential herps there I believe. They spend so much time in the bush they come to know the fauna well - and often on an up-close-and-personal basis!

In a few weeks I am having a friend who holds doctorates in both veterinary medicine and wildlife perform venomectomy on the cobra. It is a reasonably simple procedure (he has done the same op on two cobras I previously owned successfully). The tube that carries the venom from the gland to the fang is cut and ligated - soon I will have a cuddly "lap cobra" to fill the gap on lonely evenings. The reasons for doing this, instead of taming him down like you Aussies do with your tigers, dugites, mulgas etc, is because of the difficulty, in the event of a bite, with locating adequate supplies of antivenom for this exotic. Rattlesnakes are a different story. There is plenty of antivenom around if needed, and I plan very soon to have a few "lap rattlers" around for Busho and Brad to cuddle if they ever get around to visiting here. The thought of hideously painful, necrotic ulcerations all over the body might faze that smelly pair but it doesn't worry me - well, I have a very robust constitution and back here in my backyard I must, at all costs, maintain a masculine image! Ha ha!

The Australia habit of handling "hot" snakes is great. Some of my favourite photographs of us in Oz were the ones which pictured us free-holding tiger snakes, mulgas and dugites. Bloody epic! Well, I fear I am beginning to ramble, but before I close, let me thank you all, especially Brian Bush, Colin Keast, Paul Orange, Brad Maryan, Robert Browne-Cooper and David Knowles for the warmth, humour and kindness you all showed Helen and me while we were there in your fabulous country. There is something very, very special about Australia. Don't take it for granted. Keep wriggling - WASAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

With our warmest regards,  
Rob and Helen Mount (17 July 1997)

**WASAH  
GENERAL MEETING  
Sunday 21 September  
10.00am**

**Harry Waring Marsupial Reserve**  
Entry off Russell Road, Wattleup  
*GATE ON LEFT HAND SIDE COMING FROM FREEWAY*

**SPECIAL**  
**This is a picnic meeting that should be  
finished by lunchtime. Bring your  
camera as there will be some  
hands-on herp!**

**WASAH EXECUTIVE  
COMMITTEE**

**President/Editor:** Brian Bush  
(08) 9295 3007

**Vice-President:** Brad Maryan  
(08) 9444 6412

**Secretary:** Robert Browne-Cooper  
(08) 9445 2409

**Treasurer:** Russell Brown  
(08) 9390 8091

Address all correspondence related to  
this newsletter to:

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**9 Birch Place**  
**STONEVILLE 6081**

***MONITOR***

The journal/newsletter and  
bulletin of the Victorian  
Herpetological Society. The  
VHS is the largest herp society  
in Australia and *Monitor* reflects  
that. Send \$23 for 2 issues to:  
**VHS**  
**16 Suspension Street**  
**ARDEER VIC 3022**

WASAH is an informal group of people  
with similar interests - all wishing to  
keep for private study and "love", frogs,  
turtles, lizards or snakes!

WASAH joined the Affiliation of  
Australasian Herpetological Societies in  
1994.

## **SNAKE BUSTERS LIST**



### **COTTESLOE**

Don Howe .....(H) 9384 1184

### **NEDLANDS**

.....(W) 9386 3040

..... *Mobile* (019) 114 221

### **SCARBOROUGH**

Robert Browne-Cooper ... (H) 9445 2409

### **MOUNT HAWTHORN**

Brad Maryan .....(H) 9444 6412

### **MOUNT LAWLEY**

Rico Schmidiger .....(H) 9328 1760

..... *Mobile* (014) 085 576

### **MORLEY**

Mitch Ladyman .....(H) 9379 0979

### **WILSON**

Paul Orange .....(H) 9451 6972

### **GOSNELLS**

Bruce George .....(H) 9490 2107

..... *Mobile* (019) 379 403

### **WESTFIELD/KELMSCOTT**

Russell Brown .....(H) 9390 2680

### **ARMADALE**

Klaas Gaikhorst .....(H) 9399 6927

### **WANNEROO (small snakes)**

Linda Gwinnett .....(H) 9405 2383

..... *Mobile* (019) 955 283

### **YOKINE/WANNEROO**

Tom Fronek .....(H) 9345 4387

..... *Mobile* (019) 371 281

### **LESMURDIE**

Dave Hall .....(H) 9291 5009

### **FORRESTFIELD**

David Pattison ..... 9453 9623

Natalie Kais .....(H) 9453 1221

### **MIDLAND**

Russel & Kristie Trehare .(H) 9274 3201

### **MIDVALE**

Jay Houston .....(H) 9274 4125

### **WEST SWAN**

Gayne Doyle .....9296 4597

David Thorne .....9274 2202

### **MUNDARING**

Brian Bush .....9295

3007

Ray Dixon .....9299 6615

### **SPEARWOOD**

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## Herping in Kakadu

by Brad Maryan, 169 Egina Street, Mount Hawthorn, Western Australia 6016

Recently WASAH members Glen Gaikhorst, Greg Harold and I spent February 1997 up in the top end of Northern Territory 'killing the pig' with regards to photographing reptiles and frogs. Talk about herpetological overload! You have to take plenty of film on trips like this - the camera sure gets a workout. At this time of year the wet season is pumping so expect bucket loads of rain and overcast conditions. This is probably the best time of year up there with the bush so green and full of life - the activity encountered on spotlighting forays is astounding. If you like humidity, heat and mosquitoes then I cannot recommend it enough. If you sweat as much as I do then you are in for a real treat losing several kilos.

The locals reckon the worst time of year is at the beginning of the wet when the heat is excessive. This is the 'tropo' season. If you can handle the conditions it would be good for herp activity as the first monsoonal storms would trigger off a mass of movement. In my opinion the dry season is a waste of time herp-wise. The bush is brown and mostly burnt and the reptiles are inactive (particularly the larger varieties). This is the comfortable time of year for us humans with low temperatures and humidity, and the tourists make a bee-line for this part of the world. It is only us tough and herp-crazy idiots that can endure the wet season experience. A

great bonus during the wet is that the reptiles are breeding and look terrific - plenty of condition and exhibiting their finest colours. This is very evident in the skinks and dragons.

One important thing to do when heading into an unfamiliar area is to tap into local knowledge. If you are targeting particular species to photograph you ask the local herpetologists. We contacted Grant Husband (reptile keeper at the Territory Wildlife Park) about *Varanus primordius* a small terrestrial monitor endemic to the top end. He put us on to a WW2 site just outside Darwin with derelict sheds and bunkers. There was tin and rubbish everywhere. During that morning not only did we collect four beautiful *V. primordius* but fourteen other species of reptiles, including *Ctenotus hilli*, *Lerista orientalis*, *Antaresia childreni* and *Demansia olivacea*.

On another day trip with Grant to the Adelaide River Hills area we found our first *Varanus baritji*, a recently described species that is also endemic to the top end. This area is absolutely beautiful with plenty of rocks to turn over as well as areas of rubbish. At one spot we found an undescribed species of whip snake *Demansia* sp. that is similar to the common *D. olivacea* but has a black head and brilliant bluish body. It is apparently only found in these hills and should be described

soon by taxonomist Glen Shea. There is also a great bitumen road winding its way through the hills which us herps all know is great for spotlighting. That night we bagged up death adders, king browns mobs of freshwater snakes and a freshwater crocodile which was not bagged. No one in the car was game enough to wrestle it. At a creek crossing we were fortunate enough to see several Arafura file snakes lying motionless in the shallow water and a beautiful



young Macleay's water snake. We were so intrigued by the file snakes. They are so weird. By the way, the top end king brown snakes are sensational snakes as they get huge and are nicely coloured. We did not see any big brutes this trip but they do exceed 3 metres in the tropical parts of Australia and have almost monotonal brown bodies. They are indeed Australia's largest venomous elapid

A popular spot near Darwin is a place called Fogg Dam. A very well known place now due to the ongoing field work being done there by researchers (mainly by that guru Richard Shine) on the water python. There are literally thousands of them and combining this with the density of frog, mammal and bird life there, makes Fogg Dam a magnet for naturalists. At most times of the year you can drive right across the causeway which is excellent for spotlighting. When we were there water was flooding over quite a substantial stretch of the bitumen so it was closed. This forced us to walk the road with torches. You still see plenty of stuff. Frogs are just everywhere providing a good spot to photograph them in situ. On one particular night we spotted a 3 metre saltwater crocodile on the flooded bitumen. It followed us in the water all the way back to the first information viewing bay. At this time of year with plenty of water about it is best that you remain alert for them everywhere. Even though you feel hot and sweaty don't be stupid and become a meal for a crocodile. There are still plenty of places to swim such as the Darwin swimming pool. Crocodiles only eat idiots or slow swimmers! Kakadu National Park is absolutely the ultimate. The sandstone escarpment which forms a large part of Arnhem Land is world famous and attracts huge swarms of tourists each year. During the wet season there are not as many people so us herps can have the place to ourselves - well at least it feels that way sometimes. A drawback during the wet is that most roads are impassable to 2-wheel drive vehicles (we had one). As there are so many herp endemics in

the area there is always plenty to do. Most people have probably heard of the Oenpelli Python, a large species only found in Arnhem Land. We did not find it but I reckon you have to be very lucky too come across this fine snake. Headtorching on Little Nourlangie Rock is very rewarding with plenty of frogs, cave geckos and snakes etc. I had never previously headtorched a snake until one night while there I picked up the eye shine of a brown tree snake and a olive python on the sandstone. Twice we came across two large (2.7m) olive pythons that had been hit by vehicles. It breaks your heart to see these long-lived snakes squashed that way. One of the highlights of our trip was getting two bandy bandys (*Vermicella intermedia*) while spotlighting. This 30-60cm long snake has black and white bands encircling the body and is a specialist blind snake feeder.

One thing that made us laugh while cruising around in the Kakadu is the amount of people fishing on every river, floodway or creek crossing for the 'good tucker' fish, barramundi. Hey, this is suppose to be a national park and they allow this as well as mining in it. The people catch a fish, gut it and eat it without even batting an eyelid. It just shows how much weight a majority carries - there are a lot of fisherman out there. On the other hand if you are a legitimate herpetologist just photographing critters and then letting them go you are looked upon in a different light.

"An interest in reptiles! You must be a smuggler or involved in something else very sinister and illegal."

If you apply for permits to photograph reptiles there might be delays and you alert the authorities of your presence (then you have to duck the roadblocks). It is a catch 22 situation for us herpetologists but its OK if you want to kill native fish. Also, if I was part of a corporation with millions of dollars I can mine uranium in the park until the cows come home. Reality is great isn't it?

On our last day in Kakadu before having to catch our plane we collected *Ctenotus kurnbudj*. A skink lizard endemic to the Alligator River floodplains area and known from only a handful of specimens. What a beautiful skink. You could tell by the delight on our faces after photographing this lizard that we have had a great trip and would do it all again. Herping is great! Maybe next time we will apply for photography licences, I wonder what it would be like to be under surveillance for the entire trip. All those wildlife officials justifying their existences by watching us!

Stuff it, the smell of fish guts and blood is more appealing. Where is my rod?

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