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**ACTHA Inc. News**

**April - May '18**

*Newsletter of the  
ACT Herpetological  
Association Inc.*

**Diary date**

The *bi-monthly* meetings of the Association are usually held on the **third Tuesday of the month** at **7.30pm**. Our usual venue is:

**Belconnen Soccer Club, Hawker  
(cnr Belconnen Way & Springvale Drive)**

**Upcoming meeting**

**Tuesday, 17 April 2018**

Meet a reptile:

ACTHA member **Liam** will be bringing his Black-headed Python plus another albino snake for members' appreciation: be it young or older! Bring along your questions and enthusiasm. Plus: meet a baby Shingle-back!

Our Guest Speaker:

**Duminda Dissanayake, PhD Candidate, Institute for Applied Ecology, University of Canberra**, will be giving a slide show of some of Sri Lanka's herpetofauna before launching into a talk which outlines his work on 'Skink Sex: Sex reversal and determination in *Bassiana duperryi*, a species found locally.

**Your Committee for 2017 - 2018**

President	Scott Keogh
Vice President	<b>Ric Longmore*</b>
Secretary	Dennis Dyer
Treasurer	Margaret Ning
Newsletter Editor	Mandy Conway
Webmaster	Angus Kennedy
Public Officer	<b>John Wombey *</b>
Excursion Officer	
Conservation Officer	Joe McAuliffe
Committee Members	Jason Spurr Iris Carter Greg Flowers Roy Chamberlain Peter Child
Student Representatives	Vacant

*\* Denotes Life Members*



*Where in the ACT? answer lies on page 8...*



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## Surveyors and water catchments: shaping Canberra's boundaries

*Brett McNamara, ACT Parks and Conservation Service, was our guest speaker at ACTHA's February 2018 meeting where he gave a remarkable insight into the role surveyors played in shaping the true nature of Canberra and its water supplies, as well as the challenges of the custodianship we have for such places as Namadgi National Park.*

Brett started as a ranger for Parks and Conservation in the early 1990s and has had a long career with them ever since. "I've seen a lot of changes over that time. In the ACT we do very well engaging with our local community and all the specialist groups, like ACTHA, within that community. One of the things communities tend to take for granted is water, the very essence of life. As global warming continues to grow we start to think of water as an increasingly valuable resource."

Water catchments shape the nature and boundaries of territories and Brett asked his audience an interesting question: "Why was Canberra placed on the limestone plains of the Southern Tablelands district of NSW?"

### A history lesson

Between 1901 - 1909 there was intense competition between the colonies about the location of a capital city to house the seat of government, a new Commonwealth of Australia.

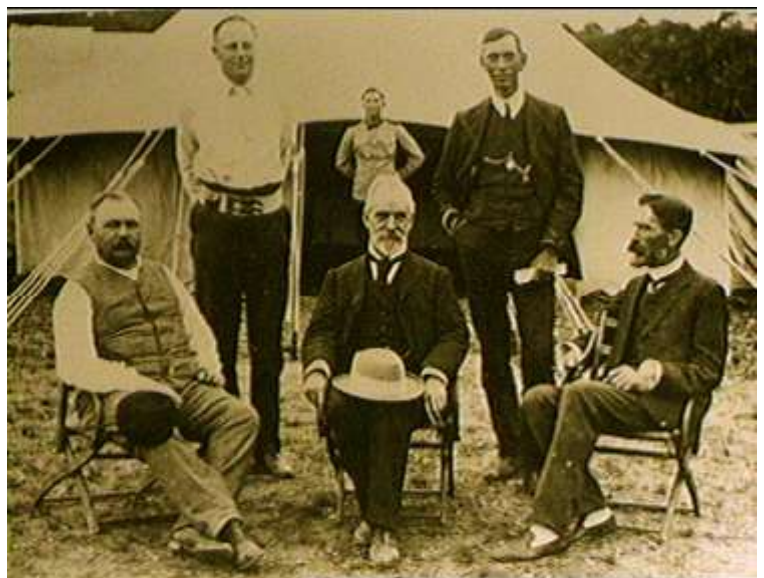
The Constitution mandated that a capital territory be established at a site at least one hundred miles from Sydney and be inland, away from naval guns. A senator from WA who was party to drafting the Constitution advocated a bracing, invigorating climate as a further criteria. An ample supply of pure water and an abundance of stone and timber for building was also required.

"It's quite remarkable to think that way back in 1900, we had already started to think about water." Brett emphasised.

Despite the freezing conditions in the mountains the politicians were strongly attracted to sites in the south-east of the state. When the Parliament held its first vote, the Senate proposed Bombala but the House of

Representatives selected Tumut. Six months later both Houses agreed to Dalgety, a small township just north of Bombala. The NSW government refused to support 'remote Dalgety'. A 'new' site at Yass-Canberra, somewhere along the Molonglo River, emerged as an acceptable compromise. If Federal Parliament would change its mind in favour of Canberra, NSW would provide land on the coast so that a federal city could have its own seaport at Jervis Bay. In October 1908, the Seat of Government Bill, confirming Yass-Canberra as the nation's capital, was passed by the Parliament.

"Surveyor-General Charles Robert Scrivener, could be considered the founding father of Canberra: he was predominantly responsible for selecting the site, a geographical location that was incredible and set within a simply stunning landscape. He was responsible for deciding where the city centre would be and where the catchments were to be located." Brett said.

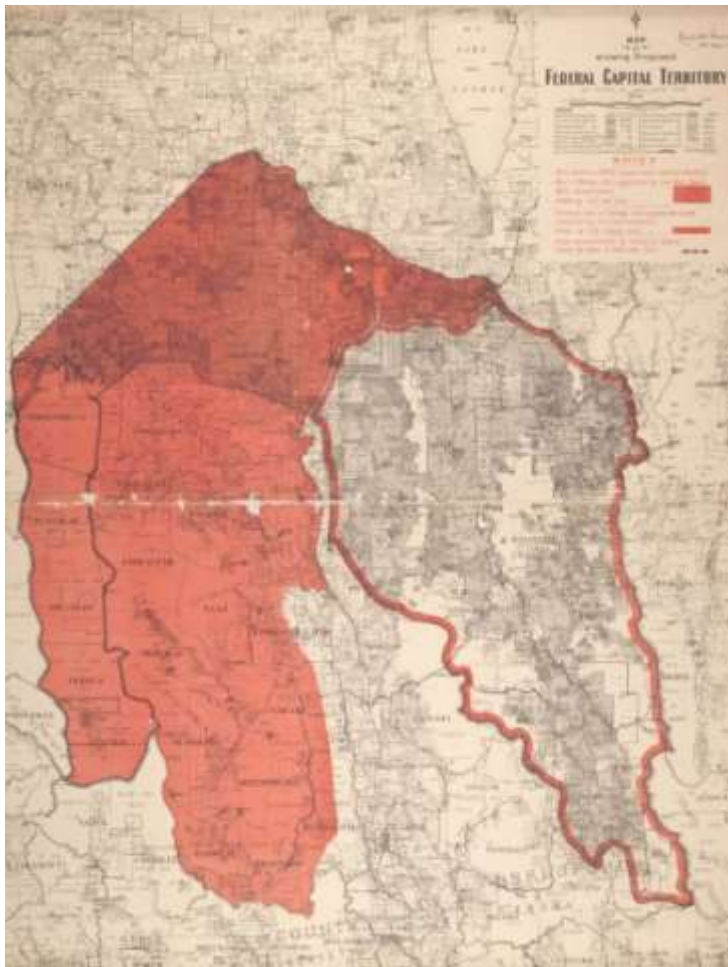


*Above: Charles Scrivener et al, in relatively formal attire befitting a person of importance, as these surveyors were deemed. Quite so, considering these people were the fore-bearers of new colonies being established throughout the country.*

As an aside, Scrivener's Hut was the first Commonwealth building erected in the Federal Capital Territory in 1910. It started life as a wood hut, however Scrivener saw the potential



Above: original Scrivener's Hut and below: as it stands today.



Above: The ACT was originally proposed to be a horseshoe shape, taking in the Queanbeyan and Molonglo River catchments.

(Surveyors and water catchments, cont'd,...)

for fire in the region, which could destroy all the precious hand-drawn maps and surveyors records. Hence a concrete bunker type building, with corrugated iron roof and heavy steel door, was built in its place.

Scrivener originally wanted to include the Queanbeyan and Molonglo River catchments - and Queanbeyan township itself - in the Federal Capital Territory. But NSW objected to that, and offered the Gudgenby, Naas and Paddy's River catchments instead.

As part of the compromise, the ACT was granted water access rights over the Queanbeyan River, which ultimately resulted in the construction of the Googong Dam in the 1970s to augment Canberra's water supply.

### But what about that straight bit?

Whilst most of the border quite literally follows the lay of the land delineating the region's major rivers, there are several sections that were drawn for convenience rather than geography; notably the straight section of the border running northeast from Mt Coree to One Tree Hill near Gungahlin at the northern tip of the ACT. (That 'straight bit' of the border was in reality an arbitrary line between two known points and was considered inconsequential to the water supplies of the ACT.)

This section was actually mapped first, before surveyors tackled the more mountainous ridges of southern ACT. It happens to be below the confluence of the Cotter, the Gudgenby, and Paddy's River catchments meeting with the Molonglo. This was the area Scrivener was most interested in.

However, Scrivener realised a few years later that 'the straight bit' omitted a section, which was reclaimed and gazetted after 1913 but the border has to date not been officially changed; today it is still known as the Coree conundrum.

Tracing the border around the east of the Capital, it again picks up a water catchment, and runs southeast to the Kings Highway just west of Bungendore, encircling Kowen Forest.

Over five years, three teams of surveyors tackled the border route; blazing trees, placing pipes filled with concrete or building rock spits and cairns to mark every twist and turn along the way.



(Surveyors and water catchments, cont'd,...)

An arrow and CT, standing for Commonwealth Territory, *above*, was blazed on trees along the route. Rocks were also piled on the ground indicating the 'border'. In 2003, after the fires went through, the Surveyor General returned to find the old stumps and rocks: they were accurate within millimetres. "Amazing to think that surveying 100 years ago was so incredibly accurate." Brett said.

For a section along the eastern border of the ACT, the surveyors followed the railway alignment, then south through what's now Royalla and towards Williamsdale. There the border crosses the Murrumbidgee River, running roughly parallel to the river to its southernmost point, near Mt Clear.

Surveying the southern and western extremities of the border presented the biggest challenges, with access often restricted by snow, baking heat and rocky cliffs. Historians say Mouat had the most rugged territory to survey, including up and over the ACT's highest peak, Mt Bimberi, just 300 metres lower than Mt Kosciuszko.

### Moving forward

The border was now established and the catchments identified; legislation was drafted and subsequently passed in 1914 as the 'Cotter River Act'. "This is where the parks service, specifically rangers, enter the scene with cries of 'thou shall not pollute the catchment...'. We have undertaken this role for the past 100 years: excluding development and reducing major impacts like cattle and fire issues to protect our Cotter Catchment." Brett said.

### 'thou shall not pollute the catchment...' take 1

**Pryor's Hut**, located on the main ridge of the Brindabella Range, between Mt Ginini and Mt Gingera, was built in 1952 as a shelter for those working in the Alpine Botanical Gardens, an annex to the National Botanical Gardens



*Above: Pryor's Hut*

(nearby). Professor Pryor was a prominent member of the Board of the Botanical Gardens and one time Professor of Forestry at ANU. At the time the hut was built, he was Superintendent of Parks and Gardens for the ACT. His vision at the time was to build 'annexes' separated from the main botanic gardens. For example, at Jervis Bay this is a coastal annex. It was built just a few metres over the border into NSW, to adhere to the Cotter River Catchment Act and 'thou shall not pollute...'

**'thou shall not pollute the catchment...' take 2**  
**Mt Franklin Ski Chalet** was built in the summer of 1937-38 by the Canberra Alpine Club. It held the record for the oldest club-built ski lodge on mainland Australia (older lodges exist in Tasmania).

"In the 1930s there was so much snow in the Brindabellas that people wanted to build a ski lodge, and as a ranger for nearly 30 years I find that remarkable."

*Below: Mt Franklin Ski Chalet well before the 2003 bushfires.*



*(Surveyors and water catchments, cont'd,...)*

Once again the Cotter River Act was adhered to: the kitchen and toilet were situated on the NSW side of the border whilst the rest of the chalet was built within Capital Territory.

*Below:* After the original chalet burnt down in the 2003 bushfires, National Parks ACT developed a unique partnership with the University of South Australia to rebuild what is now known as the Mount Franklin Visitor Shelter.

"... to pay homage to the original Chalet and acknowledge the fact that climate change is occurring; that once upon a time people used to ski here." Brett said.



Even after more than a century of urban development, the ACT still has arguably Australia's most pristine capital city water catchment, with the borderline running along the watershed of key river systems, notably the Cotter and Gudgenby Rivers.

Much of the catchment is protected from development and contamination by Namadgi National Park.

*What would the biggest threat be today?*

Brett was asked. "It is feral deer and horses."

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## **Exotic Milk snake found at McDonald's drive-through sparks fears of illegal trade in Canberra**

*By Sherryn Groch, The Sydney Morning Herald, 5 April 2018*

When Luke Dunn stopped by the McDonald's drive-through in Braddon on Thursday night, he was only after one thing - a milk snake.

The Canberra snake catcher had been called out by a staff member who spotted the bright red, black and yellow reptile lurking under the franchise's bins.

Milk snakes are native to the Americas and illegal in Australia, but a common pet in the US. They are also alarmingly similar in colour to the venomous coral snake so Mr Dunn wasn't taking any chances. "It was dark, I didn't know what I was dealing with, I just threw it in the bag and got it home," he said.

While the exotic snake turned out to be the safer kind of reptile, it still spent the Easter long weekend under careful quarantine with the Dunn family.



*Above: There are many different sub-species of milk snake, but this one is thought to be native to Mexico.*

*Image: Dion Georgopoulos.*

Authorities granted Mr Dunn and his partner Emma Carlson, who also runs Canberra Snake Rescue & Relocation, special permission to hold the animal until it could be handed over on the following Tuesday.

"We're not sure whether or not it escaped from an apartment in the city or if this was an illegal reptile trade in the Maccas carpark gone wrong," Ms Carlson said.

*(Exotic Milk snake found in Canberra, cont'd,...)*

ACT Parks and Conservation director Daniel Iglesias said the Territory was concerned about any exotic reptiles found as "they have the potential to adversely impact local ecosystems".

"A decision on the fate of the animal will be made on the advice of the government veterinary officers, who will consider animal welfare and biosecurity issues," Mr Iglesias said. (The snake was reported to the Commonwealth and it is understood the animal will be put down.)

"All exotic reptiles found or surrendered in the ACT are investigated, although there is often little or no information to go on," Mr Iglesias said.

Just a month earlier Alex Borg removed another exotic reptile, this time an albino corn snake, from outside a house in Calwell.



*Above: Alex Borg caught an albino corn snake in Canberra's south a month ago. Image: Alex Borg.*

Neither snake was fully grown, sparking fears that illegal breeding might be more rampant in the ACT than previously believed.

"It clearly wasn't imported in, someone must be breeding them here," Mr Borg said. "It's too cold in Canberra for them to survive without people."

The corn snake was seized by authorities and euthanised, Mr Iglesias confirmed on Tuesday.

When Mr Borg posted a photo of the reptile to Facebook, he said he was "overwhelmed" by the amount of people who came forward claiming it was their snake.

Ms Carlson agreed it was a "very worrying" trend.

"We'd never come across an exotic snake before, the other ACT handlers hadn't either, and now we've had two turn up in the space of a month," she said. "There's potentially a bigger illegal trade than we realised in Canberra."

Mr Dunn said he had raised his concerns about illegal breeding directly with authorities but said it was difficult to police when animals were kept in secret. Ms Carlson has since written to authorities to suggest holding an exotic snake amnesty, similar to one conducted in Queensland in 2016, to encourage people to hand in illegal species, which could often carry disease if imported.

But ACT Parks and Conservation said staff had only encountered two exotic snakes and one exotic turtle in the past 18 months.

"Any amnesty in Canberra would need to be done in close cooperation with NSW authorities," Mr Iglesias said. "ACT Parks and Conservation will continue to consider all options to prevent unlawful wildlife trade."

In the ACT, most reptiles cannot be commercially traded through pet shops and require a licence to own. Exotic snakes can only be kept by zoos or for scientific research.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Environment and Energy confirmed the reptile found at McDonald's was a milk snake but said ACT authorities were investigating. "Trafficking of wildlife and wildlife products is a serious international problem," the spokeswoman said.

"Globally, it is estimated to cost up to US\$24 billion each year."

The maximum penalty for wildlife trade offences was 10 years imprisonment and fines of up to \$210,000 for individuals or more than \$1 million for corporations.

ACT Parks and Conservation encouraged people to report any suspected illegal trade of wildlife to Access Canberra on 13 22 81. All reports will be investigated and can be made anonymously.



(The Australian & International Scene, ...)

## Venomous tiger snake slithers through central Melbourne

ABC News, 22 February 2018

*A deadly tiger snake has caused disruption in central Melbourne, forcing police to block off part of a busy city street until it could be bagged by a reptile catcher.*

The snake was spotted by lunchtime crowds in a gutter near the corner of Spencer and Collins streets. Police set up a wide cordon around it.

The tiger snake may have come into the city up the Yarra River or through the drains.

The snake was eventually trapped by reptile catcher Barry Goldsmith, who said it was unusual to see tiger snakes in central Melbourne.

The snake, dubbed "Spencer Collins", was found to be injured and Mr Goldsmith said he would be taking it to the vet.



Below: Barry Goldsmith with the tiger snake.



## Tiger snake is cut out of a can with pliers after getting its head stuck inside

By Greta Levy and Holly Hales, Daily Mail Australia, 19 February 2018

The venomous reptile from a Melbourne suburb was saved after it became stuck in the can. Stewy 'the Snake Catcher' Gatt was called to Wyndham Vale in Victoria to rescue the serpent.

He used pliers to cut a hole in the Carlton Draught can for the tiger snake to slither out.

The distressed reptile was quick to strike at Stewy, the can and even itself when it was partially released.

Wyndham Vale locals attempted to free the poisonous snake from the footpath on Black Forest Drive and McGrath Road but called the professional handler for back-up.

'If you come across a snake in a similar situation, the best thing to do, is to call a snake catcher immediately,' he wrote on Facebook.

Stewy Gatt has been handling snakes for ten years.

He told Daily Mail Australia it was not uncommon to find snakes in trouble like this. 'It does happen regularly to find snakes in different

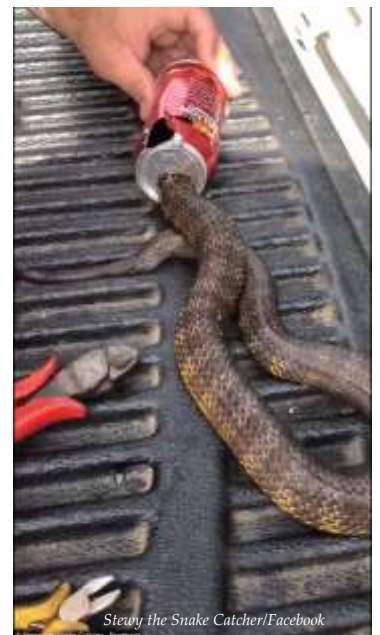
kinds of rubbish,' he said.

The tiger snake may have become stuck because '... of the warmth of the can, it could have been attracted to the liquid or another reason is because it's a dark hole to hide in,' he said.

Wyndham Vale is close to a swamp and is prone to tiger and brown snakes in the area.

'Snakes get a bad rap, everyday we try and educate people that they are dangerous but they are dangerous if they are threatened,' he said.

The tiger snake was released within five kilometres of where it was found.



## From Matt Beitzel, Aquatic Ecologist, ACT Government

"While conducting snorkelling surveys in an ACT river a few years back I saw a Red-bellied Black Snake moving on the bottom of the pool in 2m of water. I have seen black snakes regularly on water and know they dive when startled and didn't think much of it. However, in the next pool (approximately 100m upstream) another black snake surfaced in the middle of a deep run. It had a live 15-18cm (adult) Two-spined Blackfish in its mouth. The snake swam to the edge of the river where it held the fish and continued to pump venom into it. The snake was approximately 1.5m long and pretty solid. This photo was taken probably 5 minutes after the snake was spotted.



"Two-spined Blackfish are a particularly cryptic native fish species and generally hide under rocks in the bottom of the river. So in order to catch the fish, the snake (maybe both of them) must have been actively hunting blackfish in and under rocks on the bottom in at least 1.2m of water. Although very common in this river, blackfish are not found in nearby rivers."



### 2.7m snake shed found at Scullin unit block

A call from ACT Wildlife's Marg Peachey, who spotted an advert in freecyclecanberra on Feb 14 for a very large snake skin found on this bit of turf (*left*) near a unit block in Scullin has sent **Margaret Ning\*** into her super-sleuthing best!

Unfortunately the shed had already been promised to a lady and her grandson by Anna, the finder.

**Margaret:** "Ok, I have been there, photographed the skin and where she found it - amazing!!! I hope people are locking up their cats and dogs!"

**Ed:** "Ooohhh! but don't forget that the shed skin has stretched as it comes off the snake. Google says anything up to 30% for larger snakes."

**Margaret:** "I did not know that shed skins stretch that much, and it would be nice to tell Anna that. We are lucky that someone like her found it. Anna also had a couple of phone conversations with zoo people. Interestingly, she said that the gardener at their block of flats also works at a zoo... possible connection? Or just coincidence?"

**Ed:** "Ah, I was just wondering if something or someone had actually 'lost' a skin or 'planted' one as a practical joke. A snake would usually shed in a quiet spot with some shelter, they are very vulnerable during the shedding process so something not quite right with this situation I feel. And the chances of a snake that big getting around and not being spotted before would be incredulous."

ACT Environment were also contacted, so that's 5 people involved and the mystery remains unsolved. Er, unless the python is hiding somewhere in Scullin! Margaret?!