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ACTHA Inc. News
Apr - **MAY '15**
Newsletter of the ACT Herpetological Association Inc.

Your Committee for 2014 - 2015

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***** *Denotes Life Members*

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, 21 April 2015

Our first guest speaker will be **Aaron Clausen** who will give a 20 minute presentation on a proposal to extend **Canberra Nature Map** to include reptiles. Aaron is the developer of Canberra Nature Map, a web based citizen science facility to identify and record rare native plants in the ACT and beyond. While it has existed for only a short time it has amazingly increased the known sites for numerous rare plants in the ACT.

If we can launch, promote and maintain the reptile module it will enable us to map the distribution of many reptiles which will greatly assist in their conservation. It will also provide a fantastic education facility that will greatly increase the public's awareness of reptiles and their conservation. It may also assist to advertise the society and *Snakes Alive!*

Ecology of the Eastern Long-necked Turtle, *Chelodina longicollis*, along a natural-urban gradient

Bruno Ferronato, IAE, UC, is our main speaker this month. "Urbanisation is one of the leading causes of biodiversity loss worldwide. Many species living within natural-urban gradients are in contact with urban stressors and ecological studies are needed to understand biological responses of susceptible species. A previous investigation during drought in the Gungahlin region demonstrated that Eastern Long-necked Turtles (*Chelodina longicollis*) from suburban areas were more abundant, grew faster, moved larger distances, and did not exhibit aestivation behaviour compared to the nature reserve counterparts, while both populations exhibited similar survivorship estimates. After five years, many conditions had changed in this study site, including a sharp increase in urbanisation, an increase in rainfall influenced by La Niña events, and a pest-exclusion fence was established in the nature reserve. This situation created a unique opportunity to study the response of this turtle over time to an increase in urban stressors, in addition to climatic conditions."

In this issue

Ainslie to Kossie: window on wonder wander

Our guest speaker at ACTHA's 17 February '15 meeting was Matthew Higgins. Matthew is a Canberra historian who has worked at many of our national cultural institutions, including as senior curator at the National Museum of Australia. His book 'Rugged beyond imagination: stories from an Australian mountain region' (NMA Press 2009), was shortlisted for the ACT Book of the Year Award, and he has been writing articles in the Canberra Times for over 30 years. His still photography has been broadcast on ABC television and his short nature documentaries have been seen at film festivals around Australia.

Matthew's presentation at the February meeting took members on a virtual tour of the landscape between Canberra and Mt Kosciuszko, looking at animals, plants, geology, water, snow, fire, climate and some underlying human stories of our high country.

"If you're lucky you might see Namadgi's only goanna, that's the Rosenberg's Monitor," Matthew began. The Cunningham Skink, Blotched Blue-tongue Lizard, the Bearded Dragon, Highland Copperhead, the Brown Snake, the Red-bellied Black Snake and the White-lipped Snake were just some of the other reptile images shown. Matthew gave a detailed account of where each species could be found as well as his observations of them on any given encounter. "One animal you won't see here is the Carpet Python, which once occupied the foothills of Mount Tennant. Habitat change, foxes and human interference are amongst the likely reasons."

Matthew never grows tired of watching a Swamp Harrier glide and feed, so relaxing! Wedge-tailed Eagles, Nankeen Kestrals, Brown Falcons and many other raptor images taken by Matthew were also shown.

Owls encountered ranged from the diminutive Boobook to the massive Powerful Owl. "Signs of animals along a track don't necessarily include sightings. A partial carcass of a sugar glider or bush rat will tell you that owls are somewhere in the vicinity." Matthew said.

Lyre Birds are distinctive in the high country and Gang-gangs are one of the many species that migrate out of the mountains, but can still sometimes be seen with snow about.

"We can learn from the dead as well as the living. It is difficult to distinguish bats unless you are at close range however if you find a dead one it is worth having a look. The bone structure and membrane of the wing are fascinating."

Feral animals like rabbits and pigs have done enormous damage over the years, causing loss of topsoil and vegetation, whilst feral cats, dogs and foxes have taken a huge toll on native wildlife. The Bush Stone Curlew is just one of the many victims. It has only just been reintroduced into the Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary after being considered locally extinct for more than 40 years.

A photo of baby foxes surprised many in the audience who couldn't actually identify them as such. Control and/or eradication of these pests has varying levels of success.

Images of the Brindabella Ranges with its giant mossy rocks and beautiful snow gums, and wildflower displays during the Spring were simply breathtaking. The Mountain Plum Pine is an incredible tree. It is slow growing and is seen as a valuable resource when fire trend investigations occur. Some of the trunks shown were estimated to be several hundred years old.

Travelling through Namadgi into Kosciuszko Matthew explained the importance of water through rainfall, snow and streams, describing how much of the landscape relies on it. The relationship between dams, mountains and the Snowy Hydro Scheme were also touched upon.

Climate adaptation of the different species of water skinks who occupy various gradients of the high country was interesting. Niches of different reptiles as they come to terms with climate change is plain to see.

Matthew's images of Kosciuszko National Park itself, from open plain grasslands to forests, through nature's four seasons, made many members long to experience just some of the region's magic. Field trip anyone?!

CONSERVATION COUNCIL
ACT REGION

Can you make a donation to the Conservation Council ACT and help make sure **that our community's voice for the environment remains strong?**

The Conservation Council is our peak environment body in the ACT region. They provide support for over forty community groups all working to ensure a safer and healthier environment for all Canberrans. In the 2014 May Federal budget they had 20% of their annual budget stripped away and so they are now asking for your assistance

The Conservation Council ACT is a community of conservationists, environmentalists and activists who enable both strategic and unified campaigns on issues that matter. Shared successes have been a product of strong collaboration and support and so in response to the cuts of the federal government and to assist the Conservation Council ACT Region to continue being our voice for the environment – we are urging you to help out and make a tax-deductible donation.

To donate, please ring the Conservation Council on 6229 3200 with your credit card details or visit www.conservationcouncil.org.au/support-us/donate/

All donations over $2 are tax deductible.

Suburban pool conversion provides a home for eastern water dragons

Summary of article by Ann Jones, ABC RN, 23 March '15

The Ku-ring-gai Council area in northern Sydney is verdant and surrounded by national parkland. Almost 15,000 of its dwellings have pools. Interestingly, the council runs a program which encourages residents to let their unused pool go wild: Pool to Pond

Michael Gillings has stopped putting chemicals in his pool, has turned off all the pumps, and over the course of the last two years his backyard has been transformed into a wonder of nature.

Wildlife; including frogs and fish, but also dragon flies and wading birds have converged on his backyard. The crowning achievement so far, however, is a breeding pair of water dragons who have taken up permanent residence.

"When we first started coming out with torches at night to look for the frogs, naturally you crouch down and look with the torch close to the water to see frogs crawling on the various plants and things, and then you'd come across a lizard head sticking out of the water looking at you."

Before you fall too much in love with these charismatic lizards though you should be aware that they do get up to some somewhat anti-social behaviours. They will pee in your pond. The idea is that by defecating while partially submerged they dilute the odour and avoid attracting predators.

Converted backyard pools can be the perfect place for a little David Attenborough moment of your own.

'To me it's about turning something that was a white elephant that was going to be difficult to remove and expensive to repair the hole that's here, into something that we use every day and we gain a great deal of pleasure from," says

Mr Gillings, stepping over a water dragon as he potters around the edge of his backyard pond.

A pair of foxes wipe out Jerrabomberra Wetlands turtles' nests

By John Thistleton, The Canberra Times, 1 Feb'15

Above: ACT Parks and Conservation senior ranger Michael Maconachie at Jerrabomberra wetlands. Photo: Matt Bedford.

Two foxes have raided 62 of the 63 eastern long-necked turtles' nests identified at Jerrabomberra Wetlands this breeding season.

ACT rangers have identified a cunning male and female fox as top-order predators in the wetlands. The pair have wiped out hundreds of new baby turtles, due to be born in autumn.

During October, November and December the female turtles emerge from the water after rain, looking for open land away from the flood plain to nest. They urinate on the ground to help soften it before laying their eggs.

Above: Broken turtle eggs left behind by a pair of foxes at Jerrabomberra Wetlands.

Ranger Michael Maconachie, who has captured the elusive foxes on sensor cameras, says the smell is a dead giveaway. "Foxes get them [the eggs] that very same night. We're pretty certain foxes can detect the smell for two weeks," Mr Maconachie said.

Another ranger, John Freeman, said numerous turtles struck a netting fence near the water after they had emerged to lay their eggs, and consequently a lot of nests were built along the fence line. The two foxes then came along and raided them all.

Placing mesh over some of the nests, which each can contain up to a dozen or more eggs, did not stop the foxes from destroying the lot.

Excellent adaptors to the urban environment, the Fyshwick foxes are raiding nests despite intense scrutiny across the 201-hectare wetlands. This was apparent on World Wetlands Day on Sunday which brought out in large numbers the bird-watching community, members of a managing trust for the reserve, rangers, Friends of Jerrabomberra Wetlands and scores of families who were taken on tours of bird hides.

Car parking, walking tracks, neatly mown grassed areas and a constant stream of bird watchers and photographers have not deterred the male and female foxes from making the wetlands their hunting ground. Adjoining the wetlands, construction crews are building the new Majura parkway.

Mr Maconachie said birdwatchers had seen the foxes take water birds, but rangers

were reluctant to take out the foxes just yet, and were limited in their options. They

cannot shoot them or lay 1080 poison bait because of the urban surroundings and domestic animals.

As well, the mature foxes dominated their territory, and removing them would open the way for new ones to enter and sort out a fresh hierarchy which could cause even more damage to wildlife.

"Knock down this pair and eight more foxes might start coming in to sort out new living arrangements," Mr Maconachie said. "Researchers in Melbourne and Perth are finding foxes take out 90 to 95 per cent of all nests, which is huge."

Wetlands management committee chairman Warren Nicholls said this raises all sorts of interesting questions. "Questions like do we have a very old adult population of turtles, with no new generations coming on? We don't know if that is the case. Are there enough nests that allow some turtles to escape the foxes? We just don't know enough about it?"

Kimberley goannas trained in cane toad taste-aversion

Geoff Vivian, ScienceNetwork WA, 1 May 2014

Above: Rangers Herbert and Wesley with George Ward-Fear and a captured flood plain goanna.

A PhD candidate and indigenous rangers are working to train wild goannas to avoid eating toxic cane toads, *Bufo marinus*

Herpetologist Georgia Ward-Fear says the method involves feeding juvenile toads to goannas in the wild.

The small toads are toxic enough to make the goannas sick, but not enough to kill them, hopefully instilling an aversion.

"With conditioned taste-aversion, it's like if you develop an aversion to something like a toxic or a spoiled substance based off a negative experience that you have with it," she says.

Ms Ward-Fear says the fieldwork started in July 2013, when she and Balingarra rangers began a survey of yellow-spotted monitors *(Varanus panopte)* and sand goannas *(Varanus gouldii)* at the abandoned Aboriginal community of Oombugurri, East Kimberley.

They chose the site because it was relatively accessible, likely to be soon invaded by cane toads and, according to the rangers, had plenty of goannas.

Ms Ward-Fear says the rangers' tracking skills proved invaluable in finding so many of the animals.

During the survey they fitted a number of goannas with radio tracking collars.

With transmitters in place she was then able to track each lizard to its burrow and place a Perspex "arena" around it, containing a juvenile toad.

Many of the goannas emerged and ate the toad.

While the research is still in this "training" phase, Ms Ward-Fear says they usually seem to survive their cane toad meal.

However a surprising number of large goannas end up in the stomachs of even larger black-headed pythons *(Aspidites melanocephalus)* and olive pythons *(Liasis olivaceus)*, where transmitters continue to transmit radio signals from within.

While it is yet to be confirmed, she suspects the goannas that refuse to eat the small toads are all females—a disturbing trend if invading cane toads tend to wipe out all breeding males in a population.

Meanwhile feral cane toads have started to arrive at Oombulgurri, so the effectiveness of this taste-and-scent aversion method can be tested.

Ms Ward-Fear says her study follows an earlier taste-and-scent aversion project in the upper Ord Valley, where her colleague Stephanie O'Donnell encouraged wildlife to eat special cane toad sausages.

While quolls readily took the baits they had difficulty getting goannas to eat them.

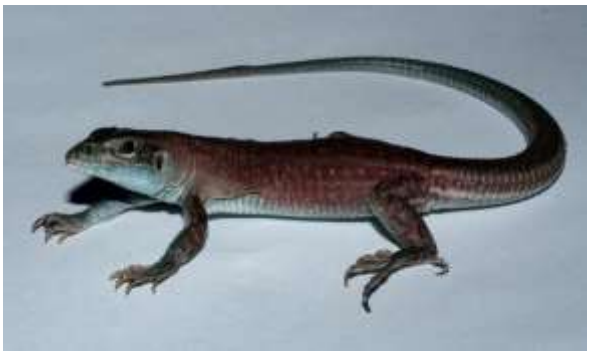
She says while it is impossible to achieve 100 per cent survival for these vulnerable species when the toads arrive, they aim to help enough breeding toads to survive for a viable population to continue.

Notes:

Ms Ward-Fear is a PhD candidate supervised by Sydney University Prof Rick Shine. She is based at the university's facility near Darwin in the NT.

The strange tale of a new species of lizard

By John Virata, Reptilesmagazine, 24 Dec 2014



Above: Neaves' Whiptail Lizard, pic: Peter Baumann

When scientists put two different species of lizard into an enclosure and they mate, generating offspring, are the offspring a new species or a subspecies? That is the question

that is beguiling scientists and herpetologists as researchers describe what they call a new species of lizard in the journal *Breviora.*

The lizard in question, a hybrid of two species of whiptail lizard is being called *Aspidoscelis neavesi.* It is a cross between *Aspidoscelis exsanguis* (capable of reproducing via parthenogenesis) and a male *Aspidoscelis inornata.* The two were placed in the same enclosure, and the lizards mated. The genes of the offspring of the two lizards were examined and the scientists found that they had four sets of chromosomes. Four were female and could clone themselves via parthenogenesis.

The scientists, Dr. Peter Bauman and Dr. William B. Neaves were convinced that a new species was created and ran their data by herpetologist Charles J. Cole of the American Museum of Natural History, a whiptail lizard expert who has studied the reptiles since the 1960s. Cole agreed with Bauman and Neaves but reiterated to the *New York Times* that what the duo did was not some sort of freak experiment, but rather just a simple act of putting two lizards together in the same enclosure and hoping for the best outcome, which was a successful mating.

The three scientists formally described the new species and named it *Aspidoscelis neavesi* in honor of Dr. Neaves, who coincidentally discovered such a lizard in the wild with four sets of chromosomes in the 1960s.

So is this lizard, which was created in a lab a new species?

The frog that looks like a turtle

Australian Geographic, 4 Dec 2014

Above: A turtle frog, credit Brendan Schembri/Flick

Oh where do I begin? That swollen, bright pink flesh, flecked with gold. Those black, beady eyes and mouth stretched out in a straight line just like a Muppet. That blunt nose and that oddly distinct, unfrog-like head. Those stumpy legs, attached to a flattened body that looks like it's just slipped out of its turtle shell. Oh and did I mention that it has claws on its legs? No? This swollen pink thing has claws on its legs.

Endemic to Perth in Western Australia, its range extending between Geraldton and the Fitzgerald River, the 5cm turtle frog (*Myobatrachus gouldii*) is found in sandy soils wherever there are termites to eat and burrowing to be done.

Turtle frogs aren't like most burrowing frogs from arid regions; rather than using its hind legs to ease itself backwards into an underground hideout, the turtle frog uses its clawed and muscular front legs to dig headfirst into the sand. And it won't stop till it's about at least a metre down.

If it's a female turtle frog, once she gets down there, she'll be able to lay a clutch of firm, round eggs, sometimes up to 50 of them at a time. And here's where the species really sets itself apart from many of its peers - the offspring will totally skip the tadpole part of growing up and transition straight from egg to fairly-well-developed tiny frog baby.

Turtle frogs have "unusual sex life"

according to turtle frog expert, Nicola Mitchell from the School of animal biology at the University of Western Australia, this species has "probably the most unusual sex life of all the frogs". Talking to ABC radio, Mitchell describes how these frogs engage in courtship behaviours every spring, the males coming up to the surface to call to the females, but they won't actually mate for another four months after that.

Describing this separation of courtship and mating as unheard of in most frog species, Mitchell adds, "If you want to put it crudely, they may have about a four-month foreplay before they actually mate."

It's thought that this strange wait has to do with the frogs needing to mate in the late summer, because their eggs take around two months to develop, and their hatching has to be timed

with the rains of winter so the froglets don't dry out. So why do they start courting in the spring if that means everything else has to be dragged out? Just like their young, adult turtle frogs don't want to risk frying on the surface, so they only leave the safety of their burrows in the spring rain.

A frog has been discovered that gives birth to live young

By Fiona MacDonald, Science alert, 2 Jan 2015

For the first time, scientists have discovered a species of frog that gives birth to live tadpoles instead of laying eggs - and it has fangs.

Image; Jim McGuire/UC Berkeley

When it comes to reproduction, frogs generally fall into two categories - most species lay eggs, while a very small group give birth to live froglets.

But in a world-first, scientists have now discovered a species of fanged frog that gives birth to live tadpoles.

The species, *Limnonectes larvaepartus,* was discovered in Sulawesi Island in Indonesia by zoologists from the University of California, Berkeley, in the US.

Overwhelmingly, most of the world's frog species reproduce via external fertilisation. There is a small group that have evolved internal fertilisation, which means they either lay already fertilised eggs, or occasionally give birth to baby froglets. But this new fanged frog is doing something else entirely.

"Almost all frogs in the world - more than 6,000 species - have external fertilisation, where the male grips the female in amplexus and releases sperm as the eggs are released by the female," lead author Jim McGuire said in a press release.

"This new frog is one of only 10 or 12 species that has evolved internal fertilisation, and of those, it is the only one that gives birth to tadpoles, as opposed to froglets or laying fertilised eggs."

The scientists still aren't sure exactly how the male would fertilise the female's eggs - frogs don't have sex organs that they can use to transfer sperm. To overcome this, some species that use internal fertilisation have evolved a penis-like "tail" that does this, but this new species doesn't seem to have any unusual structures at all.

The species was first noticed in the '90s, but it was thought they were just a subspecies of an existing species of fanged frog, which belong to the genus *Limnonectes*. Their fangs aren't actually teeth at all, but two fleshy lumps on their bottom lip which they use in fighting against each other for mates.

However, after studying these frogs in more detail, it became apparent that they had a completely unique reproductive strategy, and were a distinct species.

It's believed there are 25 species of fanged frogs living on Sulawesi, but so far only four of them have been described. Unfortunately the island has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world, so the race is now on to find out more about the remaining species.

"Finding a new species is not that rare - but actually discovering a new reproductive mode is," Ben Tapley from the Zoological Society of London, told the BBC.

"There are more than 40 of these modes in amphibians, but this one is obviously totally unique… These kind of findings are really valuable, especially in Sulawesi where most of the forest is gone."

Teeny, tiny relative of Komodo Dragon discovered in Australia

By John R. Platt, Scientific American, 8 Jan 2015

Lizards don't get much bigger than the Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*), which can reach three meters in length and may weigh as much as 70 kilograms. But not every member of the *Varanus* genus is a giant. Scientists in Australia last month unveiled the newest *Varanus* species and it's as small as the Komodo is large.

Above photo: R. Ellis, Western Australian Museum

The newly discovered Dampier Peninsula goanna (*V. sparnus*) is just 23cms long and 16 grams in weight. That's about the size of a human hand, which would barely count as a nibble for a hungry Komodo dragon.

According to research published in the *Records of the Western Australian Museum*, the Dampier Peninsula goanna split off from its closest relative, the 25-centimeter pygmy goanna (aka the short-tailed monitor, *V. brevicauda*) between six million and seven million years ago (roughly the same time chimpanzees and humans went their separate ways on the evolutionary ladder). The new lizards are described as not just shorter than the pygmy goanna (which probably deserves a new name now) but also thinner and more boldly coloured.

The scientists who discovered this new goanna don't go as far as declaring it endangered quite yet but note that it has an incredibly limited distribution—the Western Australia peninsula for which it is named. The pygmy goanna, by comparison, ranges through almost the entire Australian continent. The researchers call for "some kind of protected status" until more is known about the new species.

Visitors to Western Australian Museum in Welshpool can see a female specimen of the new species—nicknamed "Pokey"—but they have to look carefully. She's wiggly, fast and apparently loves to burrow beneath the sand and hide. Maybe she's sensitive about her weight (or lack of it).

Gigantor: Is this Australia's largest brown snake?

By Tom Decent, SMH 21 Jan 2015

A two-metre Eastern brown snake, dubbed the largest of its kind in the world, has found a new home at the Australian Reptile Park after being caught in a suburban backyard.

And there is a fair chance more snakes of a similar size are currently lurking in long grass on the east coast.

The snake, dubbed 'Gigantor', is 50 centimetres longer than an average Eastern brown snake and is almost three times heavier coming in at two kilograms.

He has been helping the Reptile Park's life saving anti-venom program with great success so far, providing 30 milligrams of venom per milking as opposed to the average amount of 11 to 12 milligrams.

Around 3000 people are bitten by snakes in Australia each year and the most common bites are from brown (76 per cent), tiger (18 per cent) and black (6 per cent) snakes.

Eastern brown snakes are the second deadliest in the country after the Inland Taipan and are quite common in Sydney and the Central Coast

Above: Gigantor is a bit of a handful at his new home. Photo Australian Reptile Park

Curator at the Australia Reptile Park Liz Gabriel said Gigantor was definitely one of the biggest snakes she had seen and estimated he was over three years of age when he was found in a Brisbane backyard.

"He's just huge to tell you the truth," Ms Gabriel said. "We measured him and milked him to see what the venom output yield was from him and it was astounding.

"Even though he's a big snake and representative of the dangerous snakes that

people see out and about, he's also a snake that will save lives in the coming years. The anti-venom here saves about 300 lives a year."

The venom is extracted from three-millimetre fangs which contain potent neurotoxins that cause paralysis and incoagulable blood. From there, the venom is given to a company which produces snake anti-venom.

Ms Gabriel said Gigantor was fairly relaxed when he was milked on Wednesday morning.

"Eastern brown snakes are quite a nervous species as a whole and he certainly portrayed that defensive nature," she said.

"For a big animal of his size and one that has come out of the wild, he wasn't too bad."

Wriggling post filled with baby crocs

By Gareth McKnight, The West Australian, 11 Feb '15

More than 70 rare reptiles, including snakes and baby crocodiles, destined for New South Wales have been discovered at two Kimberley post offices.

Above: One of the baby freshwater crocodiles discovered by the Department of Parks and Wildlife and WA Police in a Kimberley sting.

In an operation led by the Department of Parks and Wildlife and assisted by WA Police, three men aged 16, 22 and 23 were apprehended.

An officer at Australia Post noticed a package moving and heard scratching noises from inside on January 31 and alerted the authorities.

Broome police Senior Sergeant Julie Foley said after inquiries and examination of CCTV footage, three people and a vehicle were identified as suspicious.

A vehicle was spotted by Broome police and apprehended, with DPaW attending the scene.

A 30cm freshwater crocodile, 1.5m king brown snake, skinks and spiders in calico bags and plastic containers were seized, as were cameras and other implements.

DPaW wildlife officer Peter Carstairs confirmed "Some of the animals died in captivity and as a result of being posted, with the enclosures they were sent in very poorly ventilated, causing the animals to die in transit," he said.

He also confirmed that DPaW's investigations had been ongoing for several months, with the individuals in question alleged to have conducted other wildlife-related illegal activities.

Mr Carstairs stated that some of the animals seized, which were all native to the Kimberley and Pilbara, could be worth up to $3000 on the black market, while jail sentences and fines of up to $5000 were commonplace for perpetrators of animal cruelty.

"The illegal wildlife trade is the third-biggest trade after weapons and drugs, so it high priority for us to apprehend people involved - unfortunately this happens regularly in Western Australia," he said.

Broome police Senior Sergeant Brendon Barwick confirmed that two of the individuals apprehended were from the Eastern States, with the other from WA.

With the investigation continuing, he also confirmed the individuals were not in custody but police would provide DPaW with any additional resources if required.

Peron's Tree Frogs spotted but are they OK?

"We have found some frogs near a spa bath [at Gordon, ACT]. We are happy for them to stay but are worried about the chemicals we use. Can we relocate the frogs and where would we take them? A local pond or perhaps just another moist spot in our garden? We're not sure what they are and haven't heard them call."

ACTHA member replies:

They are Peron's Tree Frogs which are commonly found in Canberra gardens and it's best to just leave them alone. They only call in the breeding season when conditions suit.

Tiger snake found in Tasmania with 'grotesque' spine diagnosed with rare disease

By Lucy Shannon, ABC News, 3 February 2015

A Tasmanian tiger snake has created global interest after being diagnosed with a rare spinal condition.

Dubbed "Rocky", the snake has a genetic condition called Charcot's Disease, which causes marble-sized lumps to form along the spine.

Bruce Press from Reptile Rescue Tasmania said the snake was discovered at a property named The Lair, on the state's east coast. Mr Press said he could not believe his eyes when he pulled the snake from a hole with a hook.

"It's really unique: it's got about 28 marble-sized lumps on its back but it can still freely move," he said.

Mr Press said the 60-centimetre female snake was healthy but would not live a long life. "It's not in pain but after some years it can be a bit degenerative and the spine will fuse together and the best thing to do is euthanase the snake," he said.

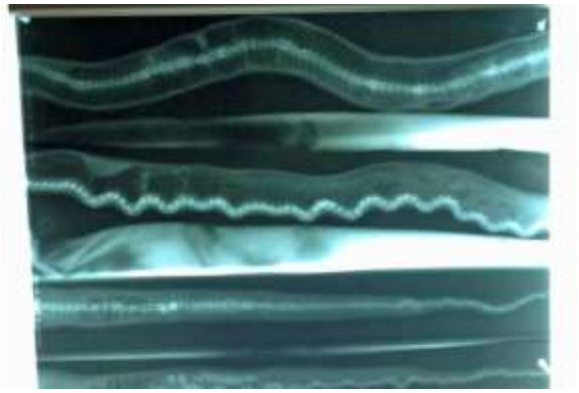
"We're not allowed to let the snake breed, so the only thing I can do humanely for the snake is keep it in captivity and feed it smaller mice that it can digest with its grotesquely bent spine, and let it live out its years until its spine starts to fuse."

It is believed to be the 16th snake in the world to be diagnosed with the condition.

Since posting pictures on Reptile Rescue Tasmania's Facebook page, Mr Press said he had received calls from snake enthusiasts around the world.

"I've had 278 phone calls about it, it's just phenomenal. And to see the snake — it's really unique," he said.

Mr Press said he would keep a journal on Rocky as researchers might find it useful.



Above: x-rays revealed the disease, which creates marbled-sized lumps. Image: Reptile Rescue Tasmania.

Murray turtle lays eggs at the ANU, Canberra

Forget the Ninja turtles, we have our own right here on campus!

Awesome photo via Instagram from @orangedrummaboy of a Murray Short-necked Turtle, laying eggs on campus at ANU.

"Thanks! Also must give a shout out to Marina who I built the first protective barrier with. We also contacted ANU security, who worked with facility services to erect a more permanent enclosure for the eggs to gestate within. We counted 16 eggs in total, and this species is known to lay as many as 30, sometimes in two batches depending on the availability of nesting zones."

Arthur Georges writes: "Wonderful to see this animal nesting on ANU campus. The species, *Emydura macquarii*, is not considered native to the ACT as successful nesting with resultant hatchlings has been observed in the Murrumbidgee only as far upstream as the Burrunjuck Dam. I now wonder? There have been captures of this species from time to time in the urban lakes, but they have been regarded as escapees from captivity. There is no reason why the adults could not survive in our waters, cold though they be in winter. It will be very interesting to see if these eggs can develop and hatch before winter, and what an autumn hatching would mean for the little ones. This species normally would lay eggs in the spring, with hatching in the mid summer to give them a good start.

Left & below: The native Murray Short-necked Turtle, *Emydura macquarii,* is rare in the ACT; a few may be seen toward Burrinjuck Dam.

Below: Nearly all native turtles in the ACT region are the Eastern Long-necked Turtle, *Chelodina longicollis*.

Worth Googling:

What to do with ill or dead frogs

An informative paper by Lee Berger and Rick Speare, School of Public Health, Tropical Medicine & Rehabilitation Sciences, James Cook University

A continental-scale analysis of feral cat diet in Australia

School of Natural Sciences, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup WA; Science and Conservation Division, Department of Parks and Wildlife, Woodvale, WA; Leuphana University, Germany; School of Biological Science, University of Sydney, NSW; Dept of Land Resource Management, Alcie Springs, NT; Natural resources Kangaroo Island, Kingscote, SA; Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment, Hobart, TAS.

Australia's next cane toad? the turtle pest threatening our shores

By Kate, 'Before it's gone', March 2012

An interesting news story caught my eye this week – a group of kids were found playing in a suburban Sydney street with a Red-eared slider turtle (*Trachemys scripta elegans*). Luckily, a passer by recognised the turtle for what it was, and reported it to NSW DPI.

Left: an adult Red-eared Slider Turtle displaying it's tell-tale bright red markings on the side of it's face. (Photo courtesy of Greg Hume).

So what exactly is a red-eared slider and what's so bad about them?

Red-eared sliders are a species of freshwater turtle, native to the Mississippi Valley in the US. They are known for their distinctively long, sharp claws and the striking red colouring behind their eyes. Although they are deceptively cute (and popular) as babies, they take on a whole new role as they morph into adulthood.

They are recognized as one of the worlds 100 worst invasive alien species, according to the World Conservation Union; based on their serious threat to global biodiversity.

In Australia they are up there with our most feared pest species such as the cane toad, the fox and the rabbit. Yet, I'll bet most people haven't even heard of them. Luckily, that's because they haven't had the chance to wreak the devastating havoc that other introduced pests have in our country – so far.

Categorized as a Class 1 pest in most states means that the importation, possession and sale of the species is prohibited, and there are heavy penalties for individuals who release the species into the natural environment.

Rightfully so. This turtle has no known predators in Australia, and has a very aggressive temperament. A nasty nature means that Red-eared sliders have the potential to out-compete many of our native freshwater species, like fish, frogs and other turtles, for resources such as food, habitat and nesting sites. Adults have also been know to prey upon hatchlings of native turtles, and can inflict painful bites to other wildlife. Another adaptation which enhances the Red-eared sliders role as an invader is its ability to breed like crazy! After each mating, females can lay around 30 fertile eggs per clutch; and continue to lay up to five clutches per year. Add to the mix, the ability of these turtles to spread deadly parasites and diseases among our native species – and you've got one perfect pest.

Right: The species will compete aggressively with other turtles (even with it's own species) for prime basking locations - often nosing out it's weaker competitors (i.e. native turtles, lizards, water birds etc.). Photo courtesy of www.petwatch.net

With confirmed reports of this species in urban and rural environments of QLD, ACT and NSW; and in the wild in VIC and WA, let's hope we don't allow this species the chance to become established in our waters.

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