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ACTHA NEWS DEC 07–JAN 2008

*Newsletter of the
ACT Herpetological
Association Inc.*

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a few weeks ago by some bored
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*Baby Tiger Snake, Rowe's Lagoon,
photo by Joe McAuliffe*

YOUR COMMITTEE

President:	Dennis Dyer
Vice President:	Ric Longmore
Secretary:	Joe McAuliffe
Treasurer:	Margaret Ning
Newsletter Editor:	Mandy Conway
Public Officer:	John Wombey
Excursion Officer:	Ric Longmore
Committee Members:	Chris Brown Christian Robertson

DIARY DATE

The *bi-monthly* meetings of the Association
are held on the *third Tuesday of the month*
at 7.30pm, Western Districts Rugby Club,
Catchpole Street, Macquarie.

UPCOMING MEETING

Our 18 December Meeting will be held in
conjunction with our Christmas party.
Please see details below.



CHRISTMAS PARTY

6PM TUESDAY, 18TH DECEMBER 2007

AT QUESTACON

To help celebrate the close of another year we would love to see everyone at our Christmas party. **Questacon** has kindly offered us their facility to have our Christmas party coupled with a behind the scenes tour.

We will be starting at **6pm on Tuesday 18th of December.**

Light refreshments will be provided by ACTHA. To start things off we will hold the AGM before moving to the social part of the evening.

To assist with catering please
RSVP to margaretning@iprimus.com.au by the 15th of December

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL
Botanic Gardens

2008 *Snakes Alive!*
Threatened, not threatening

Be charmed by Australian reptiles and frogs

14 - 20 January

10 am - 4pm Monday - Friday

10 am - 6 pm Saturday and Sunday

\$5 adult, \$2 child (Concessions \$4)

Draw a Dragon Competition

Draw and colour a water dragon. Come to the Gardens and see them in their native habitat.

Win a prize.

Age categories 2 - 5, 6 - 8, 9 - 12 years

Write your name, age and contact details on the back of your entry.

Post by 10 January to:

Drawing Competition, GPO Box 1777, Canberra ACT 2601

Look for your entry on display at Snakes Alive!

Summer Sounds

Indulge your senses at our popular concert series among the world's finest collection of Australian plants. Wine and soft drinks for sale.

6 - 7.30 pm.

Saturdays 12 and 19 January on the Eucalypt Lawn

Sundays 13 and 20 January on the Cafe lawn

See www.anbg.gov.au/anbg for band list

Open 8.30 am - 5.00 pm, Clunies Ross St, ACTON

Visitor Centre open 9.00 am - 4.30 pm

Ph: (02) 6250 9540 www.anbg.gov.au/anbg/



***SNAKES ALIVE!* - WHERE DID IT ALL START?**

Way back in 1986 our esteemed member Ric Longmore, pictured right, gave a yearly talk on reptiles in a theatre at the Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG). The Academy of Science hosted the talks and a small display for several years before the *Snakes Alive!* concept matured into what it is today. It is now running into its 6th year at ANBG in its current form, although several extra rooms have been commandeered to help house all the wonderful enclosures.

Generally the objective of the exhibit is to raise public awareness of reptiles and amphibians, with an education orientated experience for the public a main criteria.

The exhibit has grown markedly and now consists of over 35 species including snakes, frogs, lizards and turtles. The exhibit's



professional look continues to wow audiences thanks to Peter Childs of Reptiles Inc. The exceptionally well built enclosures display the various animals at their best, in simple and naturalistic settings.

It is difficult to pick just one highlight from each exhibition, as there are always many very special and beautiful animals to choose from. Countless numbers of young kids, and big kids too, fall in love with pythons which they are able to handle while ACTHA members field a battery of questions from onlookers. Apart from the various pythons, visitors are able to get up close and personal with other animals such as bearded dragons, blue tongues, shinglebacks and turtles.

The dedicated ACTHA members who organise the event and volunteer their time for the entire week (including our younger members who also impart their infectious enthusiasm to the visitors) successfully brings the fascinating field of herpetology to the people of Canberra and the surrounding region.

Snakes Alive! is now regarded as one of the largest displays of it's kind in Australia and shouldn't be missed. See you there!



Crowds from Snakes Alive! January 2007



I'll be there!



ACTHA PROVIDES SMALL GRANTS FOR HERPETOFAUNA PROTECTION, EDUCATION, TRAINING AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

In recent years, the **ACT Herpetological Association** has made a number of grants to projects that might assist to further herpetofauna protection and recovery, education, training, and research projects. In the last three years, the Association has made particular contributions to Gerry Marantelli to further the work on corroboree frog research and breeding.

The major fund raising effort by the Association is the *Snakes Alive Exhibition* at the Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG) held each January. Half of the net door takings are contributed to assist the ANBG conduct its education program which is currently developing a strong herpetofauna focus. The Association has decided to use part of the balance to provide encouragement and assistance in monetary terms to students or others who are currently researching aspects of herpetofauna.

This year, four grants were given.

DEB BOWER – PHD STUDENT OF PROF. ARTHUR GEORGES AT UC: \$1,026

Deb's project aims to **compare the relative tolerance of salinity of three species of freshwater turtle in the Lower Murray River** (the Broad-shelled Turtle, the Murray River Turtle and the Eastern Long-necked Turtle). This will lead to a better understanding of the turtles' responses to the recent dramatic increase of salinity in the Murray-Darling system and will make it possible to predict and respond to changes brought about by increasing salinity. ACTHA's grant will go towards the cost of laboratory equipment associated with the turtle collection.

RACHELLE MCCONVILLE – FROGWATCH CO-ORDINATOR, GINNINDERRA CATCHMENT GROUP: \$875

Ginninderra Catchment Group will use the ACTHA grant to **purchase "Frogwatch Tadpole Kits" from Canberra Exotic Pets, and make them available for loan to local primary schools**. This will offer school groups the opportunity to have live tadpoles in their classroom, and enable students to watch the magic of metamorphosis, and thus enhance the students' learning experience and appreciation of amphibians and the wider natural world. In this way, students will increase their understanding and awareness of our local fauna and will appreciate the importance of protecting our local ecosystems. Once the tadpoles have metamorphosed, the schools will return the equipment to the GCG and the adult frogs to Canberra Exotic Pets. The kit will include detailed instructions about caring for the tadpoles and adult frogs and it will be made very clear to schools that the tadpoles or adult frogs must not be released into the wild.

MITZY PEPPER - PHD STUDENT OF ASSOC. PROF. SCOTT KEOGH AT THE ANU: \$500

Mitzy is interested in the **evolution of herpetofauna in the Pilbara region of far north WA**, and she is particularly working on the **molecular phylogeography of endemic arid-zone geckos**. The Pilbara region is significant both in terms of its highly endemic fauna and flora, and also for the extreme economic and mining interest in the area. An understanding of the distribution of genetic diversity is extremely important both in terms of conservation and management of endemic species and also for answering broad-scale biogeographic questions and understanding the role that geology and geological processes play in the evolution of biota. ACTHA's grant will help cover the costs of the expensive lab-work associated with the genetic side of Mitzy's project.

GEOFF KAY - HONOURS STUDENT OF ASSOC. PROF. SCOTT KEOGH AT THE ANU: \$500

Geoff has just started his Honours, and his topic concerns the **evolution of herpetofauna in southwestern Australia**. This region has been

noted for its exceptional endemism, high species diversity and degree of environmental threat across many floral taxa. This has contributed to the region's declaration as one of the world's top 25 biodiversity hotspots. However virtually nothing is known about the phylogeographic patterns in the region's highly endemic fauna, and Geoff will **study the comparative phylogeography of four lizards** in the Hotspot. An understanding of the evolutionary processes driving current species

diversity and endemism patterns is extremely important both in terms of conservation and management of the diverse and endemic southwestern biota and also for answering broad-scale biogeographic questions and understanding the role that geological processes and climate play in the evolution of the Hotspot. ACTHA's grant will contribute towards the cost of the expensive molecular lab-work associated with Geoff's project.

GOVERNMENT PUSHING AHEAD TRAVESTON CROSSING DAM PLAN

FROM *SUNSHINE COAST DAILY*,
10 OCTOBER 2007.

(at: <http://www.thedaily.com.au/news/2007/oct/10/govt-pushing-ahead-dam-plan/>)

QUOTE:

The environment impact statement for the controversial \$1.7 billion Traveston Crossing Dam could be released as early as next week for public comment.

Premier Anna Bligh told parliament today that the EIS had been provided to the Coordinator-General to confirm it addresses the Terms of Reference.

"Subject to his confirmation that it does address the Terms of Reference the EIS will be publicly released as early as next week," Ms Bligh said.

"After six weeks of public consultation the Coordinator General will then consider the response. If he approves the EIS it will then be placed before the Federal Minister for the Environment early in 2008.

Ms Bligh acknowledged that any dam of the scale of the proposed Traveston Crossing Dam had the potential to create impacts that must be addressed.

"Concern has been raised about the potential impact on the Queensland Lungfish, Mary River Turtle and Mary River Cod. These are extraordinary creatures already under stress with their populations in decline, and they deserve protection.

"The project proponent, Queensland Water Infrastructure, proposes extensive measures to address these concerns.

Ms Bligh announced a \$35 million Freshwater Species Conservation Centre to be built near Gympie - adjacent to the Bruce Highway on the eastern shores of the dam - upstream of the dam wall. The funding will be sourced from the dam project.

"Its prime goal is to ensure the survival and improve the status of Lungfish, Mary River Cod and Mary River Turtle. This proposal is about learning more about these species and ensuring that they just don't survive – they thrive."

The Conservation Centre will be run in partnership with the University of Queensland, and overseen by Australia's leading science agency CSIRO.

The world's leading experts in the research of this field will be involved to provide independent advice – they include Professor Jean Joss of Macquarie University; Professor Gordon Grigg of The University of Queensland and Dr Col Limpus of the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service have agreed to join the Centre's Scientific Advisory Panel.

"Professors Joss and Grigg have made their opposition to the construction of the Traveston Crossing Dam clear. I have no doubt their opinions have not changed but I thank them for supporting the project which is intended to achieve just one thing – the protection and sustainability of three wonderful species. "

"In April this year I visited Professor Joss' research laboratory at Macquarie University in Sydney. I understand her passion and commitment to this extraordinary fish. The time I spent with Jean and her fish was a revelation.

"The facilities proposed for the new centre include breeding tanks, fish and turtle ponds, research laboratories and researcher's accommodation.

"The centre is proposed to have 14 staff and provide an education and awareness focus for these species.

The centre will provide Queensland's first opportunity to show off this 'living fossil' - said to be more than 110 million years old. It is expected to attract visitors, students and scientists from Australia and overseas.

The \$35 million funding package includes resources for operational and research funding for the next 10 years, along with funding for implementation of research findings.

Subject to the Commonwealth giving the dam final approval it is expected that detailed planning of the centre will commence by mid next year - with the first sod being turned by mid-2009.

CRAIG LATTA, AFTCRA (AUSTRALIAN FRESHWATER TURTLE CONSERVATION AND RESEARCH ASSOCIATION), RESPONDS

"Wonderful isn't it! The experts are buckling to the pressure because a few bucks are being thrown their way, guaranteeing their staff's jobs, as well as themselves, for at least another 10 years.

It's incredible that ecologists in Australia (not a third world country) believe that conservation means a shiny new building, a few tourists and breeding lots of hatchlings of an endangered species and dropping them into a habitat that simply will NEVER be able to support them.

Do these people think that conservation is just breeding in Hatcheries for release into the river? Even Zoo's aren't silly enough to release animals into an unviable habitat.

THEIR HABITAT MUST BE PROTECTED AT ALL COSTS!

We need to contact world renowned ecologists and ask them for their comments on breed/release centres without having an ecosystem that can support them after they are released.

It looks like the Government are "doing conservation" in the media's and public's eyes but the facts are they are not! All they are doing is providing a good food source for their natural predators.

What happens after the ten years are up and everyone packs up their bags and goes home?

This ten year program will not help the Mary River turtle, as hatchlings take 15-20 years to reach sexual maturity. All they will do is take gravid animals from the wild, induce them to lay, incubate the eggs and say look what a wonderful job we have done!

In our preliminary findings, we have noted that the Mary River turtle is doing very well in the upper catchment and does not need any unnecessary and costly intervention. We have noted that so far we have caught 66% juvenile MRT's which indicates that the population is sustainable.

What we have found is that they prefer a very particular and unique habitat. That is what should be protected to ensure their survival, and that their numbers will increase.

Limiting their habitat = Limiting their maximum population. The larger the population, the more stable it is genetically. Hatcheries are nothing more than band-aid solutions."

FIELD TRIP TO ROSE/ ROWE'S LAGOON, NSW

Article by Mandy Conway

On Friday, 30 November 2007, five ACTHA members went on an impromptu field trip to search for reptiles, specifically Tiger Snakes. The team included Dennis Dyer, Joe McAuliffe, Margaret Ning and Mandy Conway, with Ric Longmore as our guide.

A convoy of two vehicles met along the Federal Highway and proceeded to our destination: Rose, now sign-marked Rowe's, Lagoon, just North of Collector (South of Goulburn). The grim weather outlook didn't deter us as we arrived, donned the boots, gathered the insect repellent and cameras, and held a brief chit-chat to discuss logistics.

Ric has visited this Lagoon twice a year since 1963, once in Spring and then at the end of Summer. His main interest lies with the Tiger Snake population however any reptile find is a bonus.

Ric explained the history of the area noting that it had always been referred to as Rose Lagoon, mainly because of the still existing briar patches which are the result of roses former sheep farmers must

have once planted. At some stage the sign at the picnic area had been altered to say Rowe's Lagoon and we can only presume this was done to recognise a former land owner. Ruins of the houses and old orchards could only just be seen.

The lagoon is surrounded by a couple of properties and apparently holds a NSW wildlife reserve status. It has a nice picnic area and environmentally friendly toilet complex. At least three cars pulled up while we were there to utilise the facilities and have lunch.

Over the years Ric said he had seen the Tiger Snake population dwindle and none had been observed by him since 2001. In the last five



years Ric said reeds had died, there was almost no bird life and the last few Tiger Snakes observed appeared inbred ie stunted growth with a 2ft specimen the longest found. Food sources such as frogs were also virtually non existent due to the complete lack of water.

Rowe's Lagoon is fed by a creek which virtually dried up as a result of the drought. Our trip was to see if the recent rain fall had had any affect on the area, both animal and plant wise.

So off we all trod with high hopes as the rain started to fall. We planned to walk around the entire Lagoon, some 3kms. "It's not that far, really..." Ric enthused several times.

Marvellous! Ric, clad in his Crickey! gear, was moving at a rapid pace exclaiming this was the best water level he had seen in three years. Reeds were plentiful in the main body of water and also in the many smaller ponds we explored. Excitement mounted as tadpoles were discovered in a fairly shallow 20m x 8m pond, and frog calls noted. "The water looks alkaline and seems to have a high Tannin level" Ric said.

Joe spotted the first frog: a Spotted Grass Frog (*Limnodynastes tasmaniensis*) pictured below.



The quaint sign on the BBQ building at the Lagoon

Then an adult *Crinia parinsignifera*. Many more of these two frogs were found along the way.

Joe also spotted the first lizard:

Bassiana duperreyi. A lovely creature who was gravid. A Cunningham Skink quickly followed.

An adult *Hemiergis decresiensis* appeared, followed by a lovely skink which Mandy identified as ULBD (*Unknown Little Brown Dude*).

By the time we got half way around, Ibis, a White-necked Heron, Swamp hens and a large flock of Black ducks were seen. Willie Willy-Wagtails were also heard. Ric commented that there used to be Swans too.

Margaret found an adult Tiger Snake skin-shed which Ric estimated at being this or last years shed. He started walking even quicker, leaving us in his wake.

Several dead turtles, probably 3-5 years of age, were found with their head and feet chewed off, indicating the presence of foxes: fox droppings were later seen. Mandy found a healthy live turtle who exuded plenty of stink on being picked up.

We came across a storm water channel which provided evidence of heavy water flow. Several ponds had a film of oil from a diesel spill: a tank had leaked into the area some time ago and it was sad the oil was still evident.

Another Spotted Grass frog, an adult, possibly female, showed up next.

Bingo! A Tiger Snake (*Notechis scutatus*) and yes, Joe found it. It was just under a log on the eastern bank and Ric estimated it was 4-5 years

old and 1m in length. Zooming in by camera we could see a Nematode worm infestation under the skin of the snake's midriff, apparently quite a common occurrence when frogs form the main diet.

An adult Brown Snake was then spotted, on the North-western edge, Ric commenting that it appeared to be in good condition. In the same vicinity were many small frogs whose tails had just about disappeared, indicating that breeding was well and truly rife.

Much bug life was discovered, including large native Cockroaches, Longicorn Beetles, Termites and ants, and the flies were almost unbearable.

A dead rabbit was found in a concrete pipe and it appeared to have died rather suddenly. Mixomatosis?

Three-quarters of the way around and Joe found a baby Tiger. We took pictures and Ric nearly cried with happiness as we realised that Tigers were once again breeding in the area.

We were all soaking wet (except for Dennis in his trenchcoat and hat under a brollie) but no-one cared. It had been an exciting day with many discoveries and relief that the area seemed to be making a comeback with its flora and fauna. Field trip in March 2008?



Nematodes evident under the Tiger Snake's skin.

Margaret Ning identified the following plants on our journey around Rowe's Lagoon

Kangaroo and Wallaby Grass

Red-leg Grass

Lythrum salicaria

Lachnognostis sp.

Pea

Paterson's Curse

Native Love Grass

Wahlenbergia sp. Bluebell

Centella asiatica

Common Geranium

St John's Wort

Hope I spelt these correctly, Ed.



Oh no! This can only mean one thing... I'm going to be made pretty for Christmas!!

SOME WEB SITES WORTH LOOKING AT:

<http://frogs.org.au/>

www.aussiereptilekeeper.com

www.mark.org.au

www.canberraexotics.com.au

http://www3.environment.nsw.gov.au/pdfs/hygiene_protocol_snakes.pdf

<http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/animals/reptiles.htm>

http://www.tams.act.gov.au/live/environment/native_plants_and_animals/licensing_of_plants_and_animals/reptile_policy



A Rowe's Lagoon Skink, photo by Joe McAuliffe

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Editor takes full responsibility for summaries of presentations by Guest Speakers at ACTHA Meetings, article write-up's and editing of other contributions. The views expressed by contributors and authors are not necessarily those of ACTHA.

Please feel free to contact the Editor with any queries.

*Have a very merry Christmas
and safe New Year!*

See you at Snakes Alive! 2008

ACT HERPETOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION PROFILE

ACTHA aims to promote the study and conservation of reptiles and amphibians, and to foster a positive community attitude towards this much maligned group of animals. Our members encompass a broad cross-section of the community. Amateur and professional herpetologists are joined by interested members of the public in learning more about our local frogs, snakes, lizards and turtles, as well as other herpetofauna from Australia and around the world.

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