



ACTHA CONTACT DETAILS

ACTHA
PO Box 160
Jamison ACT 2614
Inquiries: Margaret on 6241 4065
E-mail: margaretning@iprimus.com.au

ACTHA NEWS FEB - MAR 09

*Newsletter of the
ACT Herpetological
Association Inc.*

YOUR COMMITTEE

President	Joe McAuliffe
Vice President	Ric Longmore
Secretary	Angus Kennedy
Treasurer	Margaret Ning
Newsletter Editor	Mandy Conway
Public Officer	John Wombey
Excursion Officer	Ric Longmore
Committee Members	Christian Robertson Philip Robertson DennisDyer
Student Representative	Jake McAuliffe

DIARY DATE

The *bi-monthly* meetings of the Association are held on the *third Tuesday of the month* at 7.30pm, West's Southern Cross Club, Catchpole Street, Macquarie, Belconnen.

UPCOMING MEETING

Tuesday, 17 February 2009

First Guest Speaker: Scott Keogh,
Associate Professor in Evolutionary Biology, ANU

Transvestites of the lizard world

The males of many lizard species are highly colourful and these colours are important signals that serve for both sexual attraction and male-male intimidation. But what if males could impersonate the colours of females? This happens in both African chameleons and African flat lizards. Scott will talk about the research that he and Martin Whiting have been doing for many years on these two groups.

Second Guest Speaker: Frank Knight, wildlife artist

Frank Knight was a member of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research in the 60/70s where he was the resident wildlife artist. Much of his work appears in important field guides of birds and mammals as well as stamps.

He has recently completed plates for a *Field Guide to Australian Frogs*, text by Mike Tyler, which should be published around May this year.

Mr Knight would like to give the Association an opportunity to see some of the plates, which will be available for sale at a later date.



Matthew Barnes, from WA, visited Snakes Alive! with his dad Michael.

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The International Scene

Is global warming really killing amphibians worldwide or... *page 8*.

What species is that?

Yellow frogs hopping towards a campfire? *page 9*.

ACTHA's 2008 Christmas party

A fine affair, *page 9*.

A black snake eats a brown snake who lives to tell the tale...

Unbelievable but true! *back page*.



Anne Duncan, Director ANBG, started proceedings on the opening day.



Mel Python decides to get up close and personal with the TV crew camera, with our still attached Acting Chief Minister Katy Gallagher being dragged closer into focus. Luckily Dennis Dyer was on hand to untangle everyone so the Minister could continue to chat with audience members. Photos by Mandy Conway.

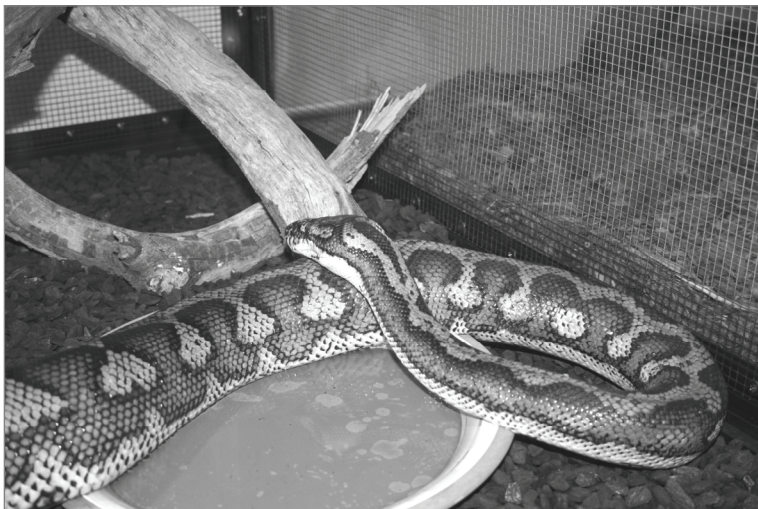


tee hee hee.....



A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

The views expressed by contributors and authors and any links to Websites provided in this Newsletter are not necessarily those of ACTHA.



'Fingers', Greg Cover's Coastal Carpet Python looks small here!

SNAKES ALIVE! 2009

**12 to 18 January 2009,
Australian National Botanic Gardens,
Canberra**

This article by Mandy Conway

A message from our President, Joe McAuliffe

I'm pleased to report that *Snakes Alive! 2009* was a great success! ACTHA can be proud of the fact that we have managed to put on one of the best reptile displays within our region. This year the Exhibition had more species diversity than ever before. One of the highlights for me was the presence of the Pig-nose Turtles. The exhibition looked very professional and the nocturnal display was particularly effective.



Joe McAuliffe with one of his Olive Pythons

During the course of the week members gave talks on reptiles and amphibians covering topics ranging from captive husbandry, which included feeding displays, to local conservation issues.

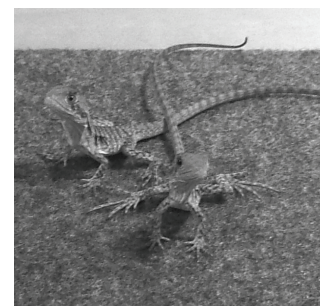
Looking ahead, it will be challenging to make significant improvements to the exhibition. It seems that we attract larger crowds when we have something new and exciting to offer in our displays such as the Corroboree Frog display of 2006. We need to start thinking about new ways to attract people who wouldn't normally come to our display. The more people

that we attract, the more people we can potentially educate. Your Committee would welcome any suggestions that could increase visitation to our future displays.

Cheers, Joe



Peter Child's endearing young Pig-nose Turtles were very popular.



Angus Kennedy's Eastern Water Dragons, dad on left and his young on right.

Photos this page by Mandy Conway.

A message from our Secretary, Angus Kennedy

The New Year has yet again begun in the most appropriate way: with an incredibly successful *Snakes Alive!* As the new Secretary for ACTHA I had the pleasure of being able to help with the organisation of the event, and I have been left with many happy memories and a lot to say about the Association. First, however, I must admit a dark and terrible secret... this was in fact the first *Snakes Alive!* I have ever been to. How, you may ask, could anyone operating on a Canberran calendar not have attended what is, as Ric most eloquently put it, an event as highly anticipated (if not notorious!) as Summernats? To be honest I don't know, but I have definitely been missing out! Luckily it is of some benefit as I believe that I am in a good position to give a 'newbie' impression of the Exhibition. Now that I have come clean, I have a few words that I would like to say about *Snakes Alive!* and the Association.

I believe that I can sum up in three words: people, people, reptiles. While it is our amazing herpetofauna that takes centre stage, *Snakes Alive!* clearly shows us that ACTHA's most valuable asset for achieving its goals are its dedicated, clever and hard working members. The sheer scale of the event is amazing – I can say with some certainty that there are very few (if any!) other groups of the same size that can consistently attract crowds in excess of 4000 people over the space of a week.

The success of *Snakes Alive!* is a direct result of its volunteers. In the few hours I was able to be at *Snakes Alive!* I could see that members of the public would begin to fully engage once they began speaking to one of the amazing volunteers. It was then that they started to understand, and most importantly appreciate, Australia's unique herpetofauna.



So at the end of *Snakes Alive!*, what was achieved? Every member of the public who comes out of the Exhibition is comfortable around our herpetofauna, and with a greater understanding of the conservation effort, will pass that information onto their children, family and friends. In this we can see the true power of *Snakes Alive!*, it acts as a catalyst for information to pass through social networks with a snowball effect. As Paul Kelly sang back in 1991 '*from little things, big things grow*'.

The dedicated ticketing and merchandise team have made sure that 2009 was the most financially successful yet. Our new President Joe has really driven this Exhibition and the hard work that he has put in can be seen in its success. Last but not least, all of the volunteers who explained the weird and wonderful aspects of our herpetofauna to the 4000+ attendees over the week should be very proud of the tangible difference they have made to the conservation of our herpetofauna.

Cheers, Angus



The tub of Eastern and Blotched Blue-tongued Lizards was as popular as ever. Many of our younger members were on hand to carefully pass around animals for delighted young visitors to pat or hold.

(Photos by (L) Lucinda Royston and (R) Mandy Conway)

THE BUILD UP...

As usual, there was much organising of enclosures and contents, animals and relevant permits, and fretting of logistics, especially in the month leading up to it.

Virtually all of the Committee members and many ACTHA members were there bright and early on Sunday, 11th January, to ensure the majority of the workload was taken care of throughout the day. Some last minute speeding to Bunnings to collect light globes (twice) etc was handled in style.

READY, SET, GO!

As in previous years, people started to queue at the entrance 15 minutes before the opening time of 10am. And the first query of what constituted a 'pensioner discount' took just 5 minutes. A record!

At noon, **Anne Duncan, Director of the Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG)**, addressed the crowd to welcome them to another *Snakes Alive!* Exhibition where learning about the diversity and

wonderful secrets of our Australian reptiles and amphibians would be the order of the day.

Anne started by acknowledging the official land owners of the area and thanked ACTHA for once again organising this hugely popular Summer activity.

"The ANBG sees itself as promoting biodiversity and conservation in general, not just plants. Particularly at this time when climate change is threatening our wildlife's existence. ANBG's resident reptiles and amphibians, including the water dragon and the more feared but equally important snakes, would also receive informative attention" Anne said.

Our Exhibition guest **Katy Gallagher, Deputy Chief Minister of the ACT**, started by saying she was first exposed to an exhibition such as this, albeit smaller, at a school fete earlier this year. "ANBG is such a lovely place in which to host a much larger version providing a wonderful opportunity for children to raise their awareness and understanding of reptiles and amphibians in a very welcoming environment, especially when not sure about these animals."



Photo by Mandy Conway.

The Minister acknowledged the work required in setting up such an exhibition in regards to enclosures, temperature control etc.

Looking at her diary the Minister noted "meeting, meeting, meeting, opening *Snakes Alive!*, meeting, meeting... Highlight of my day!"

Dennis Dyer then said a few words and encouraged the Minister to come back during the week with family and friends to learn even more of the Association's aims, only part of which is education.

Having recently attended someone's 100th birthday party Dennis reflected on the thought of conserving the Australia that was here before we arrived.

People can attend this Exhibition, a non-threatening environment for young people in particular, to have a look at what Australia has got and to go away thinking about how they themselves can do something to preserve and protect these wonderful creatures.

This doesn't mean going out into the bush and picking snakes up, a very dangerous thing to do in this region, rather just observing them in their natural environment and leaving them alone. It's nice to think that a native animal such as a python can sit up the tree and we can go bushwalking through this exhibition and not be disturbed by that animal and particularly that animal not being disturbed by us.

The message is awareness and understanding of reptiles in the region to ensure children are respectful of snakes in their natural environment and that the Exhibition can offer a safe encounter with a snake in the child's environment.



Photo by Lucinda Royston.



Young Bert, Central Bearded Dragon, kept a keen eye on things.

Displays have been held at ANBG since 2002 and continue to draw large crowds, with many people travelling fair distances to attend or ensuring their holiday in the Capital coincided with the event.

One particular gentleman and his son (*front page*), from Perth, were holidaying with his in-laws and he was determined to attend the *Snakes Alive!* Exhibition this year. He was very impressed with the way the reptiles were exhibited and even more so when his young son was allowed, nay encouraged, to hold *Mel* the Carpet Python. Whilst reptiles were relatively common out west, the opportunity to hold and see these animals so closely was something "I and my son will always remember!"

MID WEEK GET TOGETHER

The Wednesday evening party for all of the people who help make this Exhibition happen saw fine food, drinks and much chatter, as well as a more laid back perusal of the display.

Joe McAuliffe once again thanked all ACTHA volunteers and our extended colleagues which include ANBG staff, Reptiles Inc., MARK, ACT Environment for providing permits and reiterated the enormous amount of work that goes into an Exhibition such as this.

Joe highlighted that monies raised will once again be channeled back into reptile education, research and conservation. He also said that raising awareness of herps, the smiles on the faces of visitors and endeavoring to change the public's opinions of these creatures are all important features of the week.

Thanks once again to Peter Child, Reptiles Inc., for allowing ACTHA to exhibit animals from his personal collection. ACTHA has now

purchased most of its display enclosures however Peter is still our invaluable advisor and provider of the equipment we always seem to need.

Interestingly, several guests mentioned conversations with out-of-State visitors who would talk about little or no ownership regulation in their State. People also noted that visitors to the Exhibition were decidedly more comfortable coming into the display to see the animals, especially the snakes, as opposed to previous years. Is our positive message of reptiles coming through?

Good finds? a couple from Queanbeyan mentioned they have had a Green Tree Frog, *Litoria caerulea* living on their verandah for the past 18 months. This frog's normal range goes no further south than Sydney.

CROWD NUMBERS

Margaret Ning reports

The number of visitors was slightly up at this year's *Snakes Alive!* display, to 4114 from 4074 last year. This reversed a three year downward trend from the peak year of 2006 (5136 visitors) when we first displayed the Corroboree Frogs.

The hot weather definitely took its toll on a couple of the days but a couple of other days were very slow, including the Saturday, and we can only

speculate that it was because we held the display in the second week of January rather than the third week as per normal.

Door takings were fractionally down on last year, but net sales income was up substantially and the net raffle takings were also up marginally, so our overall income rose by a few hundred dollars. Over \$800 will go directly to Corroboree Frog research from the raffle proceeds.





MERCHANDISE

Our intrepid souvenirs organiser, Lois McAuliffe, has apparently had her merchandise organised since June 2008!! This year, merchandise sales continued steadily throughout the week ensuring a handsome profit. Thanks Lois and all the junior members who helped sell things!



WHAT DRAGON IS THAT?

Jake McAuliffe reports as our student representative

At *Snakes Alive!* I had a lot of people asking how to tell the difference between the Eastern/Common Bearded Dragon (*Pogona barbata*) and the Central Bearded Dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*).

The **Eastern/Common Bearded Dragon** has:

- a very lean and narrow head
- is very dull and grey most of the time
- has a much thicker layer of side spines.

The **Central Bearded Dragon** has:

- a much more robust and wider head
- is more colourful
- side spines that are much narrower than the Eastern BD.

RAFFLE RESULTS

Another successful raffle saw an increase in ticket sales. The lucky winners were:

First Prize: Reptile tank with fittings to the value of \$350

Congratulations Patrick Devlin from Milton NSW (age 11)

Second Prize: Reptiles of Australia
Congratulations Chris McGrath

Third Prize: Reptiles of NSW
Congratulations Jon (secret surname...)



*Joe feeding 'Mel' (top), Greg with 'Fingers' (above), a Corroboree Frog (below) and Bert Goanna again (bottom).
Photos by Lucinda Royston and Mandy Conway.*



THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE

IS GLOBAL WARMING REALLY KILLING AMPHIBIANS WORLDWIDE OR?

ScienceDaily (Nov 13, 2008), adapted from materials provided by Penn State.

Evidence that global warming is causing the worldwide declines of amphibians may not be as conclusive as previously thought, according to biologists. The findings, which contradict two widely held views, could help reveal what is killing the frogs and toads and aid in their conservation.

"We are currently in the midst of a sixth mass extinction event," said Peter Hudson, the Willaman professor of biology at Penn State and co-author of the research study. "And amphibians are bearing the brunt of the problem."

Studies suggest that more than 32 percent of amphibian species are threatened and more than 43 percent face a steep decline in numbers.

Much of the massive declines associated with amphibians appear to be centered in places such as Central America and Australia, said Hudson. "It appears to be linked to a chytrid fungus -- *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* (Bd) -- which we did not know affected frogs," he added.

There are currently two theories on the extinctions. The first -- chytrid-thermal-optimum hypothesis -- suggests that the declines were triggered by global warming which pushed daytime and nighttime temperatures to converge to levels that are optimal for the growth of the chytrid fungus.

But according to a second theory -- spatiotemporal-spread hypothesis -- amphibian declines were simply driven by the introduction and subsequent spread of the fungus from certain locations.

"Our models suggest that both these theories are slightly wrong," added Hudson, director of the Huck Institutes of the Life Sciences at Penn State. "Neither of them fit available data."

While the researchers do not completely discount the role of global warming in amphibian declines, they believe that evidence linking it with the declines is weak.

"There is indeed a positive, multi-decade correlation between amphibian extinctions in Latin America and air temperature in the tropics," said Jason Rohr, lead author and assistant professor of biology at University of South Florida. "But this relationship should not necessarily be interpreted as causal."

Rohr and his University of South Florida colleagues Thomas R. Raffel and John M. Romansic, both faculty

associates, along with Hudson and Hamish McCallum, professor of wildlife research, University of Tasmania, tested the competing theories by re-analyzing the same data used in conceiving the two ideas.

The scientists checked the first hypothesis to see whether climatic factors such as the percentage of cloud cover, narrowing difference between the lowest average daily temperature and the highest average daily temperature, and the predicted growth rate of the fungus under certain temperatures, could accurately predict extinctions.

Their statistical analysis revealed no such narrowing of temperature spans in the 1980s, when extinctions were increasing. When the difference in average daily temperatures did narrow in the 1990s, amphibian extinctions were decreasing.

Further, while the chytrid-thermal-optimum hypothesis showed high elevations as having the highest proportion of amphibian declines and the second highest proportion of amphibian extinctions, statistical analysis showed that growth rates for the fungus and cloud cover to be lowest at the highest elevation.

"While there is evidence to suggest that the chytrid fungus is killing the frogs, further research is needed before we can conclude that climate change is accelerating the spread," said Rohr, who previously was a researcher with Penn State's Center for Infectious Disease Dynamics.

A separate statistical analysis of the spread hypothesis also indicated inconsistencies between the year of amphibian declines, and the sites from where the fungus might have been introduced.

"Almost all of our findings are contrary to the predictions of the chytrid-thermal-optimum hypothesis," said Hudson.

The researchers say their findings show the pitfalls of drawing conclusions from multi-decadal correlations between climatic factors and extinctions, and underscores the need for molecular data on the fungus to understand from where and how it spread.

"We are facing a cataclysmic global decline in amphibians, caused primarily by the effect of a fungus that was historically not important, but the emergence of which might be associated with climate change, along with the use of herbicides and pesticides," Hudson explained. "The bottom line is that there doesn't seem to be one single explanation for the massive amphibian declines. It could be a mix of other factors."

The team's findings were published in a recent issue of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. The work is funded by the National Science Foundation.

WHAT SPECIES IS THAT?

Angus Kennedy, ACTHA

On a camping trip along the Deua River, Deua National Park (about 30 minutes from Araluen) we were amazed to see half a dozen of these bright yellow frogs leaping towards us! They positioned themselves on rocks quite close to our campfire. This was in early Spring in October 08 and it was still quite cold.

Obviously they were attracted by the heat, but we were worried that some were going to keep hopping right into the blaze!

To help identify it I contacted **Conrad Hoskin, School of Botany and Zoology, ANU**, who confirmed their identity.

"They are Stony-creek Frogs (*Litoria lesueuri*) and they're all males. The males are bright yellow when in breeding condition and can be impressively bright (as in your photos). Otherwise they are brownish. The females are brown, a fair bit larger, and less likely to be found along the river. Stony-creek frogs are quite common along rocky streams and rivers. I'm not sure why they were attracted to the fire?!, perhaps the warmth?

Thanks again for sending those shots through, I'm always keen to see what frogs people are seeing where."



Above, the bright yellow male Stony-creek Frog (*Litoria lesueuri*) (imagine them in colour!! - Ed.) and below the plain, brown female.

Photos by Angus Kennedy and Conrad Hoskin.



ACTHA CHRISTMAS PARTY

16 December 2008

Margaret Ning

Around 30 ACTHA members and family congregated at the Nursery area of the Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG) for our annual Christmas Party. Only the location and some of the faces had changed from previous Christmas parties, as everyone seems to be happy with the same food and drinks from year to year. KFC, pides, pizza, and Greek salad, followed by ice cream for dessert, seem to be a proven formula!!

In addition to the great tucker and the chance to catch up with other ACTHA members, the highlight of the evening was a tour of some of the green houses. Joe showed us threatened plant species and alpine species grown from seed collected on his many visits to Kosciuszko National Park over the last few years. He also explained

what ANBG is trying to achieve with the seed collection which is happening in the face of climate change.

The air was abuzz with discussion of *Snakes Alive!*, who was volunteering, what exhibits we would have and how we were going to do things in January 2009.

The evening was very pleasant, and warm enough for us all to eat outside until the mossies made life a little uncomfortable.

It was a fitting finale to ACTHA's year. We have a very friendly group of people, both adults and younger, who all contribute a lot, enabling us to achieve our goals of education and conservation in the wider community.

HUNGRY SNAKE DISCOVERS YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

ABC News, Tue Jan 27, 2009

A New South Wales man has had an interesting encounter with not one but two snakes, and he has the photos to prove it.

Tony Barton, from South Gundagai, says he and his wife had just been out for lunch about a month ago when they returned home and spotted a black snake alongside the car.

It turned out to be a Red belly Black Snake about 165 cm long - a species well known for a taste for other snakes.

"It looked like there was a stick or branch off a tree that was coming up towards it, so we drove past to about get 10 metres away from it and I ducked up the back lawn and around to have a close look," he said.

Mr Barton says his wife called out to him to ask him what he was staring at.

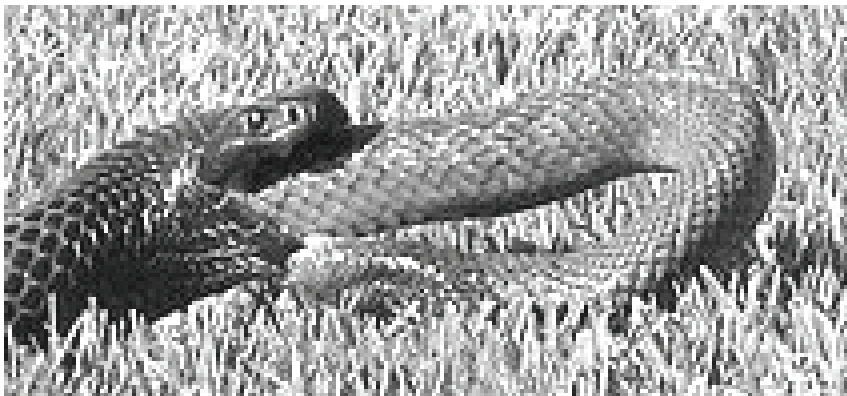
He yelled back, "Well, it's a jolly big black snake eating another one! Consuming it! You keep an eye on it and I'll duck in and get the camera."

Mr Barton says it took about 10 to 15 minutes for the black snake to fully consume the brown snake, which he says was about 135 cm long.

Then it went off for a snooze.

"It was fairly sluggish after such a huge meal," he said.

Brown Snake attached to Red-bellied Black Snake's lip to help pull itself out (below) and 'going in' (top right), 'coming out' (bottom right)



Regurgitator

Initially, Mr Barton thought someone had killed the snake and it was all a practical joke.

He says when the black snake finished eating the brown snake, something irritated the black and it moved off to try to get a bit of relief from the discomfort.

Not long after, the snake returned - this time to the back lawn.

"I walked up and got within three metres of it," he said.

"I was having a close look at it when it opened its mouth a little bit and I spotted this beady eye and the head of the brown snake in its mouth!

"So I got the camera ready, took the shot as the brown snake came out a few inches, fastened onto the black's lower jaw and pulled itself completely out.

"It had all this mucus all over it. Then the two parted ways."

Mr Barton reckons that somehow the brown snake turned itself around inside the black snake.

"When you tell these stories no-one believes you, but I have the photographs," he said.



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