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ACTHA INC. NEWS FEB - MAR 2010

Newsletter of the
ACT Herpetological
Association Inc.



Each reptile feeding session
was immensely popular



Jakub aged 4, above, and
Katie aged 3, right, both
loved the 'tub' bluey the best



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 Dennis Dyer Peter Child Iris Carter
Student Representative	Jake McAuliffe

* Denotes Life Members

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Local herps and activities: interesting sightings and requests for information from our Website, page 2.

Burrowing into ACTHA's past: snippets from the past coming soon, page 2.

Where to find frogs: a summary of Martin Westgate's presentation on his work in the Jervis Bay area, given at the ACTHA Oct 2009 meeting, page 3.

ACTHA's Snakes Alive! Exhibition at the Australian National Botanic Gardens 2010: turn to page 7 for all the photos and action. Our President and Treasurer both have something to say on pages 10 and 11.

Local ACT reptile species displayed: John Wombey describes the local little skins on display for the first time at this year's Snakes Alive! and Geoff Robertson tells us how they were collected, page 12.

The Spiny-tailed Monitor:
By Jake McAuliffe, page 14.

A Seminar on geckos by Dr Tony Gamble on 18 February at the ANU: and

A field trip to Nimmitabel in March:
see page 14 (back page) for details.

DIARY DATE

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

UPCOMING MEETING

Tuesday, 16 February 2010

Guest Speakers:

Joe McAuliffe

Breeding the Centralian Earless Dragon
(*Tympanocryptis centralis*).

Joe started with just a few individuals of this dragon several years ago and now has nearly sixty of various ages. Joe will describe his successful breeding technique to ACTHA members and representatives from stakeholder organisations. A captive breeding program for this species' near cousin, the ACT's Grassland Earless Dragon, could be possible in the future.

Geoff Robertson will give a brief talk on **Molonglo developments on the Pink-tailed Worm Skink**

Tim McGrath, will give a brief talk on his proposed **Grassland Earless Dragon project** for his Masters degree.



Here's looking at you!



LOCAL HERP ISSUES AND ACTIVITIES

By Mandy Conway

The ACTHA Website has succeeded in providing long overdue information regarding our local herpetofauna judging by the number of people who commented on the website whilst attending our recent *Snakes Alive! 2010* Exhibition. ACTHA has received several enquiries from the general public about our local reptiles, specifically asking for help in identifying, or what to do with, the critters that have been found in backyards. A few people have sent in photos of their herp 'visitors' to help with identification and you will see these as they arise in future newsletters. To date, sightings of small garden skinks has been common, our only 'issue' being convincing a lady that these skinks do not dig up nice green lawns.

The Website is also proving to be a valuable tool in alerting herp enthusiasts and authorities about disturbing activities involving reptiles and amphibians in and around Canberra.

'Rosemary' contacted ACTHA through the Website to express concern about possible reptile poachers in the Mt Rogers, Belconnen, area.

Two Mt Rogers' residents whose properties abut the local reserve/parkland have recently seen people acting suspiciously.

"On Mt Rogers (above Flynn, Fraser, Spence, Melba) many rocks are overturned and not replaced when 'young people' are seeking reptiles.

Local families have watched, enjoyed and admired families of dragons and blue-tongue lizards in their mulched and partly rocky gardens for years.

In one reserve-bordering yard the householder spoke to a 'young man in khaki' who was lifting rocks and poking about in leaf-litter. He said he "was just checking up on your lizards". More was said about his trespassing, not the reserve etc. He left in a ute whose number was recorded. I think the police were notified.

Some days later a motorcycle drove into the cul-de-sac and someone went to the same garden, foraged, picked up something and stowed it into the motorcycle's bag. He left too quickly for any numberplate to be recorded. A Ranger was informed but, understandably, like the police, there's not much they can do.

Neither of these two Mt Rogers' families has seen anything of their lizard families since early December 09.

Given that these two raids seem to have been carried out by adults as opposed to teenagers there might be a suggestion of some sort of 'racket' going on. Obviously the two gardens have become known as a good source for these two species implying several trips by the thieves.

Does ACTHA know of any such problems? Is there anyone the two families can contact, apart from yourselves, to get a broader picture of what's going on?

BURROWING INTO ACTHA'S PAST

By Mandy Conway

Having some time on my hands over the holiday period I decided to sort through the contents of a 4 drawer filing cabinet containing old ACTHA material and wow... There was the usual filing material but the more I sifted through the paper the more I realised I was sitting on an enormous wealth of information. So much historical data, eg surveys, that many of our current young researchers would be delighted to have access to.

I put good copies in date order and filled in the gaps with Ric Longmore's editions (luckily he kept every copy). That was the beginning.

Next I started to compile a brief contents list of each edition. I'm up to 8 pages and the year 2003. The following headings give an indication of contents:

- Funding for ACTHA's Gippsland Water Dragon Project accepted by The Peter Rankin Trust Fund;
- Small-eyed Snake *Cryptophus nigrescens*, 9 specimens found in the ACT: an unusual occ;

- Exciting new locality record for the ACT: James Fitzgerald finds the Nobby Dragon near the Lower Molonglo Sewerage Works;
- 'Australian Frogs' by Michael Tyler, book review by Will Osborne;
- Excursions to view proposed freeway routes through Gungahlin and a Brindabella search for Corroboree Frogs;
- 'Frogs spell danger for earth' newspaper article on a trend biologists say appears linked to the planet's deteriorating environment;
- Reptiles in the Home Paddock Project, more discoveries Oct '90;
- Mallee Reptiles in Yookamurra Sanctuary, South Australia, Canberra students take a trip;
- 12 ACTHA members take a field trip on 26 Sept to Hume Industrial Estate ACT to search for reptiles. 'Earless Dragons in numbers'.

Starting next issue there will be a new section in our Newsletter where random articles will be reproduced, including a full contents list for that edition. Anyone wishing to see full articles will be able to contact me to make viewing arrangements.

WHERE TO FIND FROGS

Our Guest Speaker at our 20 October 2009 Meeting was **Martin Westgate**, PhD Scholar, Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU. This write-up by Mandy Conway

Martin studies the distribution of frogs in the Jervis Bay area, which is located on a beautiful stretch of the south coast of NSW. He has always had a soft spot for these animals and previous Frogwatch activities have certainly helped him to identify the many frog calls he painstakingly tracks. Moving away from wide-scale distribution studies, Martin's work concentrates on the local abundance of species.

"Why study the distribution of a species?" Martin asks of members. "If you don't know where a species is you can't conserve it, but just because a species has a narrow distribution doesn't necessarily mean that it is rare." Martin said.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISTRIBUTION

Example 1: Often field guides contain sentences like 'Species X is confined to a small area'. But does a small range size necessarily make the animal rare?



Sometimes very much so, as in the case of the Gastric Brooding Frog (left). But not always, as was found to be the case of the Sandhill Frog in WA (bottom left).



Example 2: The issue of local abundance: 'Species X is widespread but rarely seen'. This could mean a few things; including the species is hard to find, or restricted to particular habitats. The Giant Burrowing Frog is a good example of this dilemma.

At Jervis Bay, trapping at 110 sites, 3 times a year, has found this species on only 7 occasions, and it has not yet been found at the same site twice. They are caught every year in completely different locations. "Are they hitch hiking on someone's car perhaps?!" Martin joked. The low capture rate makes things difficult and identification of individuals was not really feasible.



Sometimes species rely on aspects of habitat that are hard for

us to see. For example: *Litoria nudidigita* (above) a stream dweller, was the only green species of tree frog Martin found during surveys in Jervis Bay.

The frog was found to be camouflaged not just to our eyes, but into the infra-red spectrum as well, suggesting it is well adapted to hiding in vegetation.



"Fine-scale habitat matters to species.

Understanding habitat preferences - whether a species prefers swamps, heaths or forest etc - means we can work out what effect any changes to habitat would have. This is the point where we can intervene and make conservation efforts. A species' natural dependence on its' habitat allows us to investigate things like the effect of land use change, or the management effects of forestry, fire or agriculture."

SET OF ECOLOGICAL THEORIES

To understand how frogs use the landscape, we need to take into account two types of pattern. The first is that, as discussed above, frogs are likely to have habitat 'preferences'. This suggests that ponds with similar vegetation will contain similar groups of species. The second pattern is that frogs often find it difficult to move large distances. This means that ponds which are close together are also likely to contain similar groups of species.

Which of these patterns best predict which frogs will occur in which ponds? Each approach predicts different distributions of frogs, and so by looking at real landscapes, we can see which theory would best apply.

MARTIN'S STUDY AREA: BOODEREE

NATIONAL PARK IN JERVIS BAY

Booderee National Park, Jervis Bay, is home to a couple of villages and an airfield, with the rest of the area being a national park dotted with lakes, waterholes, swamps and a few creeks. It also has very interesting and varied vegetation, including large areas of both heath and forest (slide 33). The area is excellent frog habitat, and allows us to test the relative importance of habitat quality and isolation of frogs.

Call surveys were carried out across 110 sites. In each of these sites Martin did 9 surveys of 5 mins duration.

Species found during call surveys:

Myobatrachidae ground frogs (below)

Crinia signifera
Paracrinia haswelli
Pseudophryne bibronii
Uperoleia tyleri



Limnodynastidae (possibly a subset of the Myobatrachidae, perhaps not – it depends who you read!) charismatic marsh frogs (below)

Limnodynastes peronii
Limnodynastes dumerilii



Hylidae tree frogs of which there were many

Litoria dentata *L. freycineti*
L. jervisiensis *L. nudidigita*
L. peronii *L. tyleri*



Other species...

The Giant Burrowing Frog (*Heleioporus australiacus*) was seen at night on tracks but not heard.

Litoria verreauxii trapped (probably) but not heard calling (blurry pic (right) taken in Dec 2008, very uncommon).

Limnodynastes tasmaniensis spotted grass frog was trapped before but not heard calling.



SOME STRANGE PATTERNS EMERGED

- Some species call without water: *Litoria freycineti*, *L. dentata*, *Pseudophryne bibronii*;
- Some frogs got 'lost', *Litoria nudidigita* mostly called at creeks, but on one occasion was found at a swamp. Others showed unexpected patterns; for example, it has been suggested that *L. tyleri* used to be common and *L. peroni* comparatively rare in Booderee. However Martin found the opposite during his surveys: a strange pattern that is difficult to quantify.

Booderee Park Management were keen to see if their fire management strategy was affecting frog populations. Their bush fire history data was comprehensive, so Martin was able to compare the distribution of frog species at breeding sites against the fire history of those sites.

In most animal taxa one would expect a repopulation response to fire frequency or 'time since fire'. The question begs, however, if frog breeding swamp habitat is 'unburnable' then why would you expect fire to affect the frogs in any way, shape or form?

The image (right) shows the edges of a hazard reduction fire in October 2007.

Once it was put out, Martin was allowed back into the area and

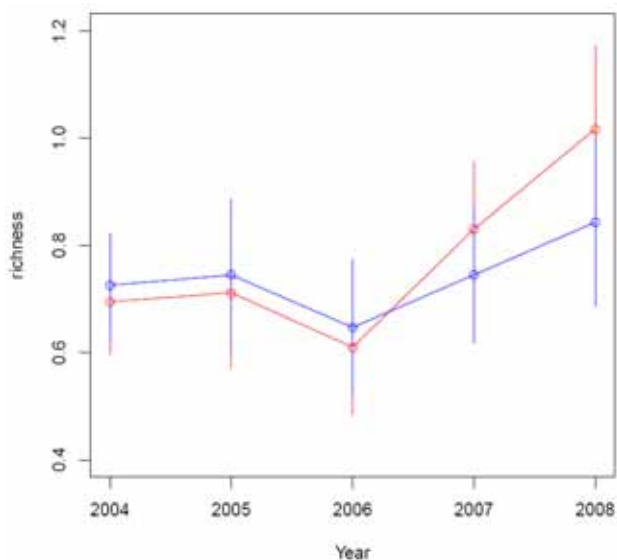
heard many frogs, including a Peron's Tree Frog (right) calling from the burnt trees. Unfortunately the above picture is also a reminder that one of his tape recorders was found incinerated 30cms within the burnt edge. A *crinia* and Delicate Skink (*Lampropholis delicata*) were hiding beneath it, a small mercy.



So should we expect some frogs to be more vulnerable to fire than others? Well, perhaps.

A frog like Peron's Tree Frog with terrestrial habits or *Pseudophryne bibroni*, which breeds terrestrially, could be more strongly affected by fires than those species which occur in water all the time, or burrowing species like *Limnodynastes dumerilli* and possibly *Uperoleia tyleri*. However, in some cases these hypotheses are contradictory eg *Heleioporus australiacus*. These patterns can be evaluated by looking at species groups at many breeding sites; however these show little evidence of the influence of fire on frog populations.

Another way of investigating this problem is by the use of trapping, from which data was available for 2004; the year after the enormous December 2003 bushfire in Booderee National Park. The trap sites were split in half, 50% burnt and 50% unburnt areas, and although there were some differences between

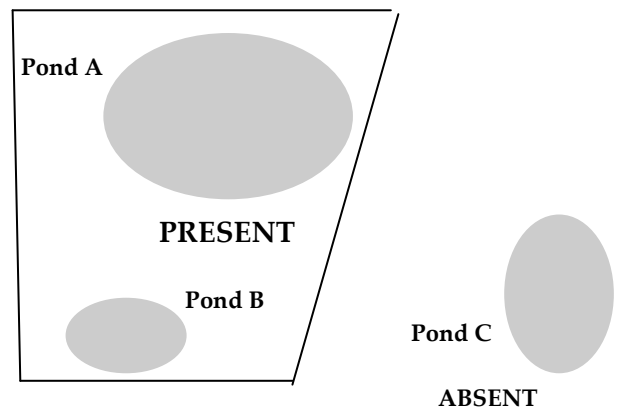


Time series slide: Does fire have an effect?
 After the 2003 Bushfire: blue = unburned
 red = burned

these treatments they were not great. This was a strange result; "So perhaps we shouldn't worry about fire if you are just looking at conserving frog populations", Martin commented. Having said that, Martin and members at the meeting agreed that one particular fire may not make much of a difference to a population however several fires could be a problem. When you look at flora, which is heavily influenced by fire frequency and intensity, impacts could reasonably be expected to follow through to fauna. Drought conditions are yet another factor.

Hypothetical Landscape

...assuming dispersal is limiting

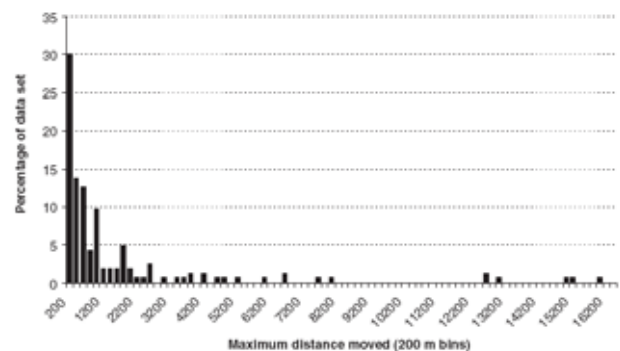


DISPERSAL

Some hypotheses regarding why frogs might be affected by fire has been discussed. Dispersal is another process of interest, to aid our understanding of frog populations.

The diagram above shows that as you go further from water you would have a logarithmic decrease in how many frogs are caught.

Dispersal and the metapopulation paradigm in amphibian ecology and conservation: are all amphibian populations metapopulations? by M. Alex Smith and David M. Green (McGill University, Canada).



The findings were based on radio tracking data from all over the world, however most studies are from the U.S. (NB: 'bins' show the number of observations in each distance class – i.e. how many frogs moved only 200m; how many moved between 200m and 400m, etc.). The findings also show that the details of how far species disperse (on average) vary between species and locations. You can test this without radio tracking, by digging pit fall traps at set distances to achieve similar data (Martin did that with the funding received from ACTHA) to see if you get a logarithmic decrease in captures if you go a certain distance.

Martin encountered many resident snakes and showed a slide of a Diamond Python which sat on one of his pit fall buckets for 4 days, table service?! He more frequently encountered Red-bellied Black Snakes.

Martin also found that captures of frogs logarithmically decreased with increasing distance from water. This is not surprising by itself; however it was interesting that different species moved different distances on average. In theory, these patterns should allow a 'scale up' of predictions to make guesses about which frogs will be able to use which swamps, and test those expectations against actual data. This is a work in progress (see diagram below).

A second question of interest was "Do all frogs disperse at the same rate?" It has been suggested that small frogs travel further afield than the adults, who remain close to their breeding areas. Martin's results suggest that all frogs, whether adults or juveniles, male or female, might be moving as far as each other.

IN SUMMARY

To date we have evidence of the influence of both dispersal and habitat on frog populations. Which is

the more important process, and for which species, is a work in progress.

Findings to date

- Martin has found frogs at large distances from water albeit at low densities.
- Breeding sites are not all that matters. Frogs occur at low densities almost everywhere and terrestrial vegetation has some influence on distributions.
- Fire doesn't affect frog populations all that much though it is possible that some species are more vulnerable than others.
- Dispersal is important at a fine scale but we don't know yet whether it describes landscape-wide patterns.

Where to from here?

The aim with this work is to describe general patterns of how our frogs 'chose' which sites to breed in. This information will be helpful for the management and conservation of these and other frog habitat in the future.

Management and Conservation Article

Differentiating Migration and Dispersal Processes for Pond-Breeding Amphibians

RAYMOND D. SEMLITSCH,¹ *Division of Biological Sciences, 105 Tucker Hall, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211-7400, USA*

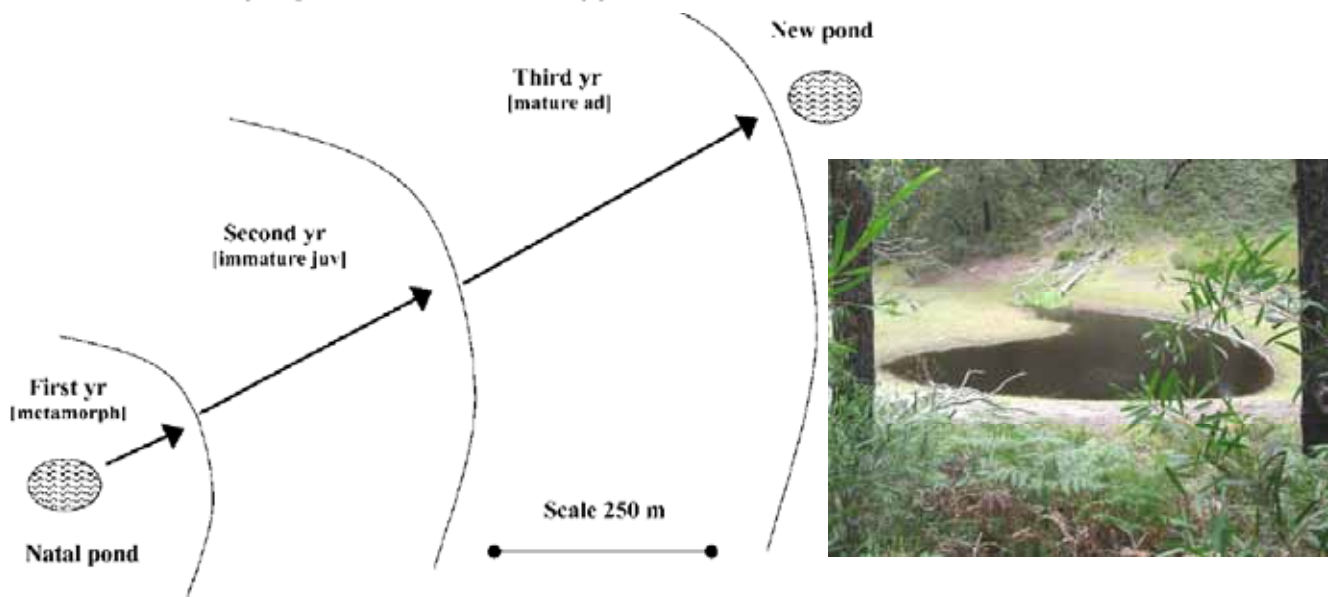


Figure 2. Model of juvenile-based amphibian dispersal with arrows indicating movement. The ultimate distance achieved by individuals occurs over discrete intervals (e.g., yr).

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.

SNAKES ALIVE! EXHIBITION

Held 18 - 24 January 2010 at the Australian National Botanic Gardens, Canberra

This article by Mandy Conway, with photos by Lucinda Royston and Mandy Conway

THE EXHIBITION'S PRODUCERS

Joe McAuliffe started preparing ACTHA's own enclosures for this year's *Snakes Alive!* Exhibition the preceding week. Word has it he spent many hours



before and after work assembling all of the flat-pack units. Cycling in early every morning and then ensuring all was well with the display animals every evening during the Exhibition made for very long days and a very, very long

week. There is no way *Snakes Alive!* could be held without him so be very nice to our President next time you see him, indeed bearing gifts of roaches, crickets and rats (frozen) for him would count as tokens of appreciation.

Of course the display looked awesome thanks to extra supplies from **Peter Child** of Reptiles Inc. Kambah. The Pig-nosed Turtle and crocodile were huge crowd favourites along with the other species Peter kindly lent us, some with their own enclosures. All animals were sustained with fresh produce from Reptiles Inc.. Peter also helped provide



the raffle's 1st prize: a fully set-up reptile tank. The Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG) supplied reptile reference books for 2nd and 3rd prizes.

Margaret Ning has been going to the gym for quite some time and was in excellent physical shape for the annual event, moving quickly from one 'situation' to another with ease. She handled the odd difficult visitor every event attracts with dignity and style. She handled any member requesting money for display goods with the contempt they deserved.

Geoff Robertson just did as he was directed by Margaret and also ensured 'paperwork stuff' and announcements were carried out effectively.

Lucinda Royston

arrived each day warmly welcoming the public who were clamoring to enter the building. Her exercise



routine mainly

comprised of standing up and speaking with great authority to anyone who tried to enter without paying, or jumping over the table to catch a special moment on her camera. An amazing woman who never seemed to let concession or discount demands from some visitors get to her.

Iris Carter was just everywhere each and every day. An extraordinary speed walker who diligently ensured all the animals had everything they needed and more. Her partner Dale quietly helped her when he could catch up.

Trish and Jim Williamson were our chief raffle ticket sellers, with their smiles and "proceeds will be going to Corroboree Frog research" catch-cry enticing many visitors to buy generous quantities of raffle tickets for this worthy cause.

Dennis Dyer and **John Wombey** were there, well, they were there a lot. Both quiet gentlemen entered the building and it took some time before the rest of us knew they had arrived. Crowd control and sharing their enormous knowledge on all things reptile with the public was their main focus before disappearing into thin air.

Ric Longmore had a captive audience with the snakes and museum pieces he had on display, with many young visitors simply awed into quiet admiration. Ric held quite a few interviews during the week with several radio personalities which saw a 'spike' in visitor



numbers sometime later. As a man of immense herp knowledge, gained over a lifetime, all tricky questions were referred to him.





Jake McAuliffe made sure no young person missed out on experiencing the touch of a reptile. His days started out fairly laid back and gained momentum once he had consumed a few high energy drinks. This must have been contagious because the

animals certainly became more lively once he had handled them.

Lois, Connor and Noah McAuliffe supplied, organised and sold much merchandise, with the best sellers being small plastic frogs and herp growing eggs. This year Lois provided a roster for 'the shop' which meant young ACTHA members could meet and compare notes on their lizard and turtle tub duties.

Chris Robertson, Steven Ellis and Mark Robertson carried the reptiles who were able to be handled by visitors around and fielded the thousands of questions asked in the process.

Angelique, Iris E., Emma, the two Sophies, Nicholas, Alisdair, Anam, Ben, Annabelle and Millissa were brilliant young herpetologists, showing children the correct way to hold a skink and ensuring that little hands did not dip into the tub of water containing the long-necked turtles.

Greg Flowers assisted by transporting substrate, water, cage furnishings during the previous week as well as providing moral support for Joe when it was needed. He even cooked a BBQ feast for our Wednesday night get-together in great style. What a man!



The Corroboree Frog tank: just one of the display stations.

THE DOORS OPEN

A queue had formed well before the advertised opening time of 10am on Monday morning. There was a last minute installation of some reptiles who had arrived on the morning, our younger members were making last minute adjustments, the doors opened on time regardless.

The official opening ceremony consisted of **Judy West, Executive Director of the ANBG** greeting the audience and welcoming everyone to the display that is a very popular summer activity.

"Snakes Alive! is being presented by ACTHA and located in the ANBG. It has drawn crowds to the Gardens since its inception in 1987. It's wonderful to see so many active younger members of the Association too."

Dr West continued by saying that the ANBG was pleased to host something that so effectively highlights the diversity of both flora and fauna in Garden's setting. The Gippsland Water Dragon impresses visitors as a visual resident reptile.

She then introduced **Dr Maxine Cooper, Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment**, to open the *Snakes Alive!* Exhibition for 2010.

Dr Cooper spoke briefly before moving towards the gathering of seated children.



She emphasised that "One of my roles is looking after the environment in which these species live. I've ensured that the ACT Government and the community are aware of all the environmental issues."

Dr Cooper asked the attentive children a question: "How many species of snakes are in Australia?", quoting numbers from 10 to 800.

The young lad who provided the correct figure of close to 200 was invited to assist her in handling some of the reptiles.

"Of the species of snakes in Australia there are 11 species in the ACT, so we're really lucky in the bush capital because we have reptiles right on our back doorstep. One of my aims is to educate the ACT residents that the best thing we can do for reptiles is to watch them, stay back and leave them alone in the environment."

She was pleased to convey that her favourite ACT reptile is the local Earless Dragon (*below, a Central Earless Dragon on display*). The ACT hopes to

protect it by caring for our grasslands which is where it lives. Majura Valley grasslands provide a great environment for them. Dr



Cooper said that this event is fantastic because it brings people together and educates them all about reptiles. "Just because they don't have big brown eyes or aren't furry doesn't mean we don't love them."

"I'm very pleased to be able to open this Exhibition and thank you all for coming. If you have cats or dogs, keep them away from locations where reptiles occur, particularly during the reptiles' active period when they also assist in reducing the numbers of insects and vermin in our area."

ONE OF THE FEEDING EXPERIENCES

"Effective immediately we have to be cautious, the prey items are in the room" Joe said which resulted in a relatively hushed crowd. Mel and Poe Carpet Pythons, perched above the crowd on a large branch, also seemed to become aware of their impending meals. "I don't think they've detected it yet but it won't take long" Joe added. Crowd got quieter.

"One of the prey items we're feeding Poe is a Starling. A pest species which is caught and killed humanely." Poe's tongue flickered quickly and his body started to straighten as he sensed his meal. "All he needs now is a heat signature. Do have to be careful at this point as they have quite a strike range" Joe said as he picked up a very large pair of feeding tongs. Adults uttered 'Awww' as the children excitedly squealed "look look look..."

"A Snake the size of Poe could happily eat 3 or 4 starlings in one sitting" Joe informed the crowd.

Mel was offered a rat and the crowd emitted an even louder 'Ohhhhh'.

"These snakes, although pets, still have their instinctive reaction to constrict their prey once caught, increasing the constriction each time the prey item breathes out to ensure it can't breathe in. The snake's bottom jaw dislocates in 3 places so they can take a prey item larger than the size of their own head. Snakes don't chew their food they swallow it whole, preferably head first which is the easiest way. Sometimes snakes need to let go of their prey item to find the head although they usually don't like to do this. The top jaw starts to 'walk' over the prey item until the largest part is in their mouth which is when the neck muscles come into play. Consuming their food takes 10-20mins depending on which part they start with first."

'How long can a snake go without feeding in Canberra?' someone asked. "During winter, Mel and Poe will not feed between March and August. Once 'awake' the snakes still won't want to feed because they are too busy breeding. The females, if gravid, will only feed for a short time and when she lays her eggs she won't feed much because she won't go far from her eggs." Joe answered.

In Summer Mel and Poe get fed 2 or 3 prey items (10% of the snakes body mass) once every three weeks. Alternatively you could feed them 1 prey item every week. Joe prefers to feed smaller prey items every three weeks because this is easier to digest.

Most of Joe's snakes eat anything of suitable size offered however a few individuals insist on small rats or mice as opposed to Starlings or adult rats. Each snake is different and has its preferences.



Geoff Robertson and Lois McAuliffe



TOUCHING MOMENTS

Our intrepid overseas traveller **Angus Kennedy** appeared on Saturday to be reunited with Bert the lace monitor, *Varanus varius*. The moment Angus opened the enclosure door to touch and ‘speak’ with Bert was incredible and apparently the highlight of the week for Joe.



The amazing bond between this reptile and its owner, built over 4 years, is just one example of the affinity many herpetologists have experienced with their animals and is always a touching scene.



The Cunningham Skinks and Shingle-back Lizards also shared some touching moments during the week.

LITERALLY OVERWHELMING MOMENTS

Greg Cover (*below, with cap*) appeared in the cool and quiet nocturnal room looking, well, frazzled. He was perspiring heavily, had rosy cheeks and a wide-eyed look. Reason? He had just delivered a talk about ‘Fingers’ the Carpet Python to a crowd of excited children. He described the experience from which he had just escaped as “*a wave of humanity washing over me*”.



Greg’s moment was closely followed by Joe, seen walking extremely quickly away from the talk he had just given about scorpions, muttering something to himself. An excited crowd had converged on our quiet President and the experience was right out of his comfort zone.



Both Greg and Joe made a full recovery after sipping a cold drink and seeking some quiet time in the tea room.



Lastly **Mandy**, Editor. I mainly hovered everywhere to continually check enclosure temperatures and the wellbeing of



occupants. Different reptiles were brought out to be handled on different days of the week to help ensure no animal was likely to get stressed. Trips outside resulted in me calling excitedly to children playing on the lawns to come and see the basking water dragons, and holding an impromptu talk. First time observers, especially from overseas, were chuffed.

The Exhibition has ended but work has just begun for this Editor. Hmm, this pic or that? this story or the other one?? Is that what really happened or are you exaggerating Jake???

A WORD FROM JOE MCAULIFFE, OUR ESTEEMED PRESIDENT

Well there it is, *Snakes Alive! Exhibition 2010* done and dusted for another year.

Many people have been asking me “how did it go, was it successful and did you get more people than last year?”. I found myself repeating the same answers over and over again. Now that I have had time to think about the success of the Exhibition, I’d probably provide a few different responses.



Let me ask you what a successful exhibition is and what that means to the Association. Our life member Ric Longmore first conceived *Snakes Alive!* back in 1987. If we were able to go back to 1987 and tell Ric that this concept would provide a herpetological association with funds to further herpetofauna research and conservation, he'd probably think we'd had our head in the ethanol drum for too long....or not long enough!



"I'm very proud that a bunch of like-minded volunteers can get together once a year, run a truly awesome event for a whole week and raise some modest funds along the way. It is even more satisfying knowing that ACTHA is dedicated to channelling these funds straight into research, education and/or conservation of herpetofauna. This is something that ACTHA and every one of its members can and should be proud of. It places our little organisation on a mantle all of its own and if I could give all our volunteers and the Association a medal, I would.

So back to that ever echoing question, was it successful? Well we did meet all of our objectives: raising funds, herpetofauna awareness and education, and for the first time we were able to go one step further and increase the presence of our local herpetofauna.

I was pleased and somewhat surprised how our visitors received them. Standing beside our skink display and hearing people talk about the reptiles in their backyard or hearing them say, "oh so that's what that lizard is" was a real conversation starter. As a result, many of our visitors this year took home that little extra something, an appreciation for some of the common reptiles found in our region and a deeper understanding of about them, their habitat and the part they play in the ecosystem.

So that word 'success', to me, is not just what boxes we tick but how we go about doing it that brings added value to the exhibition. The result will also mean that another round of grants relating to herpetological research will be offered in 2010.

AND A WORD FROM OUR TREASURER, MARGARET NING

4139 people passed through the doors of *Snakes Alive!* this year which was an increase in attendance for the second year running: the record of 5136 set in 2006, when Corroboree Frogs were displayed for the first time, still stands. Although numbers at the door only rose slightly, our overall takings (door entry, merchandise and raffle proceeds) rose by \$700, totally due to a superb effort on the raffle ticket sales which increased by over 50%.

In fact, it was a roller coaster of a week! By close of business on the Wednesday, after three days of record attendance compared with the previous year, we were optimistic that we would definitely achieve good numbers. However subsequent successive days of 36, 38 and 37°C, put paid to that. However, a cooler day of 30°C on the Sunday enabled us to just fall over the line re numbers. Of course, another factor that affects numbers is publicity, and we were very lucky to have both TV and particularly newspaper coverage for most of the week. The life and death struggle of the brown snake and water dragon in a pond at the Gardens a few days prior to *Snakes Alive!*, which was reported in the Canberra Times on the preceding Sunday, was an especially fortuitous occurrence for us, but not for the dragon!!!

Our volunteers turned up day after day, educating visitors and spreading the herpetological word. Once again, ACTHA will be in a position to donate large sums to Corroboree Frog research/breeding programs, and to herpetological studies by local post-graduate students.



On display: Centralian Blue-tongue Lizard, above, and *Nephurus amyae*, Australia's largest gecko, below.





Copper-tailed Skink

LOCAL SPECIES DISPLAYED

By John Wombey

It was with great interest that I observed at this year's *Snakes Alive!* Exhibition at the Botanic Gardens four enclosures exhibiting examples of some of our smaller, lesser known lizard species. These were collected under permit especially for this year's display. Many of the smaller cryptic reptiles, although common in the region, are poorly known by most casual observers because they are rarely seen and often very difficult to identify and keep in captivity.

I was amused by the interest shown in the very active legless lizard *Delma inornata*, which most visitors first thought was a snake. It gave attendants a perfect opportunity to engage in conversation over the differences



Robust Skink

between legless lizards and snakes. *Delma inornata* is a very common species in the ACT region and can be found in a variety of grassy habitats, often hiding under logs and rocks. It also turns up frequently dead from being run over on the road.

A very young Copper-tailed Skink, *Ctenotus taeniolatus*, was also active in its cage and readily devoured any crickets introduced to tempt its appetite. These attractive lizards have a striped body of black and white lines with no spots and the tail is usually a bright coppery red albeit somewhat faded in older individuals. They are usually found in more sandy soils and are more abundant towards the coast.

Two grass skinks, *Lampropholis guichenoti*, were also on display. Although very common in coastal regions, they are less often seen in urban Canberra where the Garden skink *Lampropholis delicata* is often seen. These two skinks are difficult to tell apart but in general the Garden skink is darker, has a dorsolateral line along its body and no markings on the back. The Grass Skink usually has a dark mid-lateral line bordered below by a pale line and the back pattern is usually mottled with darker scales. All this can vary depending on locality and even the experts sometimes have difficulty in determining them. They are both very common

in urban gardens, frequently seen running about or sunning themselves in some quiet spot.

The skink I least expected to turn up for a show such as this was the Three-toed Skink *Hemiergis decresiensis*. Although a very common species throughout eastern NSW, central Victoria and south-eastern SA, it is nevertheless usually only observed under rocks and logs or in leaf litter. It rarely, if ever, emerges into the open from the safety of the litter it hides and feeds in and probably does not venture far from a central

home range. In a survey I conducted in the south-west of WA for reptiles in forest plantations, I never caught a similar species found there in my pit falls but could easily find them by raking the adjacent leaf litter in all sites. It

is a shiny dark coloured slender lizard with a brightly coloured belly of cream to yellow. It has a moveable eyelid and in this region can be most readily identified by all the reduced limbs having only three fingers or toes.

COLLECTING AND DISPLAYING LOCAL REPTILES

Geoff Robertson

ACTHA has increasingly developed a focus on the conservation of local reptiles and frogs through its education and research grants activities.

The theme: people in the Canberra region are lucky to have many reptile and frog species living around them.

The strategy: providing people with an experience of local herpetofauna (slide presentations, posters and live animals) should lead to better conservation outcomes - largely the protection of habitat.

For the 2010 *Snakes Alive!* Exhibition, ACTHA took this one step further by capturing and displaying some local reptiles. Several pre-conditions for the success of this project were: knowing where to and how to capture the animals, how to care and display them and how to return them to the wild. Oh, and permission to do so.

ACTHA members certainly meet the knowledge requirements, and ACTHA's good relationship with the ACT Government meant that permission was forthcoming after applying for a licence to collect and return.

Joe McAuliffe led several expeditions into the wilds around Canberra to capture suitable animals. I was fortunate to accompany him on two occasions.



Joe trying to lead everyone up the creek...

The most successful trip was on the Sunday before *Snakes Alive!* when Joe, Greg, Jake, Chris, Steve, Iris and I headed into the ACT high country. At one spot along a creek it was possible to capture a number of water skinks.

In that vicinity a brown snake was spotted and some serious time was devoted to trying to capture it, but it was too well ensconced in thick vegetation. We had permission to capture and display a brown and a black snake but were unsuccessful in capturing either species – next year maybe.

Several Jacky lizards were captured a little further away. Several sites were visited but no additional were animals caught.

This expedition, while a lot of fun, had some serious education lessons from my viewpoint. Collectors need to know where to find animals and how to capture them safely, from a reptile



The scorpion, seen here under lights, gave birth during the display: the babies are sitting on mum's back.

and human perspective. Even so, there is a lot of luck involved in finding animals on the day. Learning about the specialised habitat of each species and of course just being in the bush with knowledgeable friends is always enjoyable.

ACTHA was able to display many species of local reptiles, although this is only a small fraction of what is out there. Captured for display were copper-tail (*Ctenopus taeniolatus*), robust striped (*C. robustus*), water (*Eulamprus heatwolei* or *tympanum*), three-toed (*Hemiergus decresiensis*), garden (*Lampropholis guichenoti*), delicate (*L. delicata*), and Boulenger's (*Morethia boulengeri*) skinks, plain legless lizard (*Delma inornata*), and Jacky dragon (*Amphibolurus muricatus*). There were many more local species that were also displayed, such as blue-tongues, Cunningham's skink, Eastern long-necked turtle, water and bearded dragons, but these were already owned by members and therefore did not need to be captured.

Many visitors to *Snakes Alive!* took much interest in learning more about those enclosures with the *Local species* label and how they might learn more about local species they encounter in the wild or see on their properties.

The Northern Corroboree

Frog was once again displayed at the Exhibition. Many thanks to **Dr Murray Evans** of ACT Environment and **Carly Humphries** from Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve who set this display up, maintained and fed the frogs and answered the many questions visitors asked her on her visits each day.



Our **Raffle** to raise money for Corroboree Frog Research was a huge success, congratulations to the following winners:

- 1st prize - a complete reptile tank worth \$350 **Mary**
- 2nd prize - Complete Guide to reptiles of Australia **Owen**
- 3rd prize - Reptiles of NSW **Lachlan**

The colouring in competition winners were **Stephanie, Thea and Noah.**



Houdini just wanted to go home!

SPINY-TAILED MONITOR *Varanus acanthurus*

By Jake McAuliffe

The Spiny-tailed Monitor is a small to medium sized monitor that is found in the northern subtropical, tropical half of Australia. Their relatively small size and ability to adapt to captivity has made this monitor very popular and is strongly represented in collections in Australia.



In the wild the Spiny-tailed Monitor can be found hiding in ground burrows, under rocks, inside termite mounds, and it also takes refuge amongst piles of timber, corrugated iron and under 44 gallon drums. While generally considered to be terrestrial they have been seen living inside hollow trees. When inside rock crevices this monitor can use its spiny tail very effectively to wedge itself against the rock surfaces, making it extremely difficult to be dislodged by predators or us.

Spiny-tailed Monitors will prey upon other small monitors, lizards, mammals, and insects.

Mating in the Pilbara area seems to be around about late October. On average the female will lay about six eggs but can lay up to eight and can have more than one clutch per year.

FIELD TRIP TO NIMMITABEL Weekend of 13 and 14 March 2010

Margaret Ning and Geoff Robertson have invited ACTHA members to their property 'Garuwanga' at Nimmitabel, just south of Cooma, for a herping weekend. The property is some 700 acres and offers considerable scope for not only enjoying the beautiful scenery but also spotting local reptiles. A brilliant time was had by all who attended a similar excursion in 2008.

If you would like to join the group going down this year then please register your interest with **Margaret on 6241 4065 by the end of February 2010**. Most people will be going down after work on Friday the 12th, but final arrangements will be advised closer to the date.

ANU SEMINAR, Thursday 18 February, 1pm PHYLOGENY, BIOGRAPHY AND EVOLUTION OF GECKOS OF THE WORLD

**Dr Tony Gamble, Department of Genetics,
Cell Biology, & Development
University of Minnesota**

**Evolution, Ecology & Genetics, Research School of
Biology, Gould Wing Seminar Room,
Building 116 Daley Rd, ANU.**

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ACTHA News

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