

AUGUST

NEWSLETTER



A.C.T. HERPETOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION 1989.

A faint pencil sketch of a tropical scene. In the foreground, a large lizard, possibly a monitor lizard, is shown in profile, facing left. Behind it, several palm trees of varying heights are sketched. The background is filled with more palm trees and foliage, creating a dense jungle atmosphere. The drawing is done in a light, sketchy style with visible pencil lines.

COVER DESIGN &
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MIKE THOMPSON.

AUGUST MEETING

Monday August 21
A.N.U. Zoology (downstairs)
7:30 pm.

7:30 - 8 pm Informal-members exchange of news

- * Meet some of Ron's pythons, discussed in this month's feature article
- * Discuss the proposed Cunningham's Skink survey with Alan & Nick Thorne.

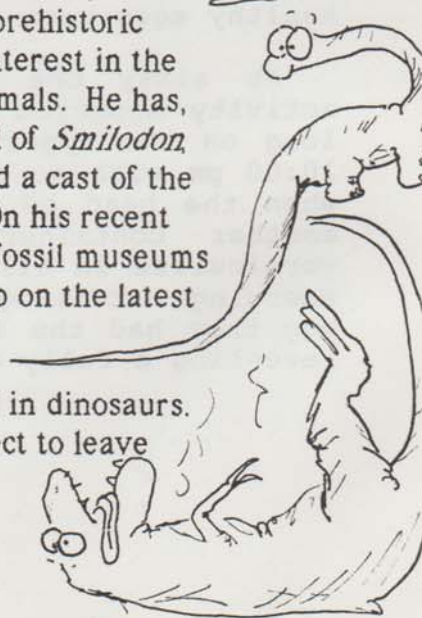
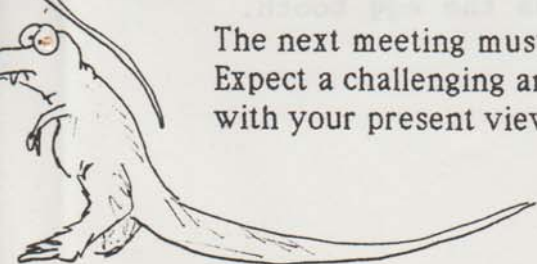
GUEST SPEAKER: RUSSELL MORAN

DINOSAURS

Were dinosaurs really the ultimate reptiles? Were they reptiles at all? Were they slow, primitive and dumb? What if they were warm-blooded? Fast-moving and intelligent? Would that make them birds? Or are birds really dinosaurs? Should the Canberra Ornithologists Group be hosting this meeting?

Current scientific debate and research on dinosaurs is as controversial as ever and many of the classical ideas about these creatures have been put to one side. Russell Moran works for CSIRO Division of Entomology where his primary interest is in spiders. He is also fascinated by prehistoric animals, especially dinosaurs, and has maintained a keen interest in the flux of scientific thinking about this important group of animals. He has, in his kitchen, a full-sized, museum quality cast of the skull of *Smilodon*, the sabre-toothed cat, and I believe he has recently ordered a cast of the skull of *Allosaurus*, one of the large predatory dinosaurs! On his recent overseas holiday Russell visited many of the world's great fossil museums in North America and Europe where he was able to catch up on the latest views and ideas.

The next meeting must not be missed by anyone interested in dinosaurs. Expect a challenging and interesting address and don't expect to leave with your present views intact!



NOTES ON BREEDING *Morelia spilota spilota* X *variegata*

IN CAPTIVITY

R Dencio, Higgins ACT.

During the early part of September 1987 the male *Morelia s. variegata*, which had been continuously housed with a female *Morelia s. spilota* and a female *Morelia s. variegata*, was removed from the enclosure and kept separate until late October 1987. Upon reintroduction of the male, the female *variegata* was removed (owing to incompatibility with the male) and kept separate until late December 1987.

From the beginning of January 1988 the female *s. spilota* refused all offers of food. The condition of this animal did not appear to be good, which was the cause of some concern at the time. A third of the female's body posteriorly had also broadened and become flaccid, lacking in muscle tone.

On the morning of January 23 1988 the female *s. spilota* was found incubating a clutch of newly laid, parchment shelled eggs on the floor of the enclosure. Three eggs were underdeveloped and separate from the main clutch along with four fully developed eggs. The total number of eggs laid was twenty-three, each about the size of a 55 gram hen egg. Owing to unsatisfactory conditions prevailing in the enclosure at the time, the female endeavoured to move the clutch to an area of higher humidity and better protection. In the process of this activity the clutch was divided, many of the eggs were disoriented and apparently suffered membrane damage. The eggs were collected, candled and placed in three sealed plastic containers on damp vermiculite. Candling of all eggs was possible and all, including the underdeveloped eggs, showed evidence of fertilisation.

The three egg containers were placed in an incubator running at 28.5 deg C. + 1 deg on the evening of January 24. Eggs and containers showing fungal contamination were sprayed with a solution of "Mycostatin" (200 units per ml. conc.) five days after laying. By the eleventh day all mould infected, discoloured and putrifying eggs had been removed leaving eight healthy eggs in three containers. Between the seventh and tenth day all healthy eggs were sufficiently hydrated, becoming full and firm.

At sixty one days (March 24) the first sign of hatching activity appeared in the form of five small incisions up to 5mm long on the upper surface of one egg shell. This was noted at 10:00 pm with no further activity until 2:10 am of day sixty two when the head of a neonate was found protruding from an egg in another container. Paper tissues were placed over exposed vermiculite in all containers to prevent it from adhering to the emerging hatchlings. As no further activity was evident in the egg that had the small incisions, the shell was carefully opened revealing a fully developed dead juvenile, minus the egg tooth.

The hatching activity spanned a period of 70.5 hours, ie from the first signs of hatching activity to the last neonate leaving the egg. In the case of each successful hatching the juveniles head protruded from an incision in the egg shell for several hours before extricating itself completely from the shell. This time varied considerably, from 12.33 hours to 30.25 hours, between the six successful hatchlings. The last egg to show signs of hatching followed the same pattern as the first egg but was opened immediately upon detection. Unfortunately this fully developed juvenile was in the final stages of dying. It appears that in both cases the unsuccessful hatchlings failed to incise a large enough opening with the egg tooth to allow exit of the head and therefore suffocated within the shell.

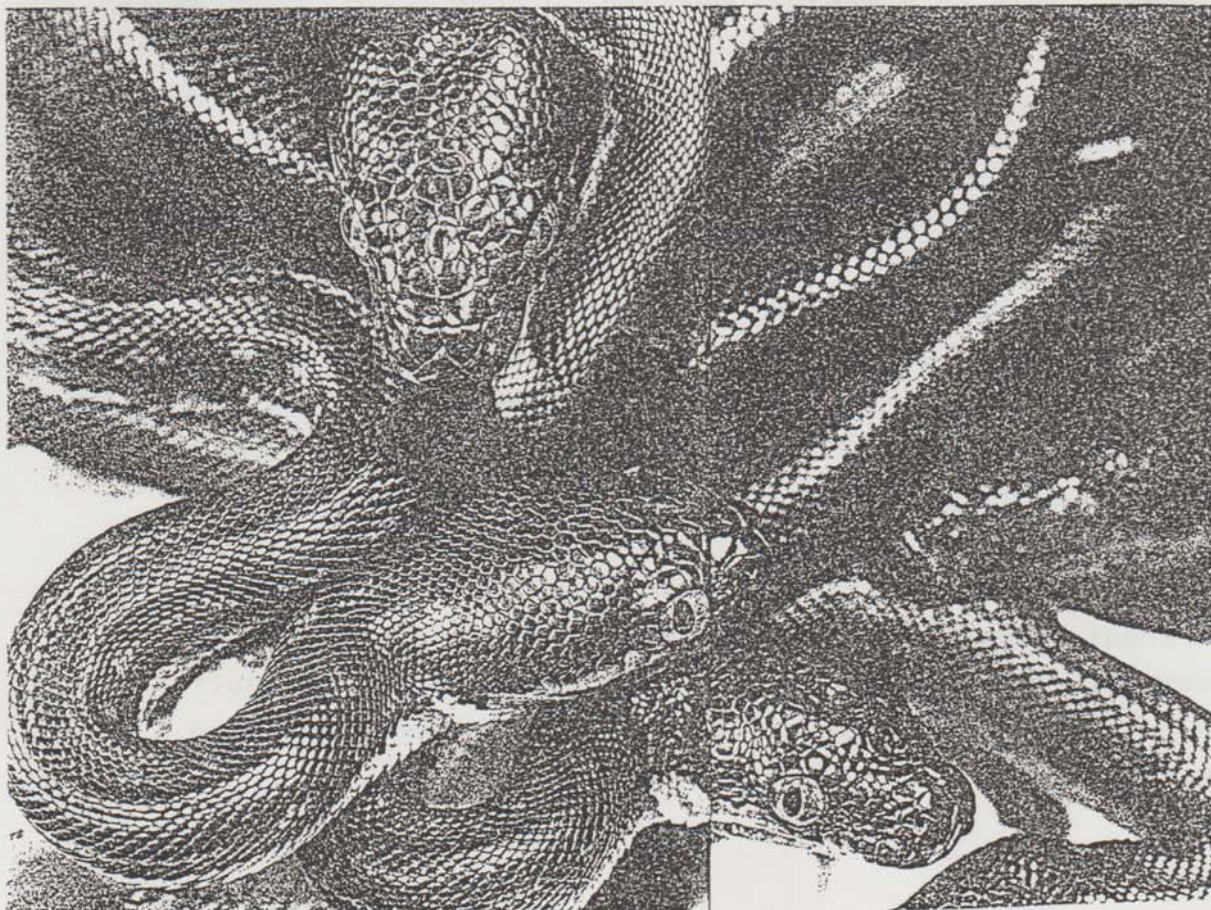
The first successful neonate left the egg on March 25 and the last on March 27 1988.

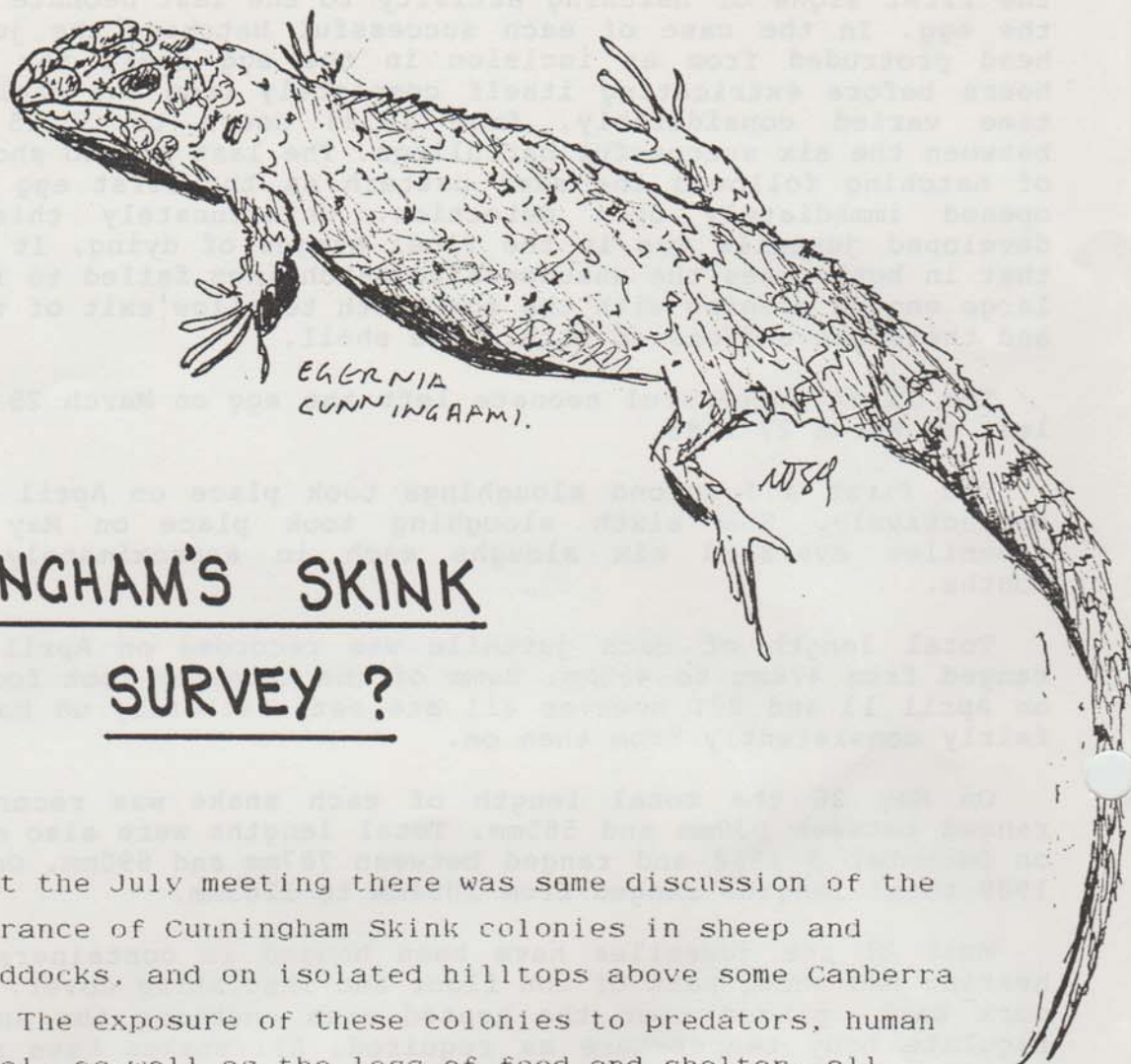
The first and second sloughings took place on April 6 and 7 respectively. The sixth sloughing took place on May 1. The juveniles averaged six sloughs each in approximately twelve months.

Total length of each juvenile was recorded on April 11 and ranged from 478mm to 498mm. Some of the neonates took food items on April 13 and 22, however all ate satisfactorily on May 2 and fairly consistently from then on.

On May 26 the total length of each snake was recorded and ranged between 530mm and 585mm. Total lengths were also measured on December 5 1988 and ranged between 787mm and 890mm. On July 7 1989 total lengths ranged from 1094mm to 1283mm.

Most of the juveniles have been housed in containers with a heating pad under part of the floor and insulating cover, such as cork bark, placed over the heated area enabling the snakes to regulate body temperature as required. All snakes have remained healthy and continue to feed consistently.



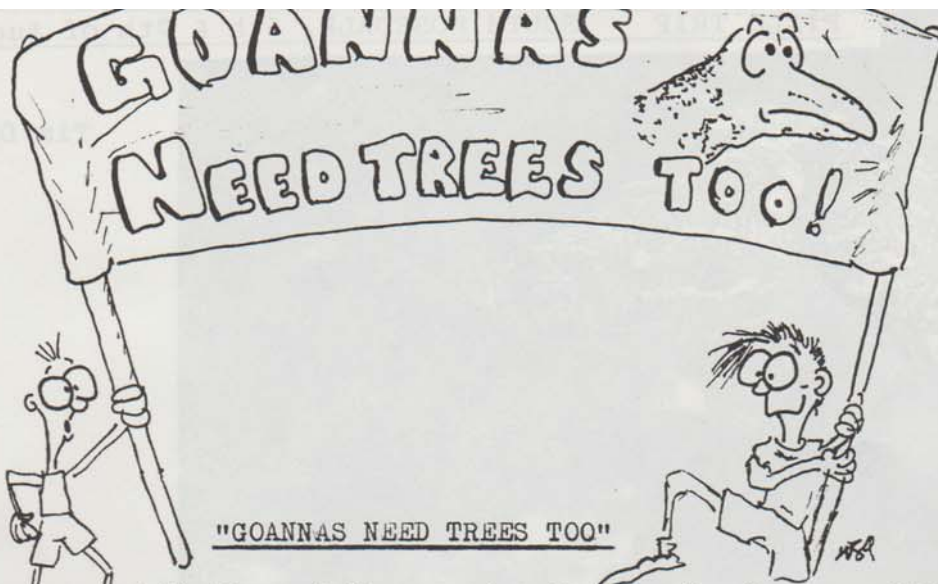


CUNNINGHAM'S SKINK

SURVEY ?

At the July meeting there was some discussion of the disappearance of Cunningham Skink colonies in sheep and horse paddocks, and on isolated hilltops above some Canberra suburbs. The exposure of these colonies to predators, human and animal, as well as the loss of food and shelter, all suggest there is a gradual decline in some areas. Some small colonies are on the verge of starvation and extinction. The possibility was raised of systematically collecting certain whole colonies and transplanting them to other areas.

We suggest there be a further discussion of Cunningham Skinks at the August meeting. Those interested could plan a long-term survey of their populations in the built-up area, mapping the region and determining overall numbers, distribution, relative status in different areas and so on. From this we might gain some insight into the conservation of these lizards and help build greater security for this species, passing on information to the relevant planning and conservation authorities. While it is relatively easy to interest planners in the impact of Canberra on birds and mammals, the city's impact on reptiles is more difficult to determine and these skinks could be a good example to start with.



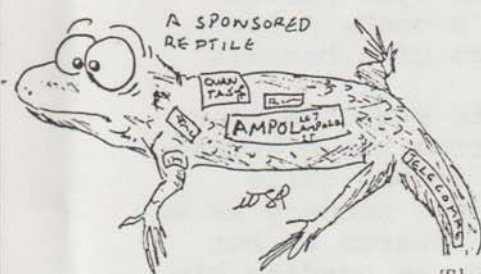
I parked my car at Parliament House and walked to the Japanese Embassy. It was July 16th, a cold wet Sunday morning. It was encouraging to see so many colleagues gathering to support the preservation of our national forests, despite the weather and poor publicity.

Forests for the Future rally started at 11.30 at the Japanese Embassy with a number of speakers addressing the large crowd on the importance of preserving our forests. The protest was made to the Japanese Government not its people, because of its involvement in the wood chip industry.

We walked to Parliament House our society was well represented and carried a colourful banner, designed and made by Mike Thompson and his mother, its message being that herpetological fauna needs the forests as well as the birds, animals & humans of our continent. The banner was carried in turn by Mike, Julian, Glen and Shuji. The rally ended at Parliament House with further speakers addressing the crowd.

The fight to save our forests is vitally important to each and everyone of us. It has a long way to go. Our society needs to give its total support to future demonstrations and to "spread the word".

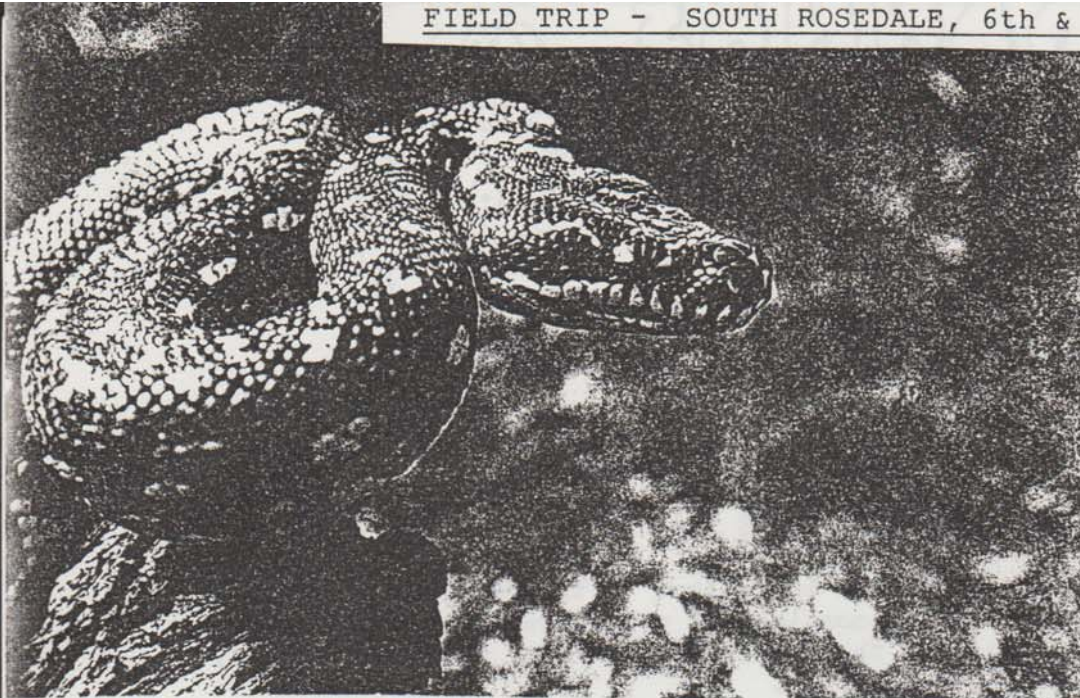
Charles Atkinson.



SHOULD THE ACT HERPETOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
SPONSOR A REPTILE AT TARONGA PARK ZOO?

This idea arose as a follow-up to our behind-the-scenes visit to the Reptile House at the Zoo and has been enthusiastically promoted by DEAN WARD in particular. As mentioned in Paul's article, the reptiles are not faring well at the moment, with the halving of the Reptile House, so any promotion of their cause would be welcomed by their keepers. What do you think? Is there any particular reptile you would like us to sponsor, if we sponsor? Ideas and opinions please!

Tim Deveson.



The aim of the trip was to find some diamond pythons winter basking and generally get an idea of what "herps" can be found at Burrawarra Point.

There were 18 participants in all, 10 arriving on Friday night and the rest the following morning. Accommodation was provided by Jo Vandermark and Alan Thorne. They recently discovered they had houses opposite each other at South Rosedale.

The first find of the weekend was actually on Friday night. Nick Thorne and Warwick Smith found two Small Eyed snakes (*Cryptophus nigrescens*) in Alan's garden. Both snakes had unusually pale colours. Small eyed snakes are common in the area and feed mainly on skinks.

After celebrating Andrew Hill's birthday with champagne and cake and an encounter with a brush tailed possum on Jo's verandah, we retired hoping the bureau's forecast of rain would be wrong. It was!!

Saturday morning was overcast, but by ten o'clock the clouds had broken up and we were blessed with a beautiful day. After breakfast we walked to Burrawarra Point and split up to search for the elusive diamond pythons.

Annabelle and I searched the northern side of the point for half an hour with no luck and were beginning to lose hope. I'd just finished telling Annabelle to keep her eyes peeled when she pointed into a tree and said, "There's one". A large diamond python was draped over the low branches of a banksia getting some UVs.

We looked about for others in the group to show him to, but as nobody was around decided to lift him from the branches and take him with us. He was very docile and seemed quite content to hang around my shoulders and watch the scenery as we walked. Eventually we saw some people walking towards us but seeing that they were not members of our group, we bundled him unceremoniously into our day pack so as not to attract too much attention.

We wandered about looking for other pythons and members of the group and eventually decided to take him out and have a closer look at him. Twenty minutes of bouncing around on somebody's warm back, however, had severely darkened his sunny disposition and on emerging from the pack he considered his surroundings for a moment and began to strike, mouth agape, at anything that came within range. Returning him to the pack the second time required more technique and I resolved to carry the pack away from my body from here on.

a gum tree. Following his gaze we discovered Andrew Hill in a very awkward position, his arm down a hollow branch. He seemed to be trying to pull something out but what ever it was was pulling him in with equal vigour. The tug-o-war continued for some minutes before Andrew started to gain the advantage. Eventually, very reluctantly, a three and half foot lace monitor appeared, tail first, from its roost. With a look of triumph Andrew passed his prize down to the watchers below, which by now was the entire group.

Our tally for the morning was a juvenile and an adult Jacky lizard (*Gemmatophora muricata*), a small quick dragon common to the area, an exhausted Lace Monitor (*Varanus varius*), and a seven foot, male diamond python (*Morelia spilota spilota*).

After de-ticking, measuring and photographing, the lace monitor was released. It spent a moment catching its breath then ascended a dead branch and lay there coming to terms with its defeat. It was then the python's turn to be photographed and measured - we estimate he weighed about three kilos. He was still not in the best of moods as the teeth marks on Nick Thorne's camera will testify.

After lunch and a short rest we returned the python to his banksia and watched him moving effortlessly through the branches for some time before we set off for home.

Dinner that night was stupendous, our thanks to our chef extraordinaire (Jo.). The soups were a culinary marvel, Mr Heinz could learn a thing or two.

After allowing dinner to settle, a few of us set out again for Burrawarra Point with our torches, hoping to catch a glimpse of some nocturnal activity. All we saw was the tail end of a bandicoot as it ran into a bush and a sad and sorry lace monitor, still perched where we left it that afternoon.

The following day the weather was still magnificent and we set off to explore the headland directly south of Burrawarra. We tramped about the banksias and cycads for nearly two hours but had no luck, so we returned to Burrawarra nature reserve for another look around.

The lace monitor was still where we had left it and we began to worry about its health. We needn't have, before we left it had vanished, hopefully back into its hollow branch. We also located the diamond python again, basking in a small banksia fifty metres from where we released him the day before. Another lace monitor and a red bellied black snake (*Pseudechus porphyriacus*) were also spotted.

We topped the weekend off with a barbecue lunch, our thanks to Simon's father for supplying the beef. While collecting fire wood we discovered some weasel skinks (*Lampropholis mustelina*) one of which had unusual bronze-red colouring.

The weekend declared a complete success, we packed and started the drive home.



Measuring the
goanna.

MEET THE NEWS.

Di Baker-Finch.

Dianna (Di) Baker-Finch is a strapping 182cm hammer thrower.

She first realised her great love of reptiles when one day during training in the heat of summer, the hammer flew from her sweaty palms a millisecond too early.

She sprinted to a nearby field to retrieve her missile.

And there she spotted a frill necked skink resplendant in its breeding plumage of black back with deep blue stripe along the spine. The belly was fire engine red and the black back was flecked with gold.

Unfortunately the hammer had landed on it!

As she gazed upon the warm little body she vowed from that moment on to preserve and cherish all reptilian life forms.

So folks meet Di, secretary of the ACT Herpetological Association.

As Di has declined to submit a photograph, here is a brief description:

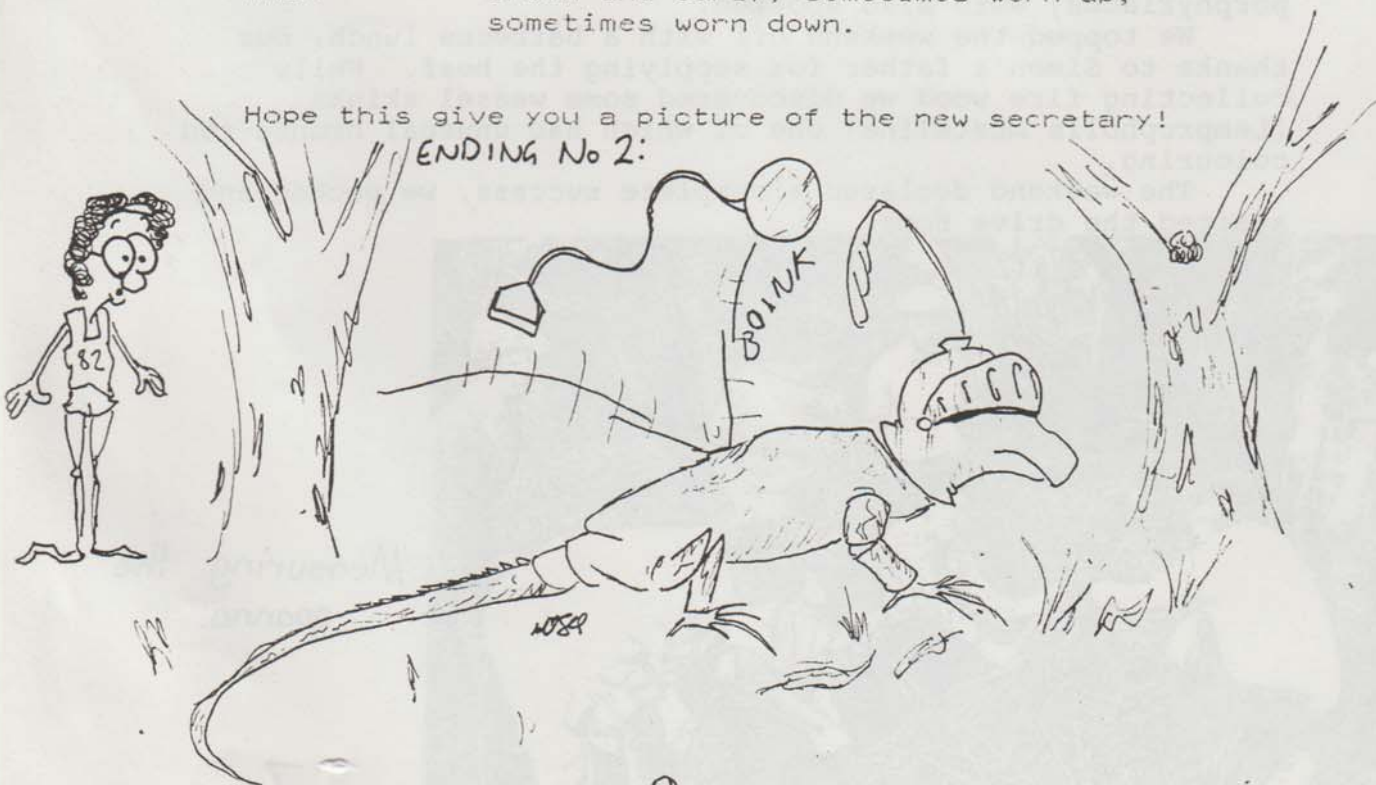
HEIGHT 182 cm

EYE COLOUR Sometimes blue, sometimes green
wears glasses

HAIR Brown and curly, sometimes worn up,
sometimes worn down.

Hope this give you a picture of the new secretary!

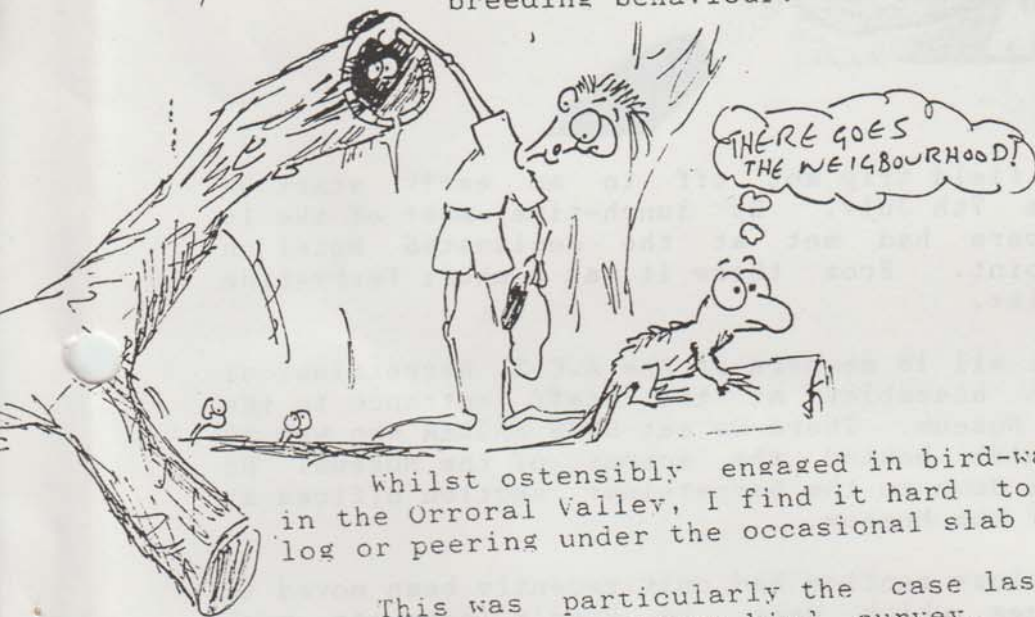
ENDING No 2:



Several weeks ago we received a letter from the National Museum of Sydney, (where the trust is based) notifying us that our project had been accepted, with the cheque included.

The study will be based on the habits and breeding of *Physignathus leseuri howitii* (Gippsland Water dragon) in the area of the Molonglo river and one of its tributaries currently we are applying for licence to handle the dragons as this will be necessary for the project.

We will also be tagging and counting individuals and measuring growth rates. We will be observing them with the use of hides and field glasses, to gather data on breeding behaviour.



Whilst ostensibly engaged in bird-watching in my atlas area in the Orroral Valley, I find it hard to resist rolling the odd log or peering under the occasional slab of rock.

This was particularly the case last Sunday August 13 as I was engaged in my winter bird survey. Apart from the stunning scarlet and flame robins and one querulous fan-tailed cuckoo, the avifauna was somewhat limited and predictable - indefatigable blue-wrens and assiduous tree-creepers contrasting with bored currawongs and kookaburras just hanging about, the clarion shrike-thrush relieving the monotonous 'choc-choc' of ubiquitous while-eared honeyeaters, rich red rosellas, gangs of galahs and cockatoos, twittering thornbills, mincing magpies and funereal black ravens. Hence it happened that, casually but carefully, I lifted a few weatherbeaten pieces of grey timber.

To my surprise several logs revealed super shiny skinks curled up in the soft black earth. Dark grey dorsally, they revealed a dazzling golden orange underneath and attenuated limbs - presumably *Hemiergis decresiensis*. Within a relatively short time I had discovered eighteen *Hemiergis* plus another four or five species of skinks, sometimes as many as three species under the same piece of timber, all of this in a very limited area, outside of which I found virtually nothing.

What fascinated me was to find so many animals packed in together, somewhat reminiscent of the Mad-Hatter's Tea Party;

"The table was a large one, but the three were all crowded together at one end - No room! No room! No room!"
where as in the vast adjoining areas, apparently similar timber slabs were unoccupied. What factors defined this particular site as being supremely suitable for wintering over?

Would anyone be interested in a trip down to Orroral, this time armed with a reptile manual for identification, preferably very soon, before conditions change too much. It is also the area where two *Cryptophis nigrescens* (Small-eyed snakes) have been recently discovered.



SYDNEY FIELD TRIP - 7-9TH JULY

by: Paul Scanlan

The Sydney field trip got off to an early start on Friday, the 7th July. By lunch-time, most of the 16 field trippers had met at the designated hotel on Gremorne Point. From there it was a short ferry-ride into the city.

At 2:00 pm, all 16 members of the A.C.T. Herpetological Association assembled at the staff entrance to the Australian Museum. There we met ROSS SADLER who was to be our guide behind the scenes of the Museum. He escorted us down to the herpetology section offices at the rear of the Museum.

The herpetology section had only recently been moved to these offices, which were, by Ross's accounts, much better than the previous ones. The main room contained a library of books on the subject of herpetology, as well as an odd collection of both preserved and live herpetological specimens.

One of the main functions of the staff of the herpetology section is to maintain and update a computer database. This database, comprising around 30,000 reptile and amphibian records from around Australia, includes information on the distribution, habitat, size, habits etc., of much of Australia's herpetofauna. As such, it is a very useful tool.

We were also privileged to see the first hand-written museum records of Australian reptiles (the very first record was of a Brown Snake) and were given a brief tour of the spirit house. This huge stone room contained a vast collection of bottled specimens, an incredible 130,000.

Before leaving the Museum, we met none other than Harold Cogger, who later this year shall give a talk at one of our meetings. We also had a chance to look inside the part of the Museum open to the general public. The main items of interest there were the displays of human evolution and animals out of Australia's past.

On Saturday, we arrived at Taronga Zoo around 9:30 am. At 1:15, after having a good look around, all the field trippers met at the reptile house. Our behind the scenes guide was TIM HAWKES.

Alan Thorne with our guide, Ross Sadlier, the Collection 'Curator at the Australian Museum.



The good news as that we were shown most specimens on display whilst Tim commented on the behaviour and requirements of each. We learnt of the breeding success with the endangered Fijian Banded Iguana. Both WARWICK SMITH and TIM DEVESON received encouraging advice about the possibility of acquiring captive pythons. The idea was raised that the A.C.T. Herpetological Association could perhaps sponsor a reptile at the Zoo.

The disappointing news was the poor state of funding for the reptile department. The building with the really large snakes housed in it had been closed to allow for the cable car-like ride over the Zoo. Despite this, the proposed new reptile house has been shelved at least for a couple of years. More bad news is the death of the famous huge and old Komodo Dragon. Now a concrete cast replica has been made of this well-loved lizard.

On Sunday we travelled to Gosford where we went to the late Eric Worrell's Australian Reptile Park and Animal Sanctuary. We were given a guided tour of the Park by JOHN WEIGAL (author of the recently published "Care of Australian Reptiles in Captivity."



The Morrison family examining the original book of reptile records

for milking purposes. Inside these cages were numerous Elapids such as Taipans, Brown Snakes, Inland Taipans, Tiger Snakes etc. We saw the home-made freeze-drying machine used to crystalize the venom milked at the Park. From there it is sent off to the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories.

Everyone in the group had the chance to hold one of the many 35 cm long American Alligators. There was also the opportunity to enter the Reticulated python ^{enclosure} with two huge snakes.

With our guided tour over, we had a good look over the rest of the Park, which included a "noctarium" and a koala enclosure. There was also a 15 foot saltwater crocodile, the largest ever airlifted out of the Northern Territory.

This field trip was well worthwhile and very enjoyable. Thanks must go to the organizers DEAN WARD and JO as well as to our guides at the Museum, Zoo and Reptile Park. I encourage as many people as possible to take part in future field trips, because if they are anything like this one, they're bound to be good.

P.S. SPECIAL OFFER TO A.C.T. HERP TOLOGISTS

Following our visit to the Australian Reptile Park John Weigal has offered us a special price on his new book "CARE OF AUSTRALIAN REPTILES IN CAPTIVITY."

\$ 9, including postage, for a minimum order of 10. (retail \$16)



"Cripes, Boss, don't it make a man's mouth water?"

RARELY.. EXTENSIVE SOMETIMES EXTRAORDINARY ALWAYS EXCEPTIONAL EXCURSIONS.



BALLABA OR BUST!



Sunday September 3
Leader: JOHN WOMBEY



A day at the Gregory's property on the Shoalhaven to survey the serpents, hound out the herps, grab the geckos, torment the tortoises, and if all else fails enjoy a barbecue lunch.....

Arrangements at August Meeting.....

DOWN THE DEUA WITH DAVE! - 11-12 NOVEMBER

LEADER: DAVE CARTER

very popular request, a return visit to the Deua in spring when the goannas are more active. Limited numbers.....

ORRORAL VALLEY SUNDAY AUGUST 27

LEADER: Applications invited!

Otherwise a case of the blind leading the blind - bring your Jenkins & Bartell, not to mention lunch. Raison d'etre elsewhere in newsletter.....

ROUND HILL with COGGER?

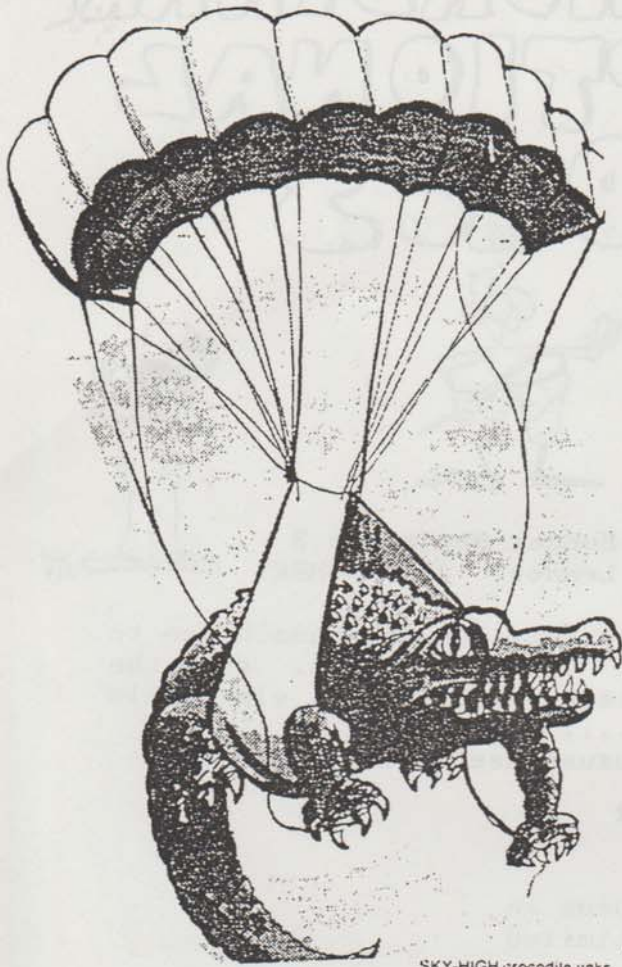
DATE: October

LEADER: Dr. Harold Cogger

For some twenty years now Dr. Harold Cogger has been conducting a research project at Round Hill Nature Reserve in Central Western N.S.W., last year being the first spring he missed. For that reason he is particularly determined not to miss spring '89 and is therefore planning to go west as soon as he returns from the World Herpetological Congress.

Hal has already suggested that he might be able to speak to our society on his return journey from Round Hill to Sydney. It then occurred to me that it might be possible for us to have an excursion to Round Hill while he is there, both to see at first hand how he goes about his research, and perhaps offer assistance in some survey work. With his usual graciousness and encouragement, Hal responded positively to the suggestion.

Is anyone interested? I should have actual dates at the August meeting.



SKY-HIGH crocodile jinks

FLYING CROCODILE SAVAGES TWO KIDS

A CROCODILE which parachuted into a back garden swim pool and savaged two toddlers is on trial for its life.

And the antics of the skydiving snapper could cost its owner Bernard Didier a crock of gold.

Lawyers are now getting their teeth into a legal action by the parents of the injured children who are seeking £500,000 damages from Didier.

If the action succeeds the crazy croc will probably be put down.

The children were attacked after a freak gust of wind blew the crocodile off course

By MARTIN REGAN

from an air show and into the pool.

Five-year-old Jean Pretet and his four-year-old sister, Andrea, were bitten by the croc before it became entangled in its own parachute.

Shocked

The children's father, Philip Pretet, said yesterday at his home in Bourges, France: "That croc landed right in the middle of the

Swim pool terror dive

pool while the children were swimming. He was trying to eat them alive.

"Now they are terrified of our pool and I don't think they'll ever swim again."

A shocked Didier admits the attack happened, but claims he can't be held responsible for a freak weather.

"We've jumped at hundreds of shows around the world without anything like this happening," he snapped.

"I intend to win this case and get my croc back."



It looks as if the water dragon has finally made it! Not only the ACT Herpetological Association has adopted the water dragon as its emblem, I discovered when I came across this car sticker from Snowy River Country. Actually the water dragon has featured in folk lore for some time as the "Crocodile of the South", hence its use here as the "Snowy River Crocodile". It's good to see such a marvellous and magical animal coming into its own at last.

ROSS BENNETT