

The

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ANTHILL PYTHON

Story and
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The anthill python is a small, reddish colored python from the Pilbara region of Western Australia. It's also known as the pigmy python or western children's python, and its scientific name—well, that's another story! Although its species name is pretty fixed as *perthensis*, it has in the past been placed in the genera *Liasis*, *Bothrochilus* and, most recently, *Antaresia*. The latest classification, *Antaresia perthensis*, uses a genus name invented and adopted by Wells and Wellington in 1983, and followed by others, including Dr. Hal Cogger of the Australian museum and Dave and Tracy Barker in 1994. (For the purposes of this article, I'll use the genus name *Antaresia*, but this position is by no means fixed; nor am I intending to pass any judgment as to the accuracy of this name.)

This small species occurs throughout the Pilbara region of northwest Western Australia, as well as adjacent areas of similar habitat. How far this species extends outside the Pilbara is largely unknown, due to the mainly uninhabited nature of possible habitat, coupled with an official discouragement by Australian wildlife authorities toward research on much of Australia's wildlife, including snakes. To date, the most accurate distribution information was that published by Laurie Smith in his 1985 paper reviewing the "childreni" species group. Smith noted and mapped locality information for all anthill python (*A. perthensis*), Stimson's python (*A. stimsoni*), children's python (*A. childreni*) and spotted python (*A. maculosus*) specimens that are in Australian museums.

The Pilbara region is located south of the tropical Kimberley in Western Australia. It is essentially arid, and includes the hottest parts of Australia (including the towns of Marble Bar [Australia's hottest town], Goldsworthy [unofficially hotter than Marble Bar], Port Hedland and Karratha [main ports]) and the Hamersley ranges.

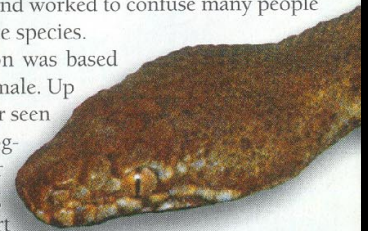
Typical of the Pilbara are rocky hills covered with spinifex (grass) bushes (*Triodia* spp.). Where trees do occur, they are usually stunted eucalyptus, except along the relatively uncommon watercourses, where larger varieties occur. Watercourses are most common in hilly areas. Being arid, the Pilbara does not have formal wet and dry seasons, but most rainfall does occur in the so-called summer months, when the occasional tropical lows wander further south than usual.

Description

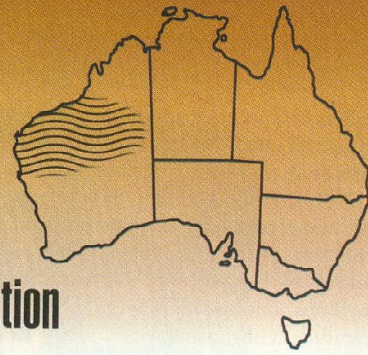
The anthill python was first described in February 1932 by Olive Griffith Stull. He was misled into believing the type specimen came from Perth, the capital of Western Australia (hence the name *perthensis*), when, in fact, the snake had been collected elsewhere. This mistake was perpetuated in the literature for many years and worked to confuse many people about the real status of the species.

The original description was based on a 297 mm subadult female. Up to 1981, little was heard or seen of this snake in herpetological circles, and a number of authors (including Cogger [1979] and Glauert [1967]) erroneously regarded anthill pythons as possibly being a subspecies of the children's python.

Adult anthill pythons average about 60 cm (about 23½ inches) in length. Dorsally, the color is usually brick red, with or without a pattern. Any patterns are most pronounced in young specimens, and they usually fade in captive specimens. The reason for this is not known. A typical anthill python pattern is comprised of a series of darker spots arranged in four more or less regular series, giving the general



**Anthill
Python
Distribution**



**There's still
much to be
learned
about this
small
Australian
python, but
government
regulations in
Australia make it difficult.**

impression of a series of irregular crossbars.

Ventrally, the snake is creamish white. The head is distinctly shorter and proportionately smaller than those of Stimson's pythons, which are found in the same areas. Anthill python's heads are more triangular in shape, as well. Stimson's pythons are the only species likely to be confused with anthill pythons, but anyone who's familiar with both species should be able to avoid misidentifying them. Besides the fact that its body is usually thicker than a Stimson's python, there is a color difference, as well; anthill pythons are of a reddish base color, whereas Stimson's are usually a yellowish or brownish base color. Besides the differences already noted, the scalation of both species differs, too. (Anthill pythons have fewer than 37 midbody scale rows and 250 or less ventrals.) If misidentification were to take place, it would probably occur with younger specimens of either species, both of which may have similar patterns.

Life in the Wild

Anthill pythons are fairly common in the wild. Herpetologists can usually locate specimens that are crossing roads during warm weather. At other times, they can be found under rocks, in spinifex and inside termite mounds. If one wished to catch substantial numbers of anthill pythons within a short time, the opening up of termite mounds usually represents the easiest, most

expedient method (although there are often logistical difficulties in getting a bulldozer or grading machine into an area of suitable habitat with large termite mounds present).

Large Pilbara termite mounds are used as resting sites by many species of reptiles and mammals due to the numerous nooks and crannies and relatively even temperature within the

mounds. The temperature inside termite mounds where anthill pythons occur is particularly important, with daytime temperatures frequently exceeding 38 degrees Celsius (100 degrees Fahrenheit).

Anthill pythons may be found in the same termite mounds as Stimson's pythons, black-headed pythons (*Aspidites melanocephalus*), king brown

(and other Pilbara reptiles) are not dependent on termite mounds for their survival; they can also be found in other areas without mounds. However, the mounds are often utilized as preferred habitat where they occur. (A similar scenario can be seen when snakes are found sheltering under man-made cover, such as sheets of tin).

Diet in wild specimens is presumed to alter with age. It is assumed that young specimens feed primarily on reptiles such as geckos and small skinks, with larger snakes tending to eat small mammals, when available.

I caught my first five anthill pythons at Shay Gap and Whim Creek in Western Australia. Besides those five snakes, large numbers of other specimens have been caught by herpetologists at Shay Gap, areas near Goldsworthy and Whim Creek. (The two former towns were mining settlements and have now been dismantled. Whim Creek is a small township along the main coastal North-South highway between Port Hedland and Roebourne/Karratha.) Although the local habitat at Whim Creek has been severely disturbed by livestock overgrazing, anthill pythons are, according to herpetologists, still common in the area, and large numbers can still be found.

In line with other small Australian pythons, male and female anthill pythons are commonly found in close proximity (pairing behavior). It is presumed that this pairing behavior results from males that are seeking females to mate, and following them. Male combat hasn't been recorded in this species, but may occur. The fact that so few of these snakes have been kept to date may well explain why such behavior hasn't been observed. (In my own case, I only had two males for three months before one of them was stolen, leaving me no time to observe male/

Key to *Antaresia*

1. Fewer than 37 midbody scale rows, 250 or less ventrals	<i>perthensis</i> (anthill python)
2. 37 or more midbody scale rows, 250 or more ventrals	<i>childreni</i> (children's python), <i>maculosus</i> (spotted python) or <i>stimsoni</i> (Stimson's python)
3. No pattern, or one that is indistinct	<i>childreni</i>
4. Bold pattern	<i>maculosus</i> or <i>stimsoni</i>
5. Pattern of distinct blotches or spots, which may join along the dorsal midline	<i>maculosus</i>
6. Pattern of bold blotches or bars and a white ventrolateral stripe along the anterior part of the body	<i>stimsoni</i>



Patterns on anthill pythons are typically more distinct on juveniles such as this, and, for some unknown reason, have been known to fade in captive specimens.

snakes (*Pseudechis australis*), moon snakes (*Furina ornata*), broad-banded sand swimmers (*Eremiascincus richardsoni*), Pilbara geckos (*Gehyra pilbara*), depressed spiny skinks (*Egernia depressa*) and other reptiles. Dunnarts (genus *Antechinus*), a kind of "marsupial mouse," are the most common mammals seen in Pilbara "anthills."

I must stress that anthill pythons

male interactions.) As a note of interest, Melbourne snake breeder Simon Kortlang has observed male combat in his captive Stimson's pythons and spotted pythons (closely related species to the anthill python).

Anthill Pythons in Captivity

Although it is the smallest python in the world, the anthill python, as Dave and Tracy Barker say, is "100-percent python." It is a tough and durable snake that is usually docile, easy to handle and one that rarely bites. Like snakes in the *childreni* complex, anthill pythons are about as easy to keep as any snake keeper could ever expect. Plus, this species is not known to be especially prone to any diseases or ailments.

A few West Australian keepers have indicated some difficulty in getting captive anthill pythons to feed, but this hasn't been the case with myself, Brian Barnett, Chris Banks, Charles Acheson, Jurgen Holzell and others who have kept this species. It is probable that only a highly inexperienced snake keeper would have such troubles with these snakes. If there is difficulty in getting anthill pythons to feed, "creative methods" (such as feeding at night and/or alternating food items) would probably solve the problem.

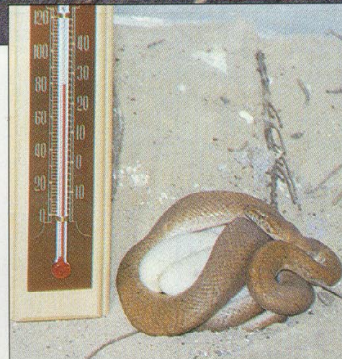
It appears that anthill pythons will survive without problems in the same sort of facilities that any other small python would require—in other words, what Kend and Kend (1992) called "standard terrestrial husbandry." Brian Barnett has successfully kept a single specimen in a shoebox-style cage for 18 years without incident. His cage is a small, plastic container with a clear lid, washed gravel as a substrate, a small water bowl and single cover (hiding spot). The box itself is housed in a large, temperature-controlled snake room with hundreds of other similarly housed snakes.

My own anthill pythons were caged within a large tank with compacted dirt as substrate, rocks as cover; generally, they were provided with a more "natural" setting. I am unable to state which is the superior way to keep this species. The common thread in all anthill python cages appears to have been the relatively dry conditions, which probably is essential. Bear in mind the arid areas these snakes come from. (A water bowl should



ABOVE: The black-headed python is one of a variety of other reptile species that share the anthill python's termite-mound habitat.

RIGHT: Anthill python clutches are comprised of two to five unusually large eggs (for such a small python).



always be available, however.)

To my knowledge, these snakes have only been bred in captivity twice to date. Both times, the breedings were apparently fairly standard python breedings. That there are only two breedings recorded to date is no doubt a reflection of how few there are in captivity, rather than any particular difficulty in breeding the snakes.

I failed to breed mine the first summer season (1981/1982) because I neglected to put them through a cooling period beforehand. The following year (1982/1983), I succeeded after I cooled the snakes during the winter period (mid-1992 in Australia). I did not separate the sexes prior to mating, although doing so may be advantageous toward initiating successful mating.

Anthill pythons lay unusually large eggs; between two and five eggs per clutch, although I can't accurately give an average clutch size in captivity due to the paucity of records. Incubation is standard for pythons, and the recommended temperature is between 29 and 30.5 degrees Celsius (84 to 86 degrees Fahrenheit).

It is uncertain how often anthill

pythons breed in the wild. Some Australian snakes only breed every second year (a few, every third year). This is dependent in some cases on a genetic predetermination, while in other cases on the condition of the female at breeding time.

In Australia, there are very few anthill pythons in captivity and it isn't likely that there will be any change in this picture in the foreseeable future. Outside of Australia, the scenario is similar. Specimens are smuggled out of the country, although not all attempts to do so have been successful. Attempts are made to mail specimens out of the country, and most busts have been a result of data-matching and tip-offs. Customs and wildlife officials have huge data bases of individuals they think are likely to smuggle wildlife, and devote vast resources to prevent such activities. People who are caught smuggling wildlife out of Australia are often fined and/or jailed.

Of the few known specimens outside Australia, only one collector in Germany has bred these snakes (once so far), so they are likely to remain rare captives for the foreseeable future.

In my opinion, the best two books