

# Herpetology in Australia: Some Good News

by **Raymond T. Hoser**

The last few issues of *The Reptilian* carried a serialisation from my book *Smuggled-2*, the sequel to *Smuggled*. Much of the contents of these articles and the books themselves were a bad news file on herpetology, wildlife crime, corruption and related matters.

Partly to add balance to the overall picture and also in order to highlight some more positive aspects in Australian herpetology, recent noteworthy events from Australia are reported here.

## The End of the Publication Drought

The Second World Congress of Herpetology hosted by Mike Tyler in Adelaide at the end of 1993 was a huge suc-

cess. As one of the 800-odd reptile people who attended the event at Adelaide University, I can say that Tyler pulled off one of the greatest herp' events in recent times. In essence it was a one-week herpfest where many of the top names in contemporary herpetology attended and people like myself could take time out to pick the brains of others. The net result was that all who attended departed a bit wiser after their stay.

To coincide with the congress, many herpetologists, authors and publishers worked hard to produce a variety of herpetological books, papers and similar for other attendees to view and buy. In essence the congress became a de facto book-launch for a whole swag of new ti-

ties. I availed myself of the opportunities available and left several hundred dollars poorer after a major book-buying binge.

The downside to all this was that for the following two years, there was a lull in new publications by Australian herpetologists. New books seemed a little thin on the ground. However in late 1995-1996 the drought appeared to be breaking. New titles are now due out by a number of well-known authors including Cogger, Greer, and Cann.

After interminable delays, Allen Greer of the Australian Museum in Sydney assures me his snake book will be out before Christmas 1996. Having seen some of the photos to be published and noting

Newborn northern death adders  
(*Acanthophis praelongus*) bred by Rob Varentic in 1996.



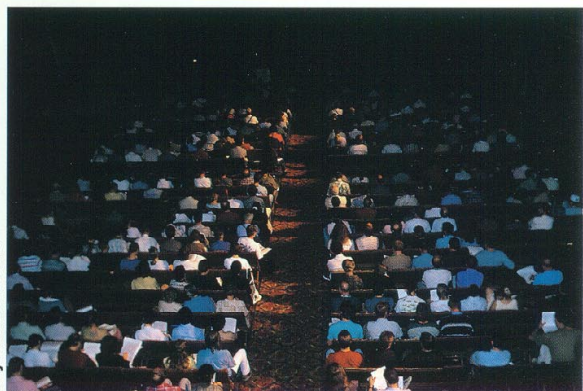
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Broad-headed snake (*Hoplocephalus bungaroides*).



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World Herpetology Congress.



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Greer's prior form (in particular his book *The Biology and Evolution of Australian Lizards* published in 1989), this next title will be another one not to miss.

John Cann's book about Australian freshwater Tortoises (I think he calls them "turtles"), published by Charles Pierson is also another title not to miss. Running somewhere over 200 pages, this book will probably be the last word on Australia's freshwater tortoises for some time. Cann's descriptions of all known Australian species are so detailed as to be a total pleasure to read. Having seen proofs for some of the book, I can say it is visually orgasmic for the reader. For a given species, he has pictures of various age classes, habitats, breeding and so on. The book is also graced with excellent line drawings of skulls, life-history diagrams and so on. It represents the summary of a man's lifelong work in the field of tortoises, and is based largely on his own personal diving experiences in creeks, lakes and rivers all

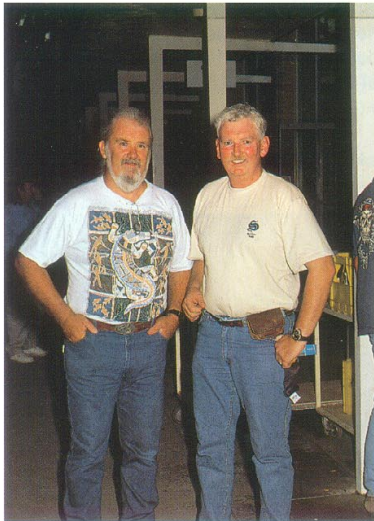
over Australia.

On top of this, Cann's lifelong experience keeping virtually every species known is also documented. While mentioning the keeping of tortoises, Cann's house and yard would have to be the most elaborate set-up I have ever seen for keeping these animals. It is one of Sydney's herpetological highpoints. He has an endless number of ponds, pumps, tanks and so on, all of which maintain his vast collection in crystal clear water and in tiptop shape.

Cogger's bible *Reptiles and Amphibians of Australia* is being revised yet again. Having recently retired from his post at the Australian Museum in Sydney, Hal Cogger is able to spend more time working on reptiles in the field, which is one of his lifelong passions. Little known to many readers of *The Reptilian* are some of Cogger's long-term studies of reptiles in the field, including species as diverse as

Dragon Lizards in arid areas, in particular *Ctenophorus fordii*, and Sea Snakes off the north Australian coast.

Rick Shine and others at Sydney University continue to push the limits of their research further and further. Perhaps the only glitch among Shine and his workers was a recent (19/5/96) quotation attributed to Jonathan Webb, who is studying Broad-headed Snakes (*Hoplocephalus bungaroides*) around Sydney, to the effect that illegal trappers were paying up to \$10,000 per snake. Within Sydney and elsewhere in Australia, legal specimens trade for about \$100 each, and I know of none ever being traded outside of Australia. So where the \$10,000 figure came from, I can only guess. Perhaps the statement was made to appease local wildlife officials or to ensure funding for future research. It is unfortunate that such statements by "experts" can be used to further unnecessarily regulate law-abiding herpetologists, both private and professional.



Above left: VHS meeting - Feb. 1995.

Above: Black-headed python (*Aspidites melanocephalus*) hatchling, owned by Neil Sonneman. The parents of this specimen originated from the Northern Territory.

Left: Collett's snake (*Pseudechis colletti*), one of the many species bred by Brian Barnett. He is one of the largest single breeders of snakes in Australia. These snakes are known to eat the bearded dragon *Pogona henrylawsoni*.

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**Private Herpetologists**

The so-called "amateur" or more correctly named "private" herpetologists haven't been idle either. While not funded by the taxpayer, these people have notched up an incredible series of gains in recent

**It is hard to determine the number of boa constrictors bred in Australia due to the underground nature of the exotic herp. scene.**



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years. Late last year saw the publication of a book called *Reptiles and Frogs of the Perth Region* by Brian Bush, Brad Maryan, Robert Browne-Cooper and David Robinson.

As far as regional herp' guides go, this book sets a new benchmark as to how they should be done. The book covers habitats, conservation and all the details of Perth's unique herpetofauna. The photos, information and so on are all first class. It is also a remarkably inexpensive book. All this from a group of men who take pride in themselves as "amateurs" and have formed a group called WASAH (West Australian Society of Amateur Herpetologists).

While talking herpetological societies, there have also been continuing gains. A number of new societies have formed, but un-

fortunately most are small in membership and publications are fairly lightweight. A notable exception to this trend is the Cape York Herpetological Society (CYHS), which puts out an excellent twice-yearly publication called *Chondro*.

The pages of this journal are mainly graced with the results of field trips in far north Queensland by a small but very active group of herpetologists. It is well produced, although sometimes the photos are substandard.

Gerry Swan continues to produce *Herpetofauna*. This journal publishes original research findings by mainly private herpetologists and is cited by herpetologists in Australia on a routine basis. Swan has personally published this journal continuously for over 20 years and over this time it has graduated from a photocopied newsheet to a world-regarded journal taken in by libraries and museums across the globe. Within Australia, most Australian herpetological societies bulk-subscribe to *Herpetofauna* on behalf of their members and the material being published each year continues to grow.

**Giant cave gecko (*Pseudothecadactylus lindneri*). Neil Sonneman of Wangratta breeds this species in huge numbers.**



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**Golden bell frog (*Litoria aurea*). Keepers in some states are now breeding so many that they don't know what to do with them.**



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**Spencer's monitor (*Varanus spenceri*). Greg Fyfe of Alice Springs has bred large numbers of this species.**



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In terms of societies in Australia, the heavyweight of the bunch is without doubt the Victorian Herpetological Society (VHS). With close to a thousand members, this society has more members than the rest combined. While calling itself the Victorian Herpetological Society, being based in Melbourne, members can be found in all Australian states as well as overseas. Besides giving members *Herpetofauna* (see above), the VHS also puts out its own publication called *Monitor*. *Monitor* is perhaps best described here as Australia's answer to *The Reptilian Magazine*, the main difference being that it only comes out three times a year and that its content is more Australian-based. Articles in *Monitor* are usually aimed at keepers of reptiles and often cover popular species such as Pythons, Death Adders and Geckos. Like

*The Reptilian, Monitor* is graced with excellent colour photos and other features. *Monitor* can be obtained in the UK through *The Reptilian*, or alternatively by directly subscribing (the address being in the front of this magazine).

The VHS, or more correctly VHS Inc., as it is formally known, really is an "Inc." It's like a huge company. Besides putting out *Monitor*, and probably circulating more copies of *Herpetofauna* than everyone else combined, the VHS provides a host of other services. The three meetings a year are invariably major events with hundreds of herpetologists gathering from far and wide. Typically the VHS brings in the best speakers available, regardless of where they come from. Recent meetings have seen Glen Shea, John Weigel and

Rick Shine flown in from Sydney to talk, Brian Bush, Brad Maryan, Robert-Browne Cooper and David Robinson brought in as a group from Western Australia, Gavin Bedford from Darwin, Peter Mirtschin from Adelaide and even Dave Barker from Texas, USA, as well as local, Melbourne-based herp' talent.

Also there is the VHS "Herp shop" which sells books, cages, herp' food and all other manner of things required by reptile-keepers and herpetologists. The VHS routinely brings in hard-to-get overseas titles and sells them in bulk at ridiculously low prices to members.

The major flaw in the whole VHS Inc. system at this stage is that 90 per cent of the work is falling on the shoulders of one man - Brian Barnett. If I were to describe him, the best way to put it is that he is not human. I mean this in a complimentary sense. Besides running the VHS virtually single-handed (and with a lot of help from his wife Lani and sons Taipan (what a kick-arse name!) and Brett, Brian Barnett works a full-time job and keeps a collection of hundreds of snakes.

Barnett is also one of the largest single breeders of snakes in Australia, routinely breeding Taipans (the snake kind) (*Oxyuranus* spp.), Collett's Snakes (*Pseudechis colletti*), Northern and Barkly Death Adders (*Acanthophis* spp.), Tree Snakes (Colubridae), all manner of Pythons and so on.

A typical Barnett day runs roughly as follows:- up at 4 AM, work till 1 PM, home to feed the snakes and run the society and then bed in exhaustion at about 11 PM. While few envy the man, herpetology in Australia would be far poorer without Barnett. Having said all this, the question then worth asking is what happens after Barnett? He is already aged 53 and can't carry on like this for ever. Part of the problem for Barney as we like to call him, is that the VHS started off as a small thing and it just grew and grew and grew. Because he does such a good job running things and he is so efficient, the whole thing just gets bigger.

While a lot of people take Barnett for granted at the moment, he'll probably be canonised after he leaves the scene.

#### **More Captive Breeding**

Although Barnett single-handedly breeds more snakes in a year than most keepers do in a lifetime, he is not alone in the reptile-breeding league. Due to many constraints, government-funded herpetologists, zoos and similar concerns can rarely if ever compete with private herpetologists in the breeding stakes.



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Due to Australia's ban on legal imports of reptiles, species such as Burmese pythons *Python molurus* (above) and ball pythons *Python regius* (below) are highly sought-after.



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In the VHS there are now a whole host of highly competent breeders producing vast numbers of herpetological offspring. Besides the Barnett influence, part of the reason for the success in breeding in recent times has come from the slight easing of keeping laws by Wildlife Authorities in Victoria and elsewhere. This has facilitated the trade among keepers and enabled potential breeders to more easily move and pair up reptiles. While the wildlife officials can take some credit for this state of affairs, most probably again goes to Barnett for his direct inputs to the government decision-making process.

Neil Sonneman of Wangaratta doesn't have a huge variety of reptiles. However everything he has he seems to breed in huge numbers. This includes Giant Cave Geckos (*Pseudoeurycea lindneri*), Black-headed Pythons (*Aspidites melanocephalus*) and Olive Pythons (*Liasis olivaceus*). Collections all over Australia now have Giant Cave Geckos sourced from Sonneman. Furthermore a recent comprehensive article by Sonneman on the keeping and breeding of these Geckos in *Monitor* has ensured most recipients also know how to have further breeding success.

As for my favourite snakes, Death Adders, the recent score here has also been good. Rob Valentic who lives around the corner from me hit the big time with his Northern Death Adders in 1996, getting perfect young from three adults. Roy Pails of Ballarat who breeds huge numbers of reptiles also bred Northern Death Adders this year. The Valentic snakes were of Northern Territory vintage, while Pails' were from north Queensland. Stuart Barnes of Sydney bred his *A. antarcticus* (again), while Roland Burrell of Adelaide produced a huge number of Barkly Tableland Death Adders (*A. antarcticus hawkei* (?)) from a number of adults.

Greg Fyfe of Alice Springs had success in breeding Desert Death Adders

(*Acanthophis pyrrhus*) along with several other species. He's become a bit of an embarrassment to wildlife officials by breeding huge numbers of Spencer's Monitors (*Varanus spenceri*). The problem here is that in some places like Victoria (at the moment), the species is not on wildlife schedules (cannot be kept in captivity) due to its alleged rarity in captivity. By pumping out so many young Spencer's Monitors Fyfe is brutally exposing the stupidity of some wildlife licensing laws and policies.

A similar situation has occurred in the frog scene. Although NPWS/NSW persist in declaring the Green and Golden Bell Frog (*Litoria aurea*) as Schedule 12, which means "Off-limits to keepers - endangered", keepers in other states are breeding so many of them that they don't know what to do with them. Tadpoles and young are being fed to other captive reptiles because NPWS/NSW refuse to allow trade in them. In other words, if they are not truly endangered yet, NPWS/NSW are working damn hard at making them go that way!

In other parts of Australia, particularly in Queensland, a number of keepers are having increased successes in breeding their reptiles with ever-increasing numbers of captive-bred young being bought and sold. Species that used to rarely if ever be bred in Australia such as Bearded Dragons (*Pogona* spp.), Forest Dragons (*Gonocephalus* spp.) and Water Dragons (*Physignathus* spp.) and a number of Pygmy Monitors (Varanidae) are all now routinely bred.

Even in Western Australia, where there are perhaps the most restrictive policies of all towards the keeping of reptiles in captivity, the local herp's are kicking goals. The latest newsletter from WASAH notes that the number of licensed collectors in Western Australia has now jumped to a new record total of TEN! This is the grand total for an area

larger than Western Europe.

#### What You Can't Get


There is a truism that the harder it is to get something, the more people want it. This is certainly true for reptiles. Reptiles common here in Australia are eagerly sought after by people in the United States and Europe, who find some species hard to get hold of. A classic example is Diamond Pythons (*Morelia spilota*) which, while commonplace and little-sought-after in Sydney collections, is a highly sought and valuable snake in the United States and Europe.

Due to Australia's ban on legal imports of reptiles, species common in captivity in the United States and Europe, such as Burmese Pythons (*Python molurus*) and Boa constrictors (*Boa constrictor*) are sought after by keepers here who under normal circumstances can't get hold of them.

Typically Australians on holiday buy hatchlings when in the United States or elsewhere and then bring them home with them. These snakes are either kept as pets or sold on to other keen keepers. While this trade is illegal, with most imported reptiles being concealed in bags or sent through the post, only a few are caught by the authorities. Consequently there is a sizeable trade in "exotic" reptiles. As Australian keepers have got better at breeding local species, so too have many got better at breeding exotics. While it is hard to gauge who is breeding what due to the underground nature of the exotic herp' scene, there have been notable breedings of Ball Pythons (*Python regius*) and Boa Constrictors. This has resulted in numbers being traded for sums that would seem ridiculous to European or American readers.

A man who bred Boa Constrictors was selling them for \$350 a snake and his entire batch of young sold overnight. Wildlife officials that had been tipped off and were eager to find the young snakes had a nightmare on their hands due to the fact that the selling network was so well organised that any given snake passed through several people before it was finally sold. To make things worse for officials, those who hold exotics aren't usually licensed keepers, thereby making it almost impossible for officials to know where to look to find the snakes.

In late 1995 a keeper declared a Ball Python to authorities which had been passed to him anonymously. To the credit of the officials concerned they didn't seize the snake, but instead allowed the man to keep it. If this event sets a precedent, it may well only be a matter of time before the true number of exotic reptiles in Australia can be accurately gauged and perhaps eventually local keepers may be able to publish the results of their successes.



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