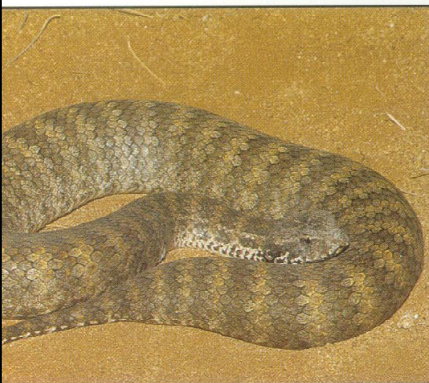




on's legless lizard from Clare (SA). R. Hoser.



: Female death adder from near Port Pirrie
None were found by Hoser in March 1996.

right: Thick-tailed gecko *Underwoodisaurus
milli* from Adelaide.

right: Red bearded dragon *Pogona vitticeps*
from Simpson's Gap.

Raymond Hoser.



Burton's Legless Lizards are renowned lizard-feeders, usually taking skinks and geckos in captivity. They rarely eat anything else. These Legless Lizards come in a variety of colours, including red and grey, often with more than one colour occurring in a single area. Both the specimens we found were grey. Notable is that in spite of finding 36 species of reptile after spending ten days in the area, Rob Valentic and Michael Kearney never found any Gunther's Skinks or Burton's Legless Lizards. In making this statement, I emphasise the fact that these men didn't burn any Spinifex, so perhaps they never looked in the "right" place for these animals. This point is only raised in that often a reptile may mistakenly be thought of as rare or even absent in an area, when in fact they are common. The conclusion may be erroneously drawn due to a "fault" in the col-

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lection technique. For reasons I cannot explain, many reptiles and frogs seem to "disappear" at certain times of the year, becoming abundant at other times. While these animals don't literally vanish, nobody seems to have actually worked out where they go.

For a few species, there have been radio telemetry studies done and movements actually tracked. Rick Shine did a study of Frilled Dragons (*Chlamydosaurus kingii*) in the Northern Territory. These lizards are commonly seen in the wet season (summer), but not for most of the rest of the year, during the dry season (including winter). Shine found that outside of the wet season these lizards appeared to go to the upper parts of trees, where they remained out of sight and then hardly moved.

In other parts of Australia, Burton's Legless Lizards are commonly found crossing roads at night, so it was somewhat surprising that neither Valentic and Kearney or ourselves saw any doing so in this area. Mirtschin and Krantz have however seen the species crossing roads in the area and regard it as common. Sometimes when driving along roads at night in search of reptiles, it appears to be almost a lottery in terms of what you end up finding.

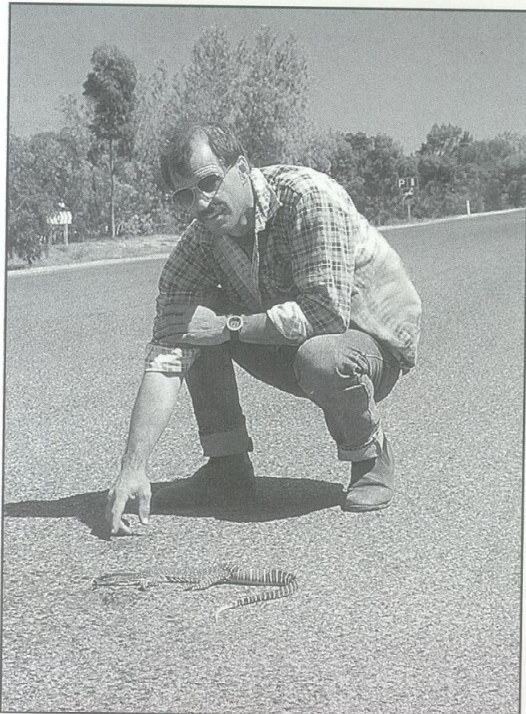
The only other reptile found in the

Spinifex was a single young dragon lizard. The Mallee Dragon (*Ctenophorus fordii*) is common in many parts of Southern Australia and is a lizard Hal Cogger spent many years studying, so it is perhaps better known than most other Australian reptiles. The specimen I caught was very fast in spite of its tiny size and posed some difficulty in capture. Dragons (Agamidae) are a major feature of Spinifex habitats and I was somewhat surprised we didn't see more. Perhaps it was the hot and dry weather that kept many out of our sights.

Notable by their absence were geckos. Others who have collected reptiles in the area have seen vast numbers of geckos, including species noted for their preference for Spinifex. I can only guess that we didn't look in enough bushes, picked a devoid area, or something similar.

While we were burning Spinifex bushes, a local Policeman drove past and questioned me about what I was doing. He claimed to be looking for a drug crop alleg-

Dead-on-road *Varanus gouldii* from Port Augusta, SA (Ian Renton in photo).



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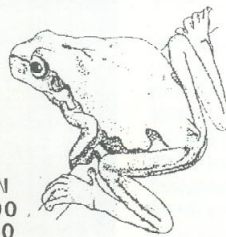


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Habitat at Sinclair's Gap, South Australia. Raymond Hoser.



Lialis burtonis (Burton's legless lizard) from Sinclair's Gap.

edly being grown in the area. When I told him I was looking for Death Adders (snakes), he pulled a large gun from next to him and pointed it at my face. He said "See this gun... I use this to shoot any snake I see!" I make no further comment.

On our second night in the area (15th March), we again drove the roads in the area and again we found nothing. The night was marginally cooler and we thought we'd score some reptiles. Air temperatures ranged from 27C at dusk down to 25C at 9.25 PM. One minute later a massive cold front struck. It packed winds in excess of 100 kph. The temperature plummeted and we were engulfed in a huge duststorm. Unable to see much of anything, we termi-

nated our drive and headed back to the camp. We again saw nothing. While unable to explain this relative lack of success, the best explanation I could give was relative bad luck coupled with the drought conditions affecting the area, all enticing the reptiles not to move. When Valentic and Kearney collected in the same area, it had been an earlier part of the summer and they had arrived in the area immediately after good, heavy rains.

The cold front was like a cyclone and it was truly amazing that the tent never blew over. The same front hit both Adelaide and Melbourne and the high winds caused millions of dollars in damage.

Without listing all the other reptiles in the area, clearly we failed to find most species known from there. In fairness however, we did very little actual searching.

Before leaving our campsite, the next morning, we pulled bark off some trees and found a pair of Dtella Geckos (*Gehyra* sp.). They were a male/female pair and found under the same sheet of bark. Vicki saw another gecko but it escaped. She thought it was a different species. Both Dtellas had small red mites (Arachnidae) located around their eyes (see photo). These tiny parasites don't appear to adversely affect wild reptiles and are commonly seen on geckos throughout much of Australia. In a captive situation, they can be an important vector for various, potentially fatal diseases. For this reason, if a wild animal is seen with these parasites and it is to be kept, then the mites should be immediately destroyed.

The road leading into Sinclair's Gap is also well-known for other reptiles. This is where the brick red Bearded Dragons (*Pogona vitticeps*) come from. Even specimens from nearby Port Augusta, just an hour or so away (towards Adelaide) aren't nearly as red in colour. Although we saw no Bearded Dragons on the Sinclair's Gap Road, probably due to the heat, other herpetologists have counted large numbers in the area. Among the geckos common to the area is also a Knob-tailed Gecko (*Nephurus stellatus*). This lizard lives in both Spinifex and Saltbush habitats and is usually seen crossing roads at night.

One of the region's more notable inhabitant is the King Brown Snake (*Pseudochis australis*). The local form of this widespread and highly venomous snake is unusual in that its colour is not just a plain brown like specimens from elsewhere. Instead the anterior part of most scales on the upper body is yellow in colour, with the rear part of each scale being brown, giving the snake a distinctive appearance. The snake may ultimately be reclassified as a subspecies or perhaps even species. We saw none of these, which was a pity. I had a permit to collect a pair for a Melbourne-based lecturer Fred Rossignoli, who sought these snakes as part of an educational display. King Brown Snakes, while potentially dangerous, are relatively docile in captivity and relatively trouble-free to keep. A number of keepers in Australia free-handle their King Browns, although I don't recommend it.

Driving from Whyalla back to Adelaide was a different experience from driving there. Upon leaving Whyalla, the air temperature was 22C only and cloud cover was total. Later this cleared and air temperatures for most of the day hovered in

Shingleback

Tachydosaurus rugosus

Raymond Hoser





the mid 20's. At 12.50 PM, just 10 km from Port Augusta we saw an adult Bearded Dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*) scuttle off the side of the highway into a cluster of saltbush. With three of us cornering the lizard on each side of the bush, it was easily caught. While reddish in colour, it wasn't the brick-red colour of the Sinclair's Gap lizards.

Although we were initially pleased to have caught the Bearded Dragon, our elation later turned to commiserations as we drove into Port Augusta. On the outskirts of town the car immediately in front of us ran over a sub-adult Sand Goanna (*Varanus gouldii*). The lizard had been crossing the road. All we could do was stop and inspect the dead lizard - blood still dripping from its nose.

This is what really upsets reptile people throughout Australia. While we have to justify every minor action to wildlife bureaucrats and fill in endless sheets of paper to have just one reptile as a pet or for research, countless thousands are killed by Australians annually with no questions asked. Whether it's on the roads, or from idiots putting a shovel through the head of a snake in their garden the result is the same - dead reptiles. In spite of this massive annual slaughter, wildlife officials persist in their lop-sided approach of hounding to death those very few people who have a genuine interest in and concern for native reptiles. Those concerned people at most only account for a tiny number of reptiles when compared to the carnage on the roads and in the suburbs.

After a quick pit-stop at Port Augusta, we headed for Adelaide before taking a detour just south of Port Augusta

to have a brief look at Telowie Gorge. This National Park is in the hills just east of the Spencer Gulf. Unlike much of South Australia that has been brutally denuded of vegetation by misguided early settlers, Telowie Gorge is fairly pristine in vegetation and habitat. Telowie Gorge itself is a rocky river running between large rocky hills covered in native pines, gums and other vegetation. Due to the dry conditions, the river itself was totally without water. Ian Renton, familiar with the area and a regular visitor, stated he'd never seen the place so dry. The gorge is notable to herpetologists for it's population of Carpet Snakes (*Morelia spilota*). In our half-hour visit, I saw a Tree Skink (*Egernia striolata*) which was sheltering under bark on a gum tree and two skinks of the genus *Ctenotus*. They were too fast for me to capture and identify.

Ctenotus is a large genus of striped skinks found throughout Australia. By virtue of their relatively small size and difficulty of capture, many species have eluded the attention of scientists. As a result, even now, new species are constantly being described. The late Glen Storr, formerly of the Western Australian Museum once described ten new species in a single paper.

Also found in Telowie Gorge were a great many of large scorpions. I am no expert on these animals, so cannot give an identification of them. However, these were perhaps the largest scorpions I have ever seen in Australia. They measured about 9 cm in length (estimation only), and the largest were dark brown in colour. A number of large females had numbers of baby scorpions riding on their backs.

Scorpions are highly territorial animals and it was rare to find more than one under a given rock. It can only be presumed that they will fight one another for sites and this may in fact have been a limiting factor on the population in the area.

In Adelaide and Melbourne, some reptile people keep scorpions as pets and feed them crickets, moths and other insects. Typically the scorpions grab their prey with their claws and then sting them with their tail. When feeding on the insect, the scorpions seem to bite onto it and suck out the insides. These Australian species, while not dangerous, can still pack a nasty punch with their stings, (I've been stung by some before). As far as I'm aware, no scorpion sting deaths have been recorded in this country.

The road outside of Telowie gorge, between the Gorge and the main North-South Highway yielded two adult Shingleback Lizards (*Trachydosaurus rugosus*). Both were crossing the road and their activity was probably in response to the more favourable weather at the time. Instead of an air temperature near 40C, as had been the case the two previous days, it was now in the mid 20's. The same applied for the two lizards seen just outside of Port Augusta.

The drive from Telowie to Adelaide was relatively uneventful as the weather worsened and the latter part of the trip was in driving rain. Upon return to Renton's house, a host of herp people from Adelaide got together for a good yarn (talk). It is perhaps here that I should mention how being a herpetologist is almost like being involved in a religious sect. It doesn't matter where in the world you go, as soon as it's known you're a herpetologist, others will welcome you as if you're part of the family. This may be even if you've never heard of or met the other person. It is almost as if herpetology as a science or hobby is designed purely to bring out the best attributes in human nature and selflessness.

After spending much of the next day photographing some of Renton's and Burrell's reptile collections, we parted company and I headed back to Melbourne.

I'd been advised that at Murray Bridge, about an hour's drive out of Adelaide, there were Western Bluetongue's (*Tiliqua occipitalis*). Wanting to photograph one, I decided to search for them in the best possible place - the rubbish tip. It turned out that the site had been filled in with dirt and had nothing, so I headed towards Melbourne. On the outskirts of town I saw an old house surrounded by sheets of tin. Tin of course is the best reptile-habitat known to science. Because the weather was cool, (18C at the time) reptiles would

Scorpion from Telowie Gorge. Raymond Hoser.



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obviously be sheltering there. The tin yielded reptiles, but no Western Bluetongues. Under a single pile of tin I recovered two Eastern Bluetongues (*Tiliqua scincoides*), one adult and a juvenile, one Marbled Gecko (*Christinus marmoratus*), a Thick-tailed Gecko (*Underwoodisaurus milli*), and a Boulenger's Skink (*Morethia boulengeri*). More reptiles were found under other nearby bits of tin. In other words I did better here, looking under man-made rubbish than in the pristine wilderness near Whyalla!

REFERENCE CITED:

Cogger, H. G. (1992), Reptiles and Amphibians of Australia, Reed International Books, Chatswood, NSW, Australia, 775 pp.

1ST POSTSCRIPT:

Following my return to Melbourne, I received a letter from the enforcement section of SA/NPWS (sent on 28th March) alleging I had illegally burnt Spinifex in violation of the Native Vegetation Act of South Australia (enacted only in 1991) and a number of other state laws. The officer who had written to me asked me to provide an explanation of my actions, which I did immediately.

In my faxed letter, I stated that I had gone through several departments, including their own, the Police, Fire and Council and asked questions over the burning of Spinifex both before and after the actual activity by myself, that I had been given verbal approval to do it, that I followed instructions given and that I had actually kept a recording of this.

Following my sending of this fax, I spoke to the head of SA/NPWS, Mr. Frank Delpava, who stated that on the basis of my explanation I would not be prosecuted but that in future both sides (NPWS and myself) would have to be clearer over our views and intentions on such matters. We agreed that litigation was not the best way to pursue the matter in this case.

However I must stress here that the decision to prosecute or not to prosecute is a discretionary one of the department and as an outsider it is best to avoid putting oneself in a position where such discretion is to be relied upon - as it may not always go the way you want. I agreed that any potential problems now and in future should be minimised. Notable is that in South Australia (and now some other states), native vegetation laws are very broad in their descriptions - so broad in fact that merely picking a flower (even on private property), barking a tree and similar can all result in heavy fines if the law is enforced. Delpava made a major point of stressing how broad the interpretation of the Act could be.

While it is obvious that land clearing of optimal native habitat continues unabated (in spite of such laws), and that taken to it's logical extreme, some of these native vegetation Acts/laws would attack the wrong people (not those who are destroying the environment wholesale), this does not mean that such laws should be wantonly disregarded.

Knowing that reptile people in Australia are perhaps one of the most closely scrutinised bunches of people in terms of possible legal infractions, I can only suggest that anybody contemplating collecting reptiles for any purposes be very wary of any methods used and that if in doubt extensive (and often costly) enquires should be made in the first instance - inquiries that may in fact save much greater costs in the long run.

Even so much as picking up a reptile off the road to look at it is regarded as a criminal offence and can in some circumstances result in prosecution.

I make mention of the matter involving "destruction of native vegetation" in terms of native vegetation laws only because few reptile people are aware of these relatively new laws and most people (including museum personnel) who have engaged in spinifex burning in the past have not got specific approval from wildlife departments on their reptile permits and hence has left themselves vulnerable to prosecution. For

visitors to Australia, a prosecution by wildlife officials may ruin an otherwise exciting experience.

2ND POSTSCRIPT:

Mr. Bob Withey a well-known snake-breeder from Niagra Park an hour north of Sydney, New South Wales was last year raided by NPWS/NSW and NSW/Qld officials allegedly (by the officials) as a result of (what turned out to be) false and misleading information sourced from an alleged informant in Queensland. The gun-toting officials went through his files and collections meticulously in search of any possible legal breaches and saw some photos of Withey holding wild reptiles in Queensland. One was a Scrub Python (*Morelia amethystina*) being held in Tully Gorge. The other was a monitor lizard (Varanidae) saved from being killed on a road near Mount Isa. Withey, who thought he had nothing to fear from being honest with the officials, told them that the animals had been photographed and released and that he had no NPWS/Qld issued permits to collect at the time the photos were taken.

He was subsequently issued two separate summonses (charged) for "illegally interfering with wildlife". While such charges show the ridiculous extreme to which these laws may be taken, this case also highlights the extreme caution reptile people should exercise when in Australia. Other people, including Matt Hingley (in Qld), Rob Valentic (in Victoria, twice) and Peter Jones (in NSW) have also been prosecuted for similar activity. That is photographing reptiles in the wild. With the exception of Hingley, who copped very hefty fines, the others had their cases dismissed (thrown out of court) on the basis that while they may have been guilty of a technical offence under the relevant Acts, their actions were NOT in violation of the spirit of the Acts which are to "protect" wildlife and NOT to deny the public access to it. However again I should stress that the non-convictions of Valentic and Jones resulted from judicial discretion, which is something that cannot always be relied upon to go the way you may desire.