

Reptiles Encountered Collecting in the Pilbara - Australia

Raymond Hoser

My first search for desert death adders and other reptiles.

It was in mid-1980, August to be exact, that I went to the Northern Territory in search reptiles, particularly death adders. I was in my teens at the time and hitchhiked from Sydney, New South Wales to Barrow Creek in the northern Territory. Barrow Creek was at the time regarded as one of the better sites for these snakes. Because Desert Death Adders were all I wanted, I basically went straight to Barrow Creek, without looking for other reptiles on the way. The only exceptions were when my lifts decided to stop to camp

overnight and while they made their campsites, I ran around collecting reptiles.

At the time much of the road from Port Augusta to Alice Springs was dirt and highly corrugated. The drive was long and arduous and took some days. For those who have never travelled in arid Australia, the one thing that seems to get everywhere is the red dust. We call it 'bulldust'. Driving along the dirt roads, when one car passes, bulldust is thrown in the air and it remains airborne for several minutes in which time it may settle on other passing cars and anything remotely in the vicinity of the road. Thus all the vegetation within up to a hundred metres of either side of the road is covered in this fine red dust.

Due to the remoteness of the central Australian region, particularly south of Alice Springs, old cars that break down have often been left behind to rot. Thus for much of the distance the side of the road is littered with car wrecks as old as motoring itself. Due to the dryness of the air, many old cars seem fairly intact.

One morning we were driving in an area of mulga country just north of the South Australia/Northern territory border, near Marla Bore, when we seemed to come upon a plague of rabbits. One of the men driving the car decided to pull out his gun and shoot a rabbit to eat. With one bullet he shot two. At the same time I peeled the bark off a tree and lifted a

COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NUMBER FOUND IN 1981	NUMBER FOUND IN 1983
DESERT DEATH ADDER	<i>Acanthophis pyrrhus</i>	41	60
KING BROWN SNAKE	<i>Pseudechis australis</i>	4	0
WESTERN BROWN SNAKE	<i>Pseudonaja nuchalis</i>	3	10
RINGED BROWN SNAKE	<i>Pseudonaja modesta</i>	1	1
WHIP SNAKE	<i>Demansia psammophis</i> (?)	2	0
COLLARED WHIP SNAKE	<i>Demansia torquata</i> (?)	0	1
BLACK WHIP SNAKE	<i>Demansia atra</i> (?)	1	0
LITTLE SPOTTED SNAKE	<i>Denisonia punctata</i>	2	0
ROSEN'S SNAKE	<i>Denisonia fasciata</i>	0	1
HALF-GIRDLED SNAKE	<i>Simoselaps semifasciatus</i>	0	1
HALF-GIRDLED SNAKE	<i>Simoselaps approximans</i>	0	1
CURL SNAKE	<i>Suta suta</i>	1	0
MOON SNAKE	<i>Furina ornata</i>	8	0
BLIND SNAKE	<i>Typhlina</i> sp.	1	0
STIMSON'S PYTHON	<i>Antaresia stimsoni</i>	18	17
ANT-HILL PYTHON	<i>Antaresia perthensis</i>	4	6
BLACK-HEADED PYTHON	<i>Aspidites melanocephalus</i>	1	3
WOMA PYTHON	<i>Aspidites ramsayi</i>	0	1
BURTON'S LEGLESS LIZARD	<i>Lialis burtonis</i>	9	6
HOODED SCALYFOOT	<i>Pygopus nigriceps</i>	15	5
DELMA SPP.	<i>Delma</i> spp.	4	19
UNIDENTIFIED SNAKE OR LEGLESS LIZARD		5	7
GOULD'S MONITOR	<i>Varanus gouldii</i>	56	47
PERENTIE	<i>Varanus giganteus</i>	1	0
SPINY-TAILED MONITOR	<i>Varanus acanthurus</i>	7	1
UNIDENTIFIED MONITOR	<i>Varanus</i> sp.	0	1
KNOB-TAILED GECKO	<i>N. levis pilbaraensis</i>	6	32
SPINFEX GECKO	<i>Diplodactylus taeniata</i>	1	0
BYNOE'S GECKO	<i>Heteronotia binoei</i>	9	50
PILBARA DTELLA	<i>Gehyra pilbara</i>	16	55
SPINY-TAILED GECKO	<i>Diplodactylus cilliaris</i> (?)	7	170
FAT-TAILED GECKO	<i>D. conspicillatus</i>	14	15
UNIDENTIFIED GECKOS	SPECIES NOT KNOWN	144	25
BEARDED DROGON	<i>Pogona</i> sp.	2	0
MITCHELL'S DRAGON	<i>Pogona mitchelli</i>	0	1
DRAGON SPECIES	<i>Lophognathus</i> sp.	9	1
NETTED DRAGON	<i>Ctenophorus nuchalis</i>	1	0
DRAGON LIZARDS	<i>Ctenophorus</i> spp.	79	22
CENTRALIAN BLUETONGUE	<i>Tiliqua multifasciata</i>	4	3
NORTHERN BLUETONGUE	<i>Tiliqua intermedia</i>	0	1
DESERT SKINK	<i>Egernia inornata</i>	3	0
DEPRESSED SPINY SKINK	<i>Egernia depressa</i>	16	10
SAND SWIMMING SKINKS	<i>Eremiascincus richardsoni</i>	33	45
FIRE-TAILED SKINK	<i>Morethia taenioleura</i>	3	10
STRIPED SKINKS	<i>Ctenotus</i> spp.	36	1
UNIDENTIFIED SKINKS	Species not known	4	51
TOTAL REPTILES	All species	572	700
FROGS	Various spp.	1176	84

TABLE: 1. - Reptiles and amphibians during two trips to the Pilbara Gap area in 1981 and 1983.

Notes: This list includes all reptiles and amphibians as unidentified, their species they were not accurately determined. Most of these were on roads, but some were on termite mounds. Most of the lizards were identified when seen at night. Numbers too many were seen to be accounted for and the numbers include estimates only. Lizards and dragon numbers are exact. The numbers of snakes listed was caught and was not identified. The appearance to *Varanus kingo* *torquata* is known from Queensland. The snake attributed to this species is so listed on the basis of its appearance. Likewise for

rocks. Within a few minutes I'd caught a Gillen's pygmy monitor (*Varanus gilleni*). I have since found out that these lizards are extremely common in the area, usually sheltering under the bark of trees.

Also south of Alice Springs, not far from where the road turns off to go to Ayers Rock, a few hundred kms into the never, never, the countryside is dominated by red sand dunes covered with spinifex bushes. In some places there are also trees and some of these are surprisingly large. The Pygmy Monitor *Varanus brevicauda* lives here. Although they are fairly shy and rarely seen, they occur here in huge numbers. Recently (in 1995)

in this part of the country a PhD. student spent a month pit-trapping these lizards and caught over a thousand individuals.

A short two-hour pit-stop in the hills just 8 kms north of the centre of Alice Springs between 4.30 and 6.30 PM on 19th August netted me a young adult male Stimson's Python (*Antaresia stimsoni*), five Spiny-tailed Goannas (*Varanus acanthurus*), 2 large juveniles, a sub-adult and a pair of adults, 20 Bynoe's Geckos (*Heteronotia binoei*), 8 DTELLA Geckos (*Gehyra* sp.) and three 18-cm skinks (*Ctenotus* sp.). The area was rocky and it was in these outcrops that the reptiles were found sheltering. While the air temperature

was only 20° C, which is fairly typical for that time of year, the exposed parts of rocks were still warm, averaging between 26° C and 30° C. The reptiles were the same temperature as the exposed rocks and all were found on a slope facing the setting sun. All the species found are very common around Alice Springs, which is situated in a large rocky range, known as the Macdonnell Ranges. At the time, Stimson's Pythons were still regarded as Children's Pythons (*Liasis childreni*), Laurie Smith's (1985) reclassification of this group of snakes came some years later. Bynoe's Geckos are almost certainly the most common lizard in Australia



Title page: The first black-headed python (*Aspidites melanocephalus*) caught in 1981 on the main highway, near Goldsworthy, Western Australia.

Left: Gillen's pygmy monitor (*Varanus gilleni*) from Central Australia.

Raymond Hoser.

1996.

Frogs caught
Hedland/Shay

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Above: A centralian blue-tongued lizard (*Tiliqua multifasciata*) found crossing the road in 1981 near Goldsworthy, Western Australia.

Right: Two depressed skinks (*Egernia depressa*) from Shay gap, Western Australia.

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Upon arrival at Barrow Creek, I soon went straight to where the Desert Death Adders supposedly live. Barrow Creek is little more than the local pub, situated on the edge of the highway. Besides the pub, there were a number of Aborigines in the area, who appeared to live under sheets of tin (shanties) in conditions that would make the worst in Calcutta or any other third world city look quite respectable.

The road past Barrow Creek runs along mainly flat country, except where it bisects two or more large, flat-topped hills immediately adjacent to the pub. The hills are very rocky and covered in tussocks of spinifex grass. It is here that the desert Death Adders live. I'd been told that Death Adders lived under the rocks on the hills and so I spent the next two days walking over the hills lifting everything I could in search of these snakes. Other than a few innocuous small skinks, some geckos and a couple of agamid lizards, I saw nothing. The trip was an abject failure. In fact I'd found more in the two hours just north of Alice Springs than I had found in two days at Barrow Creek. I took a series of nice habitat photos and then proceeded to hitchhike through Mount Isa, Charters

Towers and Townsville (all in Queensland) and then back to Sydney. Within less than a fortnight, I'd hitched nearly ten thousand kilometres.

While travelling between Mount Isa and Hughenden in Queensland, the bag containing my camera fell out of the back of the van I was travelling in. Before we could stop and rescue it, a large truck passed and ran over the bag. My camera and film were totally destroyed.

The Second Attempt

A girlfriend at the time and myself decided to hitchhike around Australia in the summer of 1981. This was January/February. Heading south, we visited Victoria, then South Australia and then entered Western Australia in late January. Besides visiting every major zoo and herpetological collection (public and private) along the way, most of the rest of the trip was spent checking out all the usual tourist sites. However from my point of view, the most exciting part of the trip was to be that to the Pilbara.

At the time, the region was little known and rarely collected. This is because of its remoteness from the rest of Australia in terms of distance and roads to

and from it. Other than a few iron ore mines, opened there in the late 1960's and since, the Pilbara was and still is just an arid wasteland with nothing much to offer the average Australian. The whole region consists of rocky hills covered in spinifex bushes, stunted trees and other vegetation, interspersed with sand dunes and flat, sandy plains. The weather is oppressively hot in summer and manageable in winter, but dry and mainly sunny all year. In summer, an overnight low of over 30° C is not rare and daytime temperatures in excess of 40° C are common. Australia's hottest town, Marble Bar, lies in the heart of the Pilbara. Goldsworthy, which is unofficially hotter than Marble Bar, is also in a different part of the Pilbara.

Prior to my arrival at the Pilbara I had been told that Port Hedland on the West Australian coast was a known location for Desert Death Adders. This is the town we had decided to spend some time in.

We didn't go there via the road up the West Australian coast from Perth. Instead we went inland and through a huge part of the middle of Western Australia and into an inland part of the Pilbara.

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Adder. It goes without saying that nobody in the pub believed me when I tried to tell them the true identities of the preserved 'snakes'. After all, what would some ignorant kid from Sydney know?

The idea of going to the disused runway to look for Death Adders was abandoned after it was realised that 1/ I couldn't exactly work out where it was or how to get there and 2/ I'd never get a lift there.

On the 25th of January, I was driven along the sandy dirt road from Nullagine through Marble Bar and on to Port Hedland. The drive was during the day and the weather was hot and stormy, although perhaps marginally cooler than previous days. One of the good things about being the only car on a road is that all reptiles seen are live - there are no road kills. By far the most common lizard seen were the Sand Goannas. We saw ten on this one drive. Most of these were in a relatively short stretch of road through flat, sandy country. Also seen were three dragons (2 *Lophognathus* sp. and 1 *Ctenophorus* sp.).

Arriving at Port Hedland, I met up with a biologist who was doing a thesis on Mangroves. These are the trees that grow in estuaries and have roots that stick up from the mud. He was to be my chauffeur to drive me along the main highway north of Port Hedland in search of Death Adders. I had allowed a week to look for these snakes and based on my previous experiences with these snakes (or lack of it), I had been of the view that to find just one or two over the whole week would make the trip a success.

I'd been tipped off as to the best place to drive in search of these snakes. Death Adders are apparently rare to the immediate north of Port Hedland until after crossing a major road bridge over a watercourse, which is about 20 kms north of the town. Not far past there, there is a pair of large hills called 'The Tits' (named after a piece of the female anatomy). It

is from that bridge, past The Tits and to beyond the Sandfire Flat Roadhouse (a few hours up the road) where the Death Adders are found. Although the road is a main national highway, the traffic in this part of the country is very light and at night even lighter.

The maximum temperature in Port Hedland that day had been 36° C, which was marginally above the seasonal average. Being right on the coast, Port Hedland's temperatures during the day are modified by a sea breeze, which usually cuts in when the temperature starts to rise. We were to drive along the road north of Port Hedland for about two hours from 7 to 9 PM. The weather conditions were excellent for nocturnal reptiles. There was no wind, no moon in the sky and just 20% cloud-cover. At 7 PM the air temperature was 33° C and it was later to drop to 31° C at 9 PM.

At 7.40 PM, we found our first reptile. It was a large Burton's Legless Lizard (*Lialis burtonis*). These sharp-snouted legless lizards are found crossing roads in most parts of Australia and feed on other lizards. It was in some ways quite a disappointing find. You see, coming from Sydney, these animals are commonly found crossing roads there. I didn't really want to go to the opposite side of the continent to find what I could find in my local area.

Death Adders - My First Encounter

The disappointment was short-lived. Before the car had got out of the lower gears, we'd stopped for yet another red line on the road. This was it, the first Desert Death Adder I was ever to find. The elation experienced at the time is impossible to describe. The snake was an adult male. 20 minutes later, another adult male was found, followed by a large adult female Stimson's Python just six minutes later. Four minutes later, yet another male Desert Death Adder was found crossing the road.

Death Adders (genus *Acanthophis*) are from Australia, New Guinea and adjacent islands. They are unlike any other Australasian snake by being like a viper in appearance but are

actually a member of the family Elapidae, which are the front-fanged venomous land snakes. This is the dominant snake family in Australia, accounting for about 90% of local species. Death Adders are stout snakes, averaging about 60 cm (2 feet) in length.

There are three recognised species in Australia, all of which are similar in appearance and habits. These are the Southern species/form (*Acanthophis antarcticus*) found mainly in the southern third of the continent, the east coast and nearby parts of New South Wales, inland Queensland and into the Northern Territory in the vicinity of the Barkly Tableland. The Desert Death Adder (*A. pyrrhus*) lives in arid parts of Australia, particularly in the western two thirds of the continent. The Northern Death Adder (*A. praelongus*) lives in the tropical north of Australia. Specimens from New Guinea are usually also attributed to this species, although the status of Death Adders in New Guinea and other islands to Australia's north is far from certain.

At least three regional forms of the Northern Death Adder are recognised in Australia, which may ultimately be subdivided into different subspecies, depending on whether or not there is clinal variation. Likewise for three or more recognised variants of the Common Death Adder. Furthermore there is a relatively recently discovered Death Adder from parts of the Pilbara region that has been variously called a Desert or Northern Death Adder, which is characterised by a reddish base colour and some specimens have distinctive black markings. I have not personally inspected one of these snakes.

Death Adders are usually ambush predators, lying in wait for their food and then striking rapidly when it approaches within range. They attract prey items by caudal luring. That is wriggling their tail rapidly in imitation of an insect. When a native mouse, bird or lizard attempts to eat the tail by approaching it, the Death Adder makes a lightning quick strike and bites its prey.