

# TASMANIAN HERP NEWS

TASMANIAN HERPETOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWS FORUM

Secretary: Dr Sue Woinarski Phone: 03 6382 6280

Editor: Jane Guy, Sally Wilson: Phone: 03 6398 1467

President: Darron Cameron: 0429 430 009

VOL 20. NO. 2 April 2010

## Editorial

Welcome to our newsletter offering for April in the Tas Herp Society's 20th year.

In this issue Darron gives an update on the 'importation' progress, there's a story from DPIPWE regarding a stuffed snake from the United States, and some Tasmanian snake behaviour observations from one of the the Herp Society's founding members, Alderman Ian Norton.

From me, a pic of one of the six *Litoria raniformis*, or 'Growling Grass Frog' that we found on a recent walk around a coastal property where we used to find many snakes but rarely these fellows hopping around. Similar to *Litoria aurea* or 'Green and Gold Bell Frog', which occurs in the south-east of mainland Australia, our *raniformis* is also known as the 'Southern Bell Frog' or 'Warty Swamp Frog', and is listed as Vulnerable under the *Threatened Species Protection Act 1992*.



During this excursion I only caught one Copperhead, one Bluey and observed these beautiful frogs. Even though we've had greater than usual rainfall this summer, three years of drought has taken its toll on the snake population, or at least the inhabitation of their home ranges.



I also have a South African Armadillo Girdled Lizard image (*Cordylus cataphractus*). Alas, there has been no trip to Africa, but maybe one day!

This fascinating lizard is unusual in that it forms family groups that inhabit the same rocky cracks. If threatened, it will bite its tail and roll into a tight ball, protecting its soft belly, and making it too spiny for predators to eat. Now you know his name go ahead and look him up on the net to find out more!

## President's Report

The most important subject for me to report on in this issue is the progress of a proposed licensing system allowing import and keeping of reptiles from outside Tasmania. The progress of which is now being held up by a review of Tasmania's exotic wildlife import legislation, regulations and process.

As many are aware, this has been a long, drawn out process. I apologise for those who are desperately waiting for the chance to import their own species however, I am afraid you will need to wait that little bit longer.

The review has not stopped and is still progressing, albeit at snail's pace. More recently, the process has slowed due to the Government going into

'Care-Taker mode' caused by the State Election. At the time of writing, we still do not know who will be governing Tasmania or for how long.

I have spent many hours on the telephone to various departments and offices, including Minister Llewellyn's office. This has produced some results and further insight into where the review is at and what is planned for the future.

The latest information I have received and can pass on is this:

*'The draft reptile licensing system was initially taken up in the Wildlife Regulation Review process, as it turned out we received legal advice indicating that the proposed licensing system would require changes to the Nature Conservation Act. As changes to Acts take a significant amount more time than amendments to regulations the reptile licensing system was removed from the Wildlife Regulation review. Currently any further progression of the reptile licensing system will be subject to the review of import arrangements.'*

DPIPWE is currently in the process of selecting a consultant who is anticipated to commence work in approximately one week. This consultant will be in talks with various stakeholder groups including the Tasmanian Herpetological Society. The report has a submission date to DPIPWE no later than 30 June 2010.

People may have seen or heard of some of the wildlife parks/zoos receiving animals lately and more will be arriving in the coming weeks/months. The departmental Import Assessment Panel approved these species, prior to a moratorium being declared by the minister. The moratorium was declared to free up resources to undertake the review of Tasmania's import and export practices, policies and regulations.

I will endeavour to keep you informed of the progress as more information comes to light.

Cheers, Darron

### **The Snake and the Beetle**

A message from Barry Calderbank, Communications Officer from the Biosecurity and Plant Health Branch, DPIPWE.

*'We would appreciate it if you could relay the story (below) of the stuffed snake to your fellow herpetologists and ask that, if bringing anything similar into Tasmania, they be as vigilant and as quick to act as the taxidermy enthusiast in this case. Thanks.'*



↑  
Actual size

In mid February, Quarantine Tasmania received a report from a North East resident of larvae emerging from a taxidermy-prepared rattlesnake he had bought from the United States, via EBay, a year or so earlier.

The larvae were those of warehouse beetle (*Trogoderma variabile*), which is a List A pest under Tasmanian quarantine law. Warehouse beetle has established in the grain growing

areas of NSW, Victoria and South Australia and is present but uncommon in WA and Queensland. It causes significant damage to stored grain and grain-based food. Where it contaminates human feed, it can also trigger allergic reactions in humans.

Thankfully, the homeowner did the right thing and did so promptly. He placed the snake and the larvae in a sealed bucket, sprayed the area with a household insecticide and contacted Quarantine Tasmania. His quick action helped limit the chances of the pest spreading beyond his property. Quarantine Tasmania arranged for the property to be fumigated and set *Trogoderma* traps around both the property and the local neighbourhood to check for any evidence that the pest had spread or survived the fumigation. We have had *Trogoderma* traps at various sites around the State since the mid 1990s and these have yielded no evidence of warehouse beetle.

The conclusions we have drawn from this incident are:

- It is far more likely that the larvae came into Tasmania inside the snake than the snake having been infested after arriving.
- We know that warehouse beetle is capable of a long diapause (hibernation) if its immediate environment is cool. In this case, the owner had the snake in a cupboard in an unheated room for a long time after he first got it. When, a year or so later, he moved it to display on top of his television set in his living room, there were no signs of larvae. The larvae started to emerge a few days later and that was probably triggered by warmth from the television set.
- This incident could have become a serious problem if the owner had not acted so quickly and effectively, and thereby enabled us to respond so quickly. Mainland states have tried to eradicate warehouse beetle but found that, by the time they were able to respond, the pest was already too well and too widely established. Tasmania is the only state that is free of warehouse beetle.

Because it appears likely that the warehouse beetle did come into Tasmania in the snake specimen from the USA, we are currently in discussion with the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service about whether this case indicates national border security issues.

But regardless of that, if you have any taxidermy-prepared animals that have originated from outside Tasmania, please check them for signs of pest infestation – especially when you first get them and again if you move them from a dark and/or cool part environment to a place that is warmer and/or sunnier. Our biosecurity system depends, to a significant extent, on the vigilance of people like the owner of the rattlesnake specimen from the USA.

## Snake Behaviour

A journey of discovery.

Over my 46 years working with snakes and observing their behaviour, I have always been aware of a basic instinct in snakes that demonstrates behaviour pattern not dissimilar to our own. Narrowing it down, the fear response. As human beings we are a cautious animal like most animals that respond to threatening behaviour by pulling back and not engaging in what we perceive as dangerous. Outside our comfort zone we, like many other species approach the unknown with a degree of caution.

Snakes act in a similar manner and are quite predictable when it comes down to it. Take the story of the Brady's Lookout copperhead. Many years ago I had a call from a lady who had a copperhead residing in her front yard. The tenor of the call was to request that the snake be relocated, as she was worried she might run over it with her lawnmower. She went on to explain how this snake was a resident animal that had become so complacent that she had to mow around it when it basked on her lawn.

Wondering as to the health of the snake I asked the lady to let me know when next it was out and I'd come and remove it. She responded telling me that it would be out now, to which I requested that she go and have a look to save me a long trip for nothing. She returned a short time later to say that it was there as usual and still laying on the unmown circle of grass from the mornings mowing session.

On arrival a large and friendly Labrador dog greeted me, and sure enough, a snake on its patch with freshly mowed lawn around it. I touched the snake with my foot to check that it was alive and to my surprise it flinched at me indignantly. This snake was so used to the everyday activity in the garden that it recognised no threat and simply went on with life.

A similar story of a snake that my wife has to shoo off the road when walking the dogs, confirmed what I have often suspected, snakes are placid once the fear response is removed. In saying this there is an unpredictability issue where snakes are concerned, when we initially invade their space. In a pit where snakes are being demonstrated, it only takes a maximum of an hour for all the snakes to settle and become harmonious and predictable.

Free handling of snakes is not a recommended activity, although I have observed that snakes who do not demonstrate a fear response will allow themselves to be handled without attempting to posture or bite. Practitioners should exercise a degree of caution.

In the wild, standing still offers us protection from a snake in close proximity, our movement will trigger a response and an advance will see the snake posture to reinforce the threat. In every test that I have undertaken with snake behaviour, I have found that they prefer to flee than engage; however when we have to share the space for a prolonged period both snakes and their human adversaries become relaxed and demonstrate an unusual peaceful coexistence.

I certainly don't advocate free handling as a general rule; however snakes with an even temperament subjected to routine activities will settle and respond to careful handling. As a rule snakes' anxiety levels increase where restrictions are applied such as being held especially around the neck. Handling with open hands once a threat-free relationship and environment has been established can offer its rewards, but remember we are talking about venomous snakes and even they can have a bad day. The elasticised bandages are always still within my reach.

The late Steve Irwin exercised similar principles and we all thought he was reckless; in fact he had already made this discovery and was ahead of the pack when it came to animal behaviour. Steve's relaxed approach allowed him to take liberties that we could only dream of. Though a wild man on the screen, his rapport with wildlife was a gift given to only a few.

Remember this is an individual approach that should not be taken lightly. You would have to establish a routine and follow strict guidelines, and never, never take snakes for granted.

So why the apparent back flip on free handling venomous snakes? My rationale is, regardless of common sense, people who keep snakes in Tasmania have no option other than keeping venomous snakes, and will, regardless of convention, attempt to express their appreciation and empathy with their pets just as they would with a non-venomous snake. If keepers are adopting free handling practices then they need to be aware of the behaviour and temperament of their reptiles.

Until our Wildlife authority falls into line with all other States and Territories in Australia, we have no choice but to pursue our wildlife disciplines with the only choice available to us with venomous Tasmanian snakes. Casualties that may result will be due to the intransigence of a regulator who have demonstrated their inadequacies for over a decade and still remain indecisive.

Ian Norton

### For Your Diary...

The **Launceston Reptile Club** will take place at 6 pm on **TUESDAY 6 APRIL** in the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery's Learning Centre, followed by the **Tasmanian Herp Society's** meeting.

*We hope to see you there!*