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RESOURCE NOTES

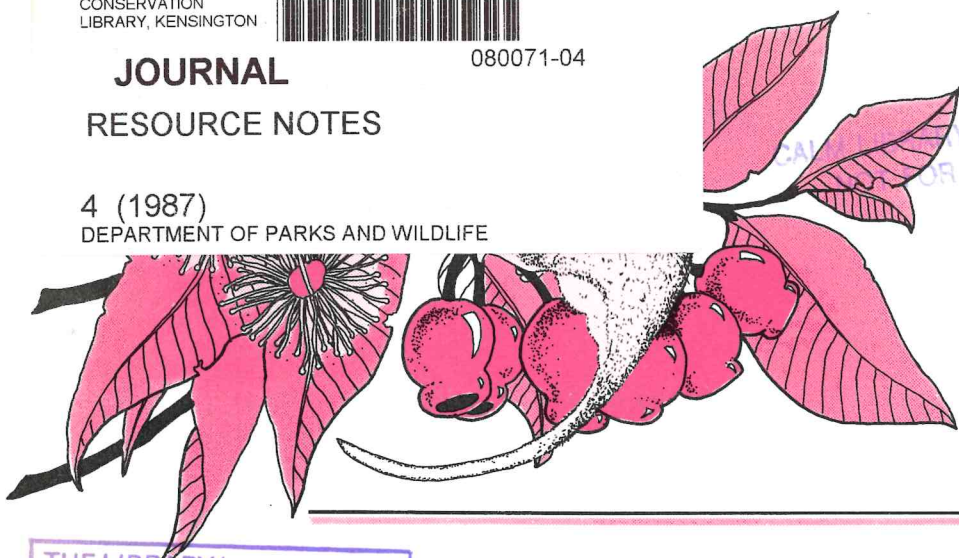
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DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND WILDLIFE

**Resource
Notes**

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Department of Conservation
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WESTERN AUSTRALIA

SNAKES AND LIZARDS OF W.A.'S SOUTH-WESTERN FORESTS

Australia is blessed with a remarkable number and variety of reptiles. The greatest number of species occurs in the semi-arid and arid areas of the country. However, there is a great variety of reptiles to be found in the south-west forests of Western Australia, even in the cool damp karri forest of the far south. Although they may look a little fearsome to those who have paid them little attention, it is well worth getting to know them.

This note will help you to identify the families and some of the more common species to be found in the south-west forests. Reptiles come in all shapes and sizes. They also show great variety in their habitat requirements and in the times and places of activity.

Temperature is probably the most important single physical factor in the ecology of reptiles. Reptiles are solar-heated and rely on the external environment as a source of heat. Thus a great portion of their daily activity is devoted to responding to the temperature changes of their environment.

Some species are active early in the morning, but others do not emerge until much later. Most geckoes, legless lizards, some skinks and some snakes are nocturnal. Certain species are climbers, others live below ground, while still others live only on the surface. Among the surface-dwellers, some are usually found in open areas, while others frequent the edges of vegetation. The places reptiles shelter and forage vary greatly between species. Some have great flexibility in their requirements, some are highly specialised. There is still much to be learnt about the ecology and natural history of even the most readily observed reptiles.

Let us examine the main families of lizards and snakes found in the south-west forests. Firstly - how do you tell whether it's a snake or a lizard? In the field, lizards can be distinguished from snakes by three characteristics: the presence of limbs (sometimes minute), a relatively long tail (usually as long or longer than the body) and by an external ear opening. As we shall see later - not all snakes, and no Australian lizards, are venomous.



GECKO



LEGLSS LIZARD



DRAGON LIZARD



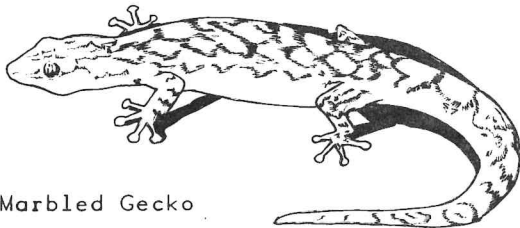
GOANNA

LIZARDS

Five of the 20 families of lizards found in the world are found in Australia. All are found in the south-west forests. Each of the five families is distinctive, all are harmless, and each species has its own special behaviour and habitat requirements.

Geckoes

The geckoes are distinctive because of their large eyes, vertical pupils and smooth velvety skin. Many climb and many are active at night. The marbled gecko (*Phyllodactylus marmoratus*) is most often seen, and is one of the most common lizards beneath rocks on granite outcrops in the lower south-west forest areas.

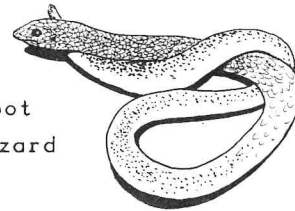


Marbled Gecko

Legless Lizards

The legless lizards are a family of reptiles found only in Australia, New Guinea and some islands in the Pacific. They are related to the geckoes, but are often mistaken for small snakes. They have tight-fitting skin, smooth scales, and there is no trace of forelegs. The hindlegs are represented by small flaps behind the vent. The most common species are very distinctive. *Aprasia pulchella*, a small burrowing legless lizard, more closely resembles a worm than a snake. *Delma fraseri* has a tail three times as long as its body. *Lialis burtonis* is a brightly-coloured large

terrestrial species. The common scaly-foot (*Pygopus lepidopodus*) is a large heavily-built legless lizard, which occurs in a variety of habitats, but is usually found under or in low vegetation.



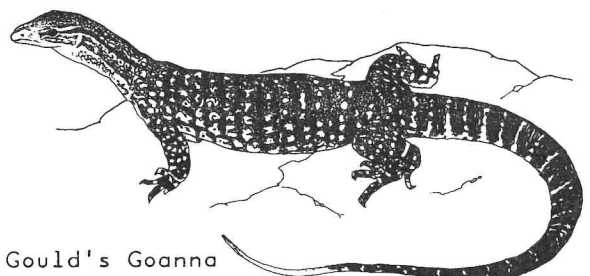
Scaly-foot
Legless Lizard

Dragon Lizards

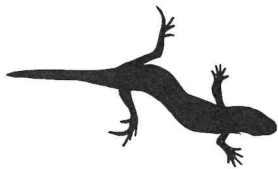
The dragon lizards are most common in the arid regions of the continent. They have rough loose skin and well developed limbs. The ornate dragon (*Ctenophorus ornatus*) is perhaps the most commonly seen animal on granite outcrops. It is found only on these outcrops, where it lives in crevices and under split slabs of rock. It is one of the few dragon lizards to occur in the south-west forest areas.

Goannas

The goannas or monitors include the largest lizards. They also have rough loose skin, but have a very long neck and a forked tongue like snakes. They are an important predator in the forests, although only two species (*Varanus gouldii* and *V. rosenbergii*) are found there. These two species can be told apart by differences in the colour of the tips of their tails. *V. gouldii* has a uniformly yellow tip, *V. rosenbergii* has a banded or uniformly dark tip. Both are usually called 'Bungarra'.



Gould's Goanna



SKINK



BLIND SNAKE



PYTHON



ELAPID

Skinks

Skinks are easily the most abundant of the lizard families in Australia. About 20 species of skinks are found in the south-west forests, including many burrowing skinks. All of the burrowing skinks are small, slender, smooth, shiny-scaled and secretive inhabitants of the leaf litter and near-surface soil.

However, the skinks also include large stout species such as the bobtail. It is most easily recognised from its rose pink mouth and blue tongue, hissing as it backs away from the would-be aggressor.

The three largest and most abundant *Egernias* (a member of the skink family) in the south-west forests, *E. napoleonis* (Smith's skink), *E. kingii* (King's skink) and *E. luctuosa* (Mourning skink) are also confined to that area. Each is distinctive, Smith's skink has a salmon belly, the Mourning skink has a dark hood-like stripe and yellowish spots, and King's skink is stocky and uniformly dark.

The red-legged skink (*Ctenotus labillardieri*) is another species confined to the south-west forests where it is abundant, often found sheltering under rocks and logs or in blackboy debris.

SNAKES

Three families of snakes are found in the south-west forests. The blind snakes are a group of small worm-like burrowing snakes, all quite similar in appearance. They are not poisonous, but if handled they may emit a strong and foul odour from well-developed anal glands. They are often found in termite mounds, their principal diet being ants and termites.

Pythons

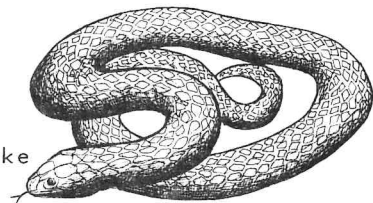
The beautiful but rarely seen carpet python is the only member of the python family to occur in the South-West. Although very large, it is not poisonous and usually lives in burrows made by other animals. Most recent sightings of this magnificent animal are from granite outcroppings on the edge of the Darling Range.

Elapids

The elapids include the most deadly snakes in the world. Fortunately few that live in W.A.'s South-West are dangerous to humans.

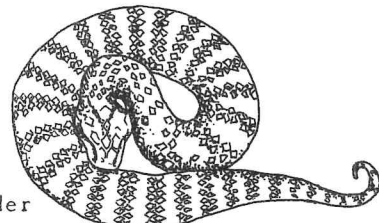
The main exceptions are the tiger snake (*Notechis ater*) - perhaps the best known reptile in the south-west forests, and the longer and more slender Dugite (*Pseudonaja affinis*).

Black
Tiger Snake



The tiger snake can be aggressive, and is most often found in damp places where frogs abound. The more mild-mannered dugite prefers mice. Both of these snakes are very dangerous and should not be handled. Admire their sleek and graceful movements from a distance. Another poisonous snake, the Death Adder (*Acanthophis antarcticus*) occurs in the Darling Range.

Death Adder



Other much less dangerous members of this family include the crowned snake, little brown snake and Mueller's snake (*Rhinoplocephalus bicolor*). They are all confined to the south-west corner of the State. All are relatively rare, and are usually found in disused stick ants' nests on coastal sand dunes. Each is relatively small and only mildly venomous, but it is better not to handle them.

Because only larger reptiles can be readily identified on sight, the great majority must be taken in hand if their identity is to be accurately determined. There are many good guide books available. Once collected and identified they should be released straight away in the area where they were found.

People are starting to appreciate not only the great variety of reptiles and their range of habitats, but also their vital contribution to natural systems. There is still much to be learnt about the natural history of these interesting and important members of the forest communities. By careful observation we can begin to appreciate the complexities of these animals' lifestyles, and their roles in the natural system.

Useful reference books are: 'Lizards of Western Australia, Parts I & II', by G.M. Storr, L.A. Smith & R.E. Johnstone 1983; and 'Snakes of Western Australia', by G.M. Storr, L.A. Smith & R.E. Johnstone.

Written by ecologist Grant
Wardell-Johnson of CALM's Manjimup
Research Station.
