

An ambush predator with a predilection for threatened species: Carpet Pythons unmasked

David Pearson, DBCA, Locked Bag 104 Bentley DC WA 6983

david.pearson@dbca.wa.gov.au

The South-west Carpet Python (*Morelia spilota imbricata*) has a wide distribution in southern WA, from around Shark Bay to the eastern Wheatbelt, throughout the south-west and along the southern coastline into South Australia. It has declined through the Wheatbelt, resulting in its listing as a threatened species. However, it can be locally abundant where native vegetation has been retained along with suitable prey species.

Pythons swallow their prey whole, so as they grow older and larger, their potential prey size increases. Juvenile pythons feed on mice, geckos and small birds, while large pythons feed predominantly on mammals up to the size of tammar wallabies; including a range of threatened species such as numbats, woylies, ringtail possums and Gilbert's potoroo. This causes particular consternation for my colleagues when their study animals fitted with transmitters are tracked to pythons with bulging stomachs.

Research has revealed pronounced differences in the sizes and ecologies of male and female pythons. This factor combined with their distinct breeding season and use of perfume could be used to reduce the impact of this cryptic ambush predator.