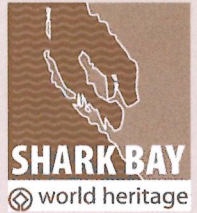


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Shark Bay World Heritage Notes



ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION DISTRICT OFFICE, DENHAM, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

THORNY DEVIL

Considering appearance only, botanist Dr John Grey was probably justified in 1841 in naming the medium sided dragon lizard found in the drier and sandier parts of Australia *Moloch horridus*.

Moloch, after all, was the fearful Canaanite god who sacrificed children. Horridus primarily means rough or bristly, with a secondary Latin meaning of dreadful. While this animal's row of conspicuous spines, including several imposing ones on its head, give it a fearsome and even gruesome look, its gentle demeanour belies its name.

Moloch – or mountain or thorny devil as it is more commonly known – is a harmless, docile creature ideally adapted to the harsh environment in which it lives; its fearsome appearance probably evolved to protect it against predators, especially snakes. The large horn and hump on the top of its head, was initially thought to be a defence mechanism that was lowered and sacrificed in the presence of snapping predators such as birds. However no thorny devil has ever been found without the hump. Studies have also been undertaken to determine whether the horn is used to store food or water, but as yet no conclusions have been reached.

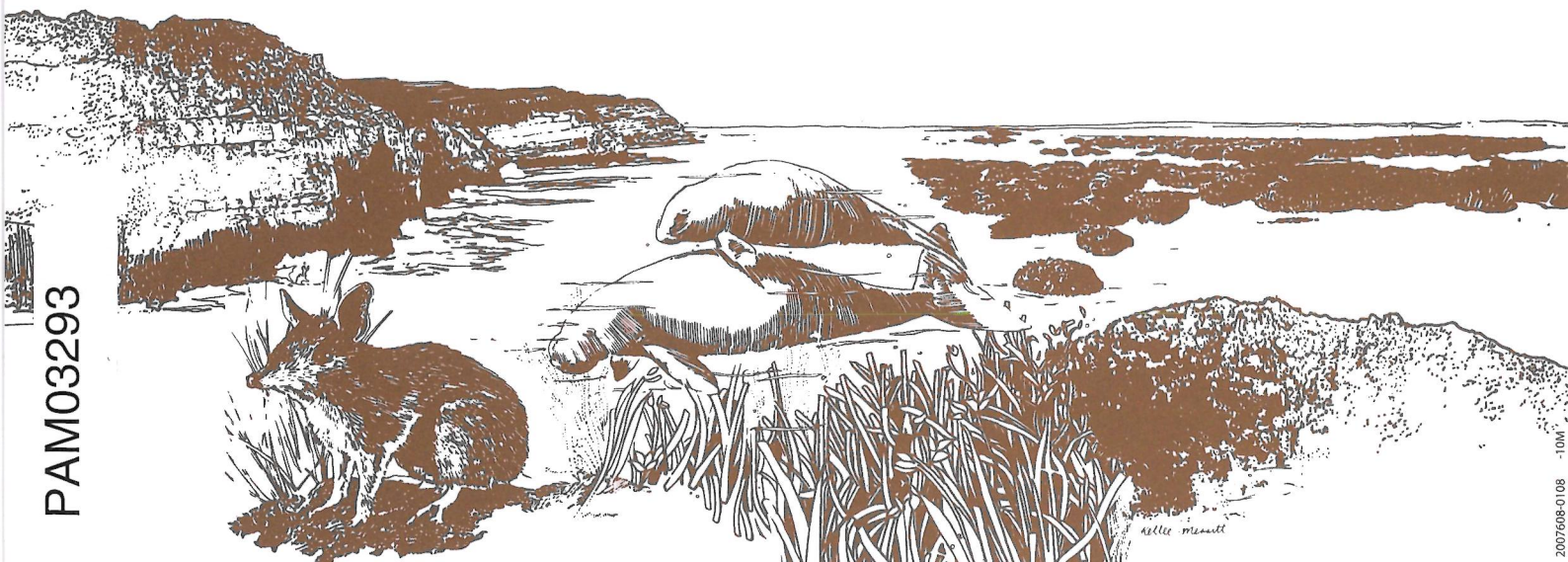
Perhaps it is merely an ornamental crown befitting such a “fearful” creature. Unlike other dragon lizards, the thorny devil is slow moving and walks with a waddling gait on thin, weak legs, although its agility reflects the ground temperature and during the day it can be quite active as it forages for food.

Thorny devils feed on ants, especially small black meat ants that are common throughout Shark Bay.

Oblivious to the ants' bites, they lie on a single ant trail or nest and with a rapid flicking tongue action lap up about 1000 ants in a single meal.

Unlike other lizards that drink water, Moloch, whose skin is impervious to prevent perspiration and dehydration during summer, seems to soak up water like a sponge. Water is absorbed through a number of fine channels located on the animal's underside belly and legs. The water travels up these channels by capillary action to the mouth where it is absorbed by mucous produced on the lips.

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Thorny devils live for at least 20 years, take eight years to reach their full size, about 19 centimetres, and start breeding at three years of age.

Like other dragons they participate in an elaborate courtship during the mating season, including such antics as leg waving and head bobbing.

Females lay a clutch of between 3 and 10 eggs in November and December after burrowing up to 30 centimetres below the earth's surface and digging out an egg chamber.

Incubation depends on temperature, with warmer conditions reducing hatching time from 18 weeks to about 13 weeks.

Young thorny devils are about six centimetres long when they hatch and start eating ants almost immediately.

While colours range from brownish-yellow to reddish-brown, thorny devils can change their colour according to the amount of sunlight and their surroundings.

Camouflaging provides an effective defence against predators, and they become difficult to detect when motionless in natural surroundings.

These "cold blooded" animals, found throughout most of the semi-arid and arid areas of Australia, can be seen in spring and autumn, particularly on roads in the early morning or late afternoon using the sun to regulate their body temperature.

To a motorist's glance they appear to be a twig, and many are killed on roads. So keep a lookout for these animals while driving.

In Shark Bay they are found in the red sand dune country, and are most likely to be spotted on roads on Peron Peninsula and at Nanga, and on the Coastal Highway just south of Carnarvon.