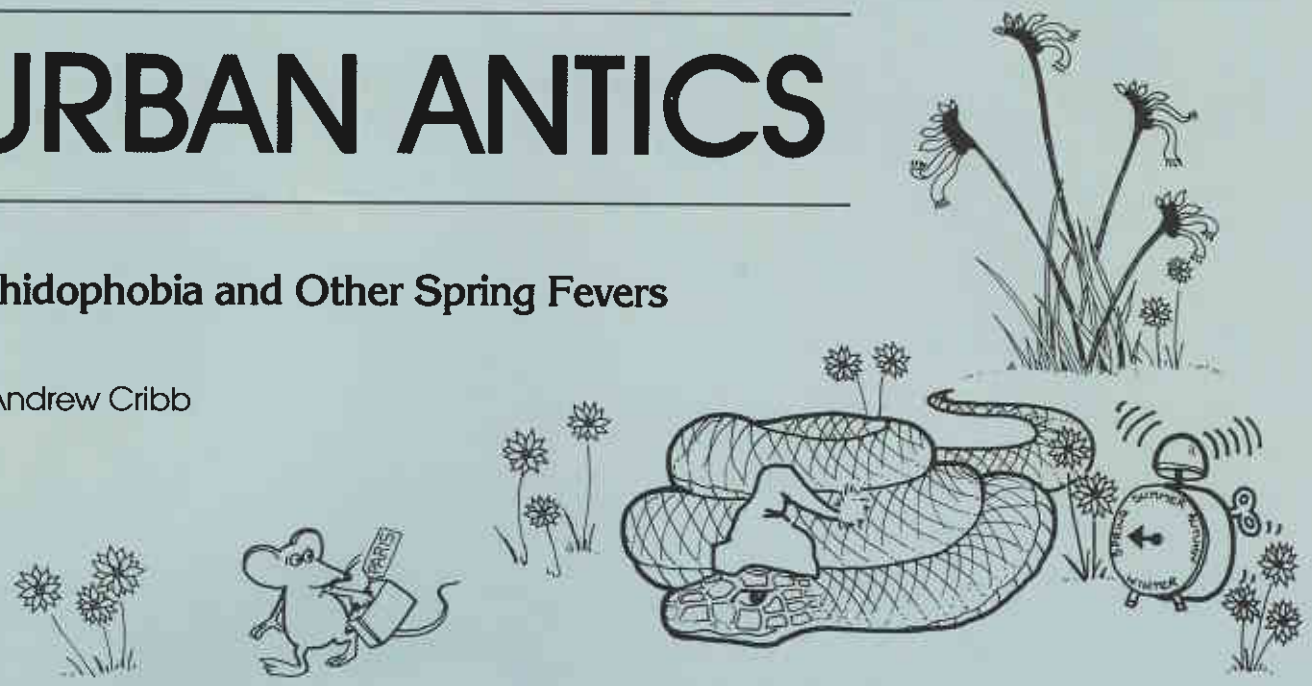
URBAN ANTICS

Ophidophobia and Other Spring Fevers

by Andrew Cribb



Spring . . time of wildflowers, strange agues, damp picnics, indecent behaviour amongst wildlife, and the issueing forth of ssnakes.

This is the time that suburbanites learn a new word: ophidophobia. Your friends might ask what it means, so tell them it's caused by aprosexia (another greek root), then perhaps they will dare tread no further, fearing the intimacy of your reply.

About this time there is a rustling in the long grass from Kalbarri to Albany. Newspapers begin to fill with stories about terrorised primary schools and pictures of Fred the caretaker holding up something long and bloody. Ophidophobia is on for young and old.

There must be something deep and dark about snakes that has taken hold of the human psyche. From Genesis to Jung, from Delphi to south Thornlie they exert their subtle influence.

In Perth, we sandgropers are a practical lot. You don't catch us setting up shrines to snake gods, or conducting manic rituals in Serpentine National Park, though we might try on the odd erotic dance routine. No mate, we just whack 'em with a crowbar, snakes that is. After all it's well known that Australia has the world's largest number of poisonous snakes.

Bloody dangerous they are too, mate. At least 50 people get bitten a year, 40 of whom were just trying to bash the slithery beggars' brains out. Not only that but two people, give or take, have actually died from snakebite in the last six years. I mean, cars only kill 200 odd of us a year, so snakes, as I said, are bloody dangerous.

But, on the other hand, they eat of lot of mice, especially in spring, so if you don't want snakes in your house, get rid of the mice.

Levity aside, if you go walking this spring through the long grass, tread carefully and wear long pants and proper shoes. Nobody likes being trodden on, least of all your local mouse-eating dugite, and he can probably complain more viciously than most.

Marie Lochman

Snakes have children, too, this is a juvenile dugite *(Pseudonaja affinis).*

In the swampy river flats of the Canning and its tributaries watch out for your distinctly anthropophobic tiger snake, he prefers frogs and doesn't care at all for small children.

As a last word. If you or your mates are unlucky enough to get fanged, don't panic. Keep still, wrap a broad bandage firmly over the bite and as much of the bitten limb as possible, immobilise it with a splint, and head for the nearest hospital, keeping the bitee as still as you can.

Oh, and one last thing . . identify the snake . . there's a great little book on most dangerous ones available from the W.A. Museum. Just before you go, ALL snakes are protected under the Wildlife Conservation Act, but you are allowed self-defence, so if the snake that bit you got clobbered take it with you to the hospital. It means that they can give you the RIGHT antivenom, which is a relief to know.□

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COVER PHOTO:
Stark silhouettes evoke the spirit of our remote regions. This photograph was taken near Quairading by Hans Versluis.

EDITORIAL

Public participation in land management sounds like a great idea: the community has a chance to study and comment upon the government's proposals. The scientists and managers can keep their fingers on the pulse of public demand. But sometimes good ideas are hard to put into practice.

Last April the Department of Conservation and Land Management released draft management plans for the south-west forest regions, and a draft timber strategy for W.A. The release of the plans was accompanied by a series of workshops and public meetings, and extensive media releases. Four hundred and thirty-five letters offering briefings and speakers were sent out. Ninety groups responded. Public comment on any aspect of the plans and the strategy was invited.

4070 responses were received. This included 3505 proformas (from 30 organisations) and 565 substantial submissions, some up to 200 pages in length. Many submissions endorsed the plans in their entirety; some rejected them out of hand; others suggested hundreds of minor changes.

How can so many, and such varied, views possibly be integrated simply and sensibly into a final plan? What weighting should be given to the views of different groups or individuals? Who decides what is 'right' when pure value judgements are to be made and values are in conflict? How should one resolve an issue when the views of a large section of the public are quite different from those of a small group of scientists working closely on the problem? These questions represent the sharp end of public participation. It's a relatively new game for W.A.'s land managers, and one in which the rules are still unwritten and ill-defined.

What is certain is that the Department's policy and planning staff have a big job ahead of them, and a job which must be done to the highest possible professional standard. It is important that the final plans for our south-west forests reflect the tremendous thought, effort and interest shown by the community; and it is essential that there are efficient mechanisms for public involvement in conservation and land management, because these processes will be the norm, not the exception in years ahead.

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