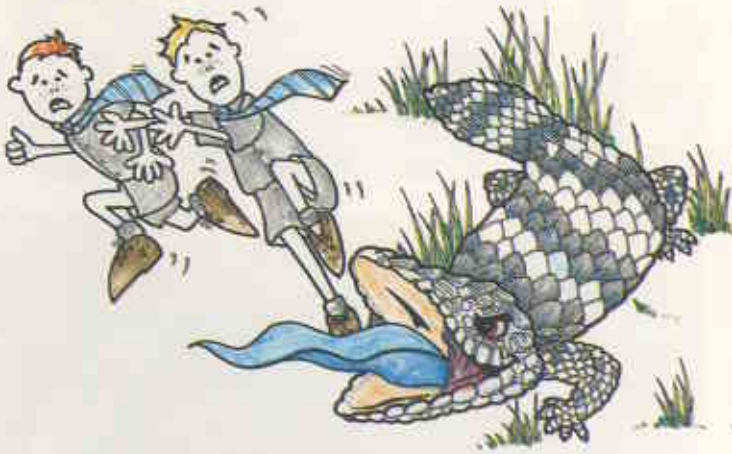
URBAN ANTICS

Reptilian escapades

by John Hunter



Five small soft toes thrust through a thicket of dense bush grasses and banksia leaves. Suddenly, Contact !! - cold slippery, scales and taut reactive sinew.

A split second later the tranquility was shattered by a high pitched human voice.

'Geez..... I've trod...on...a.....snake.'

Eyes bulged, hearts beat out of control and twenty grubby fingers clawed at two school shirts in similar condition.

The two seven-year-olds froze, supported each other and stared blankly into the thicket at their feet. There was no pain; no death throes, and everything seemed O.K. Within a couple of moments the boys had backed off, both parroting obscenities which they had heard their Dad's use behind the woodshed. So much for my savage brush with nature behind Scarborough Primary School sometime in the 'forties'. It still happens today, and with fond memories I see kids taking short cuts through vacant blocks and hear the resultant screams of blind panic.

It's that time of year again when from garden nooks, road verges and vacant blocks of long stemmed wild oats comes the tramp of little feet: *Tiliqua rugosa* is on the move.

No, it's not my Italian mate next door, it's the bobtail lizard or shingle-back skink which has been around the south-west of Western Australia in great numbers for thousands of years. They have adapted remarkably to European settlement and relish living in the yards of our homes.

The bobtail is not a goanna, but a large skink, a lizard of around 300 mm in length.

The reptile is easily recognized by its size. They have a large triangular shaped head, flattened body, short stumpy tail and large rough scales on the back. They are a reddish dark-brown above, with scattered cream or yellow blotches especially on the flanks and whitish below. There can be quite a variance between different beasts.

Every day during hot weather 'bobbies' can be observed basking on footpaths, verges or roadways. Like many reptiles, they hibernate during winter and if accidentally discovered under a pile of leaves or wood, should be left alone.

After winter the lizards emerge ravenous from their hiding places and simply take off in search of food and warmth.

The 'bobbie' is a most tenacious beast, and whilst going about its business, never seems to give up trying to scale an impossible object, or squeeze through an impenetrable bush.

If disturbed this harmless skink will take a bluff stance to ward off danger. It will face the threat, open wide its gigantic mouth, display a blue-black tongue and emit a hissing noise. This rather frightening performance has led to stories of terrible wounds and ulcerated sores. To my knowledge it is not true. The inside of a bobtail's mouth has a simple bony ridge, and if it bites it may hang on. A great deterrent to small boys and some big boys as well.

The bobtail's diet is quite varied, and includes eggs, insects, fruits (loves my mother's strawberries), flowers, snails and carrion. Young are born alive, usually two in number.

If you have a need to pick up one of these fascinating lizards, first distract its attention with one hand, and quickly but firmly grab it around the back of the neck from behind with the other. Adult beasts sometimes have ticks embedded between the neck scales. The ticks can be removed with tweezers whilst the reptile is immobilised.

The bobtail skink is an accepted part of our environment and great entertainment if you care to watch one for a while, however, they do not observe road signs and unfortunately catastrophies occur each summer. If you're driving through the suburbs, please slow down and watch the road for slow movers.

As with all lizards, the bobtail is protected fauna by law and should not be interferred with in any way.

Let them come and go naturally - respect their right to co-exist, and remember, with the yearly march of the 'bobbies' we know that spring has sprung and Christmas is just around the corner - it's a good time to be alive.!!!

Cliff Winfield

LANDSCOPE

Volume 4, No. 2
Summer Edition/January 1989

EDITORIAL

It is difficult to remember a time when our daily news did not feature some environmental controversy. To people involved in environmental research and management, the popularity of 'the environment' is a mixed blessing.

Greater public consciousness of environmental issues has meant increased funding and, to some extent, greater prestige. But many scientists working on ecosystems are uncomfortable when their work is placed in the political spotlight.

The knowledge that a scientific observation that once would have been tucked away in a scientific journal to be read only by a few colleagues could become the centre-point of a political controversy is daunting.

Retaining objectivity in any research area is difficult. For those engaged in research on the natural environment it is even more difficult. Unlike the physical sciences in the natural sciences the truth is often camouflaged by interactions between factors which vary over time and space. When the results of this type of research are placed in the political arena, the mixture is often volatile and the truth a casualty.

To enable scientists to better seek the truth and communicate it, the scientific community has adopted what has been called "the scientific method". The scientific method is a code of conduct with rigid requirements. An offshoot of that code is a set of rules which scientists must follow, at least in reputable scientific journals, if they are to have their research published. Unfortunately, a byproduct of this is that scientific articles are not the easiest to read and are often plain boring.

Given that the environment has become a major political issue, it is important that those involved in the debate are fully informed. But scientists are faced with a dilemma. They need to popularise their work to reach a wider audience. On the other hand, they cannot afford to lose objectivity.

NATIVE CREATIONS

Nouvelle jardins, multiculturalism or laissez-faire; which garden fashion will you choose? Turn to ***page 22.***

WILD MARRON

Do our wild marron have a future or will local gourmets keep catching them to the point of extinction? Find out on ***page 4.***

KARRI MAGIC

What is really going on in the karri forest? On ***page 32*** *we take a look at the system of conservation reserves that have been established to preserve this awe-inspiring forest.*

STRANDED!

Relive the euphoria of the Augusta whale rescue on ***page 18.***

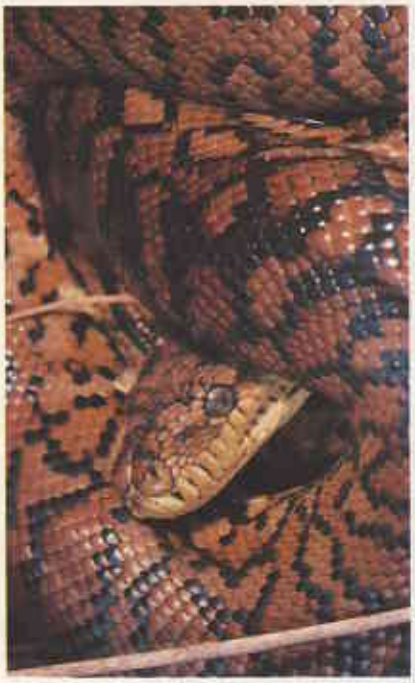
BACK TO BASICS

With today's massive land boom it's hard to imagine that the State once couldn't give land away fast enough. Now the government is buying back our valuable conservation areas. See ***page 43.***

DESERT GEM

The Gibson Desert Nature Reserve covers over 1.8 million hectares. It is a desolate but subtly beautiful landscape. Read about this unique area and the management problems it presents on ***page 48.***

SNAKES & ADDERS



Slim and active snakes have emerged hungry from their winter hibernation. But they're not all venomous. See ***page 51*** *for tips on living with snakes.*

AFTER THE FOX

Foxes pose a major threat to native mammals and other fauna. Can we outfox them? See ***page 12.***

A SIGHT TO BEHOLD

'Its pouch can hold more than its belly can', goes the popular rhyme. Find out more about this awkward but graceful bird on ***page 39.***

Cover Photograph

One of our natural wonders - the beaches of Hamelin Pool (Shark Bay) consist of billions of small shells.

Photo by Bill Bachman.

CONTENTS

The Last of the Wild Marron
by Andrew Cribb 4

Out of the Mouths 9

Outfoxing the Fox
by Jack Kinnear 12

Of Whale and Friend
by Kylie Byfield 18

Urban Antics
by John Hunter 21

Creative with Natives
by Liana Christensen 22

Portfolio - Susan Tingay
by Liana Christensen 27

Bush Telegraph 30

Conservation Reserves in the Karri Forest
by Barney White & Roger Underwood 32

A Sight to Behold
by Jim Lane 39

What's in a Name?
by Paul Wilson 42

Buying Back the Farm
by Alex Errington 43

Endangered:
Purdie's Donkey Orchid
by Stephen van Leeuwen 47

Desert Gem
by David Pearson 48

Snakes and Adders
by Ray Dickson 51

Letters 54

Managing Editor: Sweton Stewart
Editor: Liana Christensen
Assistant Editor: Carolyn Thomson
Designers: Robyn Mundy/Craig Garratt
Production: Margaret Wilkie/Karen Addison
Colour Separations by The Colour Set
Printed in Western Australia by Kaleidoscope

Published by Dr S Shea, Executive Director, Department of Conservation and Land Management, 50 Hayman Road, Como, Western Australia 6152