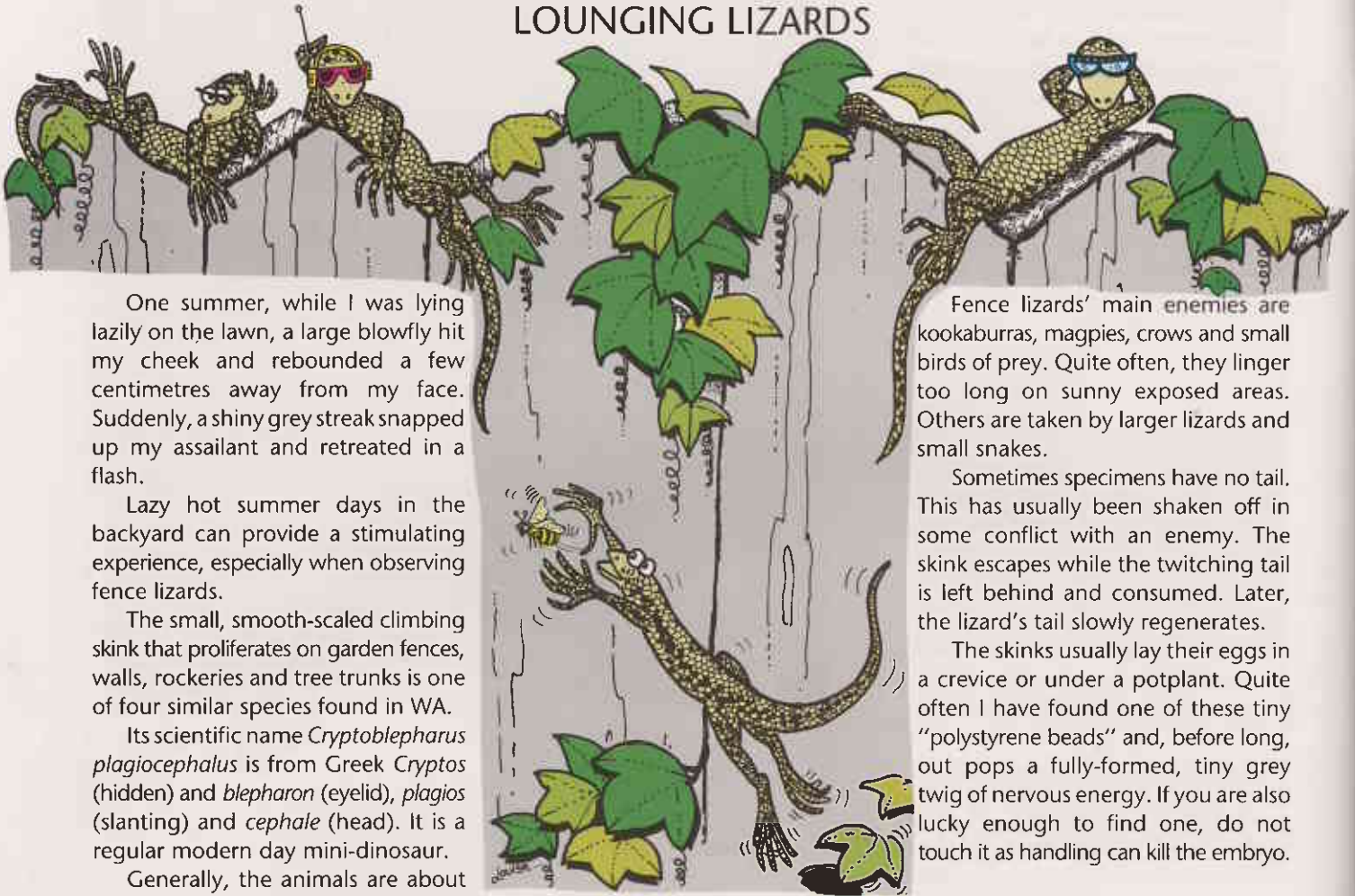


URBAN ANTICS

LOUNGING LIZARDS



One summer, while I was lying lazily on the lawn, a large blowfly hit my cheek and rebounded a few centimetres away from my face. Suddenly, a shiny grey streak snapped up my assailant and retreated in a flash.

Lazy hot summer days in the backyard can provide a stimulating experience, especially when observing fence lizards.

The small, smooth-scaled climbing skink that proliferates on garden fences, walls, rockeries and tree trunks is one of four similar species found in WA.

Its scientific name *Cryptoblepharus plagiocephalus* is from Greek *Cryptos* (hidden) and *blepharon* (eyelid), *plagios* (slanting) and *cephale* (head). It is a regular modern day mini-dinosaur.

Generally, the animals are about 8 cm long when mature (with their tail intact). Their dark olive-grey scales are dotted with dark brown or black with a blackish side-stripe. A coppery coloured head is evident during the summer months.

With the onset of summer, fence lizards venture from their niches of winter dormancy to seek food, warmth and to mate.

The skinks are insectivorous and hunt their prey in every nook and cranny into which they can squeeze, or leap some 20 cm to devour a tasty insect.

Being cold-blooded, they often bask in the mid-morning sun on warm, flat surfaces.

In many ways they act like dogs; they will pounce on one another, locking jaws on any body part, and roll over and over for up to 10 minutes.

Fence lizards' main enemies are kookaburras, magpies, crows and small birds of prey. Quite often, they linger too long on sunny exposed areas. Others are taken by larger lizards and small snakes.

Sometimes specimens have no tail. This has usually been shaken off in some conflict with an enemy. The skink escapes while the twitching tail is left behind and consumed. Later, the lizard's tail slowly regenerates.

The skinks usually lay their eggs in a crevice or under a potplant. Quite often I have found one of these tiny "polystyrene beads" and, before long, out pops a fully-formed, tiny grey twig of nervous energy. If you are also lucky enough to find one, do not touch it as handling can kill the embryo.

Two beasts may chase each other across fences or walls then disappear into a crack or crevice.

Fence lizards are quite good swimmers and have been seen trying to escape from backyard swimming pools.

Inquisitiveness, thirst or attraction to insects on the pool surface often leads to their undoing. Young lizards, in particular, soon succumb to the cold water; their movement slows and if the surface tension is broken they drown.

It pays to check your pool regularly in summer as all types of reptiles can be caught, and become waterlogged or too cold to help themselves.

Simply place them on an exposed flat surface to obtain instant body heat and they will recover in a matter of minutes or seconds.

JOHN HUNTER

Did you know ...

Lizards in the genus *Cryptoblepharus* have five fingers and toes, each with a claw for efficient action on vertical surfaces.

Most of the 150 species of skinks in WA throw their tails when in conflict. Regeneration is usually reflected by an abrupt change in colour pattern.

If you go looking for fence skink eggs beware, redback spiders inhabit similar locations in the same season and their egg sacs look similar.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME 5 NO 2 SUMMER EDITION 1989/1990



Dolphins, whales and seals frequently strand along the WA coast. Find out who helps them and what they do on p. 10.



Powerful forces have formed the rocks and land surface of WA over billions of years. See p. 48.



Why are the thousands of feral camels that roam inland Australia the scourge of the desert? Turn to p. 22.



Explore the fascinating subterranean worlds deep beneath the earth on p. 28.



Inlets and rivers, towering karri and tingle forests, rugged coastline and remote wilderness areas - Walpole-Nornalup National Park has it all. See p. 15.

C O V E R

Australian sea-lion (Neophoca cinerea). Photo - Nick Gales



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