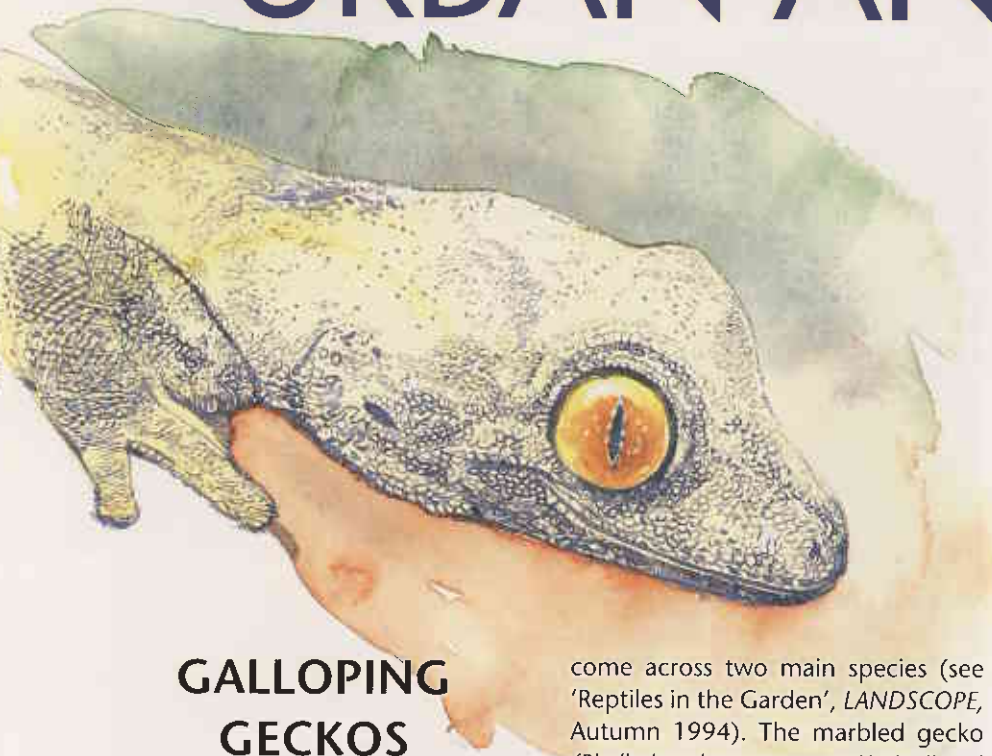


URBAN ANTICS!



GALLOPING GECKOS

'DONTOUCHTHEDAMN THINGITLLBITEYER!!!'...a common phrase used in the past to teach youngsters that all you see in the world of bugs and other bities is bad, or at best, dodgy.

Many of us, therefore, have grown up thinking that all reptiles are cold, slimy, poisonous and snappy little devils that should be avoided or simply disposed of what a shame! They are, in fact, fascinating creatures that deserve a fair go.

The gecko lizards have loose skins, very large round eyes with vertical pupils, no eyelids and, in some species, a voice—a rarity among lizards. The hunting 'call' of these species is onomatopoeic with their name—'gecko, gecko', repetitively. They are amiable house prowlers, searching at night for insect delicacies.

A most haunting feature of these creatures is that, from a position high on a wall or branch, their slim arms, delicate feet and the slender neck, with a somewhat rounded skull, make them a little reminiscent of the aliens from TV's 'X Files' or Spielberg's 'Close Encounters'. And remember, in many indigenous cultures around the world, it was the 'lizard men' who brought the law.

In Perth suburbs we are likely to

come across two main species (see 'Reptiles in the Garden', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1994). The marbled gecko (*Phyllodactylus marmoratus*) is the lizard that we see from time to time inside our houses, garages or cupboards. They can often be seen ducking for cover behind a picture frame or dart board on a verandah wall. With patience, the creature will re-appear and you can watch it checking out the nooks and crannies for prey.

The marbled gecko is a brownish grey on the upper surface. Its back is usually crossed by thick blackish 'W' shaped lines, each followed by a pale grey blotch. Quite often, this animal is found horribly squeezed between furniture or stacked wood, but to our amazement, quietly slithers away uninjured into another restriction.

The western spiny-tailed gecko (*Diplodactylus spinigerus*) is a real outdoors type. Found around undisturbed corridors of urban bush, it lives in shrubs and low trees on sandy soils, especially over coastal limestone. If you have a garden of native vegetation, the species can be found, with reasonable difficulty, clinging in a camouflage mode to the branches of bottlebrush shrubs. Here, particularly when the plant is in flower, it is but a hop, step and a jump to the many insects attracted by the nectar-producing blooms.

This gecko is generally grey on the upper and lateral surfaces, except for a

broad, white dotted black stripe, which is straight-edged on the tail and wavy-edged on the back to the head. Two rows of dark, long spines run along the top of the tail, usually with two short spines above the eye. The most striking feature of this animal is its eye, which is very large, golden with a chestnut centre and sometimes having angular greyish spots, a fascinating arrangement of colours.

The western spiny-tailed gecko has one novel habit that is not found in the marbled variety. If molested, it will squirt a sticky fluid from glands in the tail, which would almost certainly deter a would-be predator.

Like most geckos, these two beasts show an elaborate refinement for light control. During daylight, their vertical pupils have notched edges that can be brought together to form a series of pin-holes. The separate images are then superimposed at the back of the eyeball, giving them super-sharp vision. After dark, their pupils relax to form large black orbs to watch you, even in the dead of night.

BY JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- There are 720 species of gecko arranged in 84 genera in the world, with 58 species and 11 genera found in Western Australia.
- Some geckos have toe pad scales which, with the aid of hair-like filaments, enable them to walk on vertical surfaces as smooth as glass.
- The marbled and western spiny-tailed geckos have backwards-curved claws that are able to be sheathed like a cat's.
- A large wide tongue enables them to lick and clean their lidless eyes, and if they are grabbed by the tail, it comes free to be gobbled up by a predator as the animal escapes.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME ELEVEN NO. 1 SPRING ISSUE 1995



The threatened Wyalkatchem foxglove is being given a helping hand by scientists from CALM and Kings Park and Botanic Garden (see page 17).



This nesting pair of splendid fairy-wrens is one of the many 'Birds of the Stirling Range' (see page 36).



WA Goldfields timbers are fast becoming recognised as prime materials for producing world-class musical instruments. See 'Musical Timbers' on page 48.



A new CALM book, Dive & Snorkel Sites in Western Australia, will encourage novice divers and snorkellers to explore the rich and diverse coastline of WA. See 'Secrets of the Sea' on page 10.



The common rock-rat, photographed here in the Kimberley, has recently been recorded in the Kennedy Range National Park. See page 28 for a profile of this wonderful wilderness area.

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G O V E R

The brilliant purple flowers of the twining fringed lily (*Thysanotus patersonii*) entwined around the burnt stem of a slender banksia (*B. attenuata*). See 'After the Burn' on page 21.

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Subscription enquiries: ☎ (09) 334 0481
 Colour Separation by Prepress Services
 Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print

© ISSN 0815-4465. All material copyright. No part of the contents of the publication may be reproduced without the consent of the publishers

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