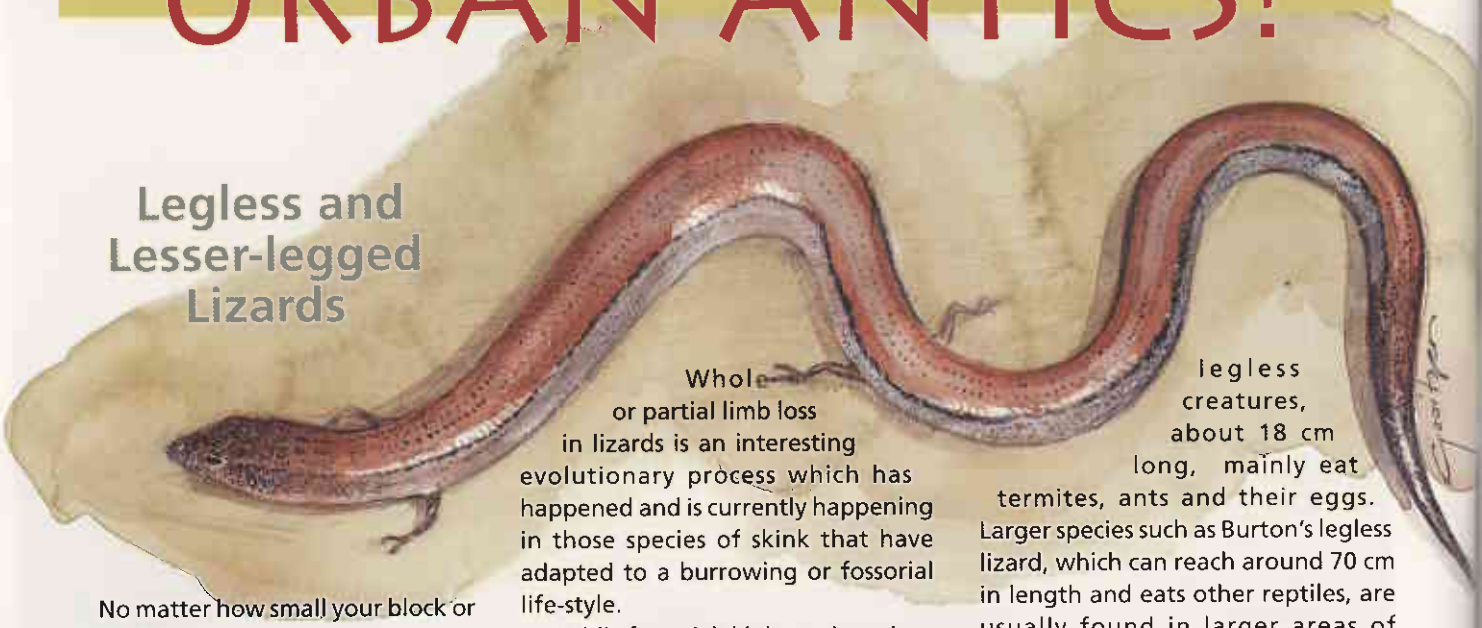
URBAN ANTICS!

Legless and Lesser-legged Lizards



No matter how small your block or plot of lawn may be, every urban garden supports its own underworld, its very own out-of-sight 'Jurassic Park' where pseudo-serpents slither and slide, day and night..

These mini-dinosaurs are the fossorial lizards, those which live or burrow in topsoil or leaf litter.

The Perth region is indeed lucky in that the loose surface soils of its Quindalup, Spearwood and Bassendean dune systems, together with occasional limestone outcrops and well-vegetated chains of wetlands, give it one of the richest reptile faunas of any city in the world.

Of about seventy local reptile species, two groups, the legless lizards (family Pygopodidae) and some of the skinks (Scincidae) are fossorial and 'snake-like' in appearance, but are actually harmless creatures which go about life mostly unseen as they 'swim' through soil, grass, thicket and leaf litter.

Being legless or near-legless in the reptile world has its benefits, allowing species to take advantage of habitats otherwise not available to them. It also has its hang-ups though. Too often, people think 'snake!' when raking the garden or edging the lawn. Sometimes, they are too eager to wield the rake in their quest to be both judge and executioner.

A careful observer always looks for the tell-tale forked tongue of a snake, compared with the fleshy flat tongue and remnant appendages of a lizard, before they freak-out.

Whole or partial limb loss in lizards is an interesting evolutionary process which has happened and is currently happening in those species of skink that have adapted to a burrowing or fossorial life-style.

While fossorial skinks are in various stages of losing limbs and digits, there are also a variety of other necessary changes that enable exploitation of such different microhabitats. These include longer bodies, shovel-shaped heads, waxy cuticles on the snouts, small eyes and covered ear openings. Also, some lizards possess moveable or fused lower eyelids with a transparent disc as built-in spectacles.

Six species of the skink genus *Lerista* are found in the Perth region. These have the greatest range of body shape, and have varying numbers of legs and toes. They feed on small invertebrates and their eggs and larvae. All are egg-layers.

Two species of the genus *Hemiergis* (earless skinks) occur in the Perth region, one in the moister laterite soils and jarrah woodlands of the Darling Range and the other around wetlands and in suburban backyards on the Swan Coastal Plain. The latter species, the two-toed earless skink, is the most common fossorial reptile in Perth gardens. It is often seen when leaves are raked up and may be killed by lawn mowers or whipper snippers.

Of the pygopodids, most are surface dwellers living under covers of dense, low vegetation and leaf litter, and at least two can be arboreal, 'swimming' through low shrubs. Some legless lizards live a 'sand-swimming' lifestyle in the Perth area, particularly two of the 'worm lizards' of the genus *Aprasia*. These small legless creatures, about 18 cm long, mainly eat termites, ants and their eggs. Larger species such as Burton's legless lizard, which can reach around 70 cm in length and eats other reptiles, are usually found in larger areas of natural vegetation.

So, next time the lawn or garden needs attention, take it easy. Clear edges and leaf litter with some care before you dig and chop. Remember, something amazing always lives there.

BY JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- *Of all the local near-legless skinks, only the two* Hemiergis *species are ovoviviparous, giving birth to between 2-5 live young. Others are oviparous, laying eggs.*
- *Many pygopodids vocalise with a high-pitched squeak when distressed, a characteristic shared with their closest relatives, the geckos.*
- *Three pygopodids practice snake mimicry, rearing their heads, flickering their flat tongues and even pretending to strike when threatened.*
- *Pygopodids occur only in Australia and New Guinea and are the only family of reptiles endemic to our part of the world.*

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME TWELVE NUMBER 3, AUTUMN 1997

Aquatic bugs are helping scientists to determine the health of WA's waterways. See Spineless Indicators on page 49.

CALM's new Marine Conservation Branch gets in deep (page 10) to play its vital role in safeguarding the health of WA's unique marine environment.

Called 'Karlamilyi' by desert Aborigines, Rudall River National Park (page 28) is steeped in history and bristling with wildlife.

The economic, social and conservation potential of Acacia in WA , a story of a golden future on page 16.

Fancy a walk? Join us while we look at the environment, history and building of a new Bibbulmun Track. See page 36.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

The tiny pebble-mound mouse of the Pilbara (see story on page 42) is a tireless night-worker and the architect of many odd, red gravelly mounds, which look like miniture volcanoes among spinifex.

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