

FEAST OR FAMINE?



Can you imagine eating something as heavy as yourself in one sitting? That would be difficult enough, but imagine having no hands to manipulate that meal and no way of cutting it up. Pythons face this problem throughout their lives!

These ambush predators wait patiently for prey in places where they can detect animal odours, such as along pathways through

thick bush or near water sources. When prey moves into range, a python will lash out with incredible speed, its mouth spread wide exposing many sharp long teeth. These teeth can puncture through reptile scales, feathers or mammal fur, providing a strong grip. It cannot afford to let go, since it lacks the speed to chase prey.

Once it has struck, the python has to move quickly,



as the teeth or claws of its struggling prey can easily inflict damage. Coils are rapidly thrown around the prey to prevent this and, with each breath, the python tightens its coils further and further until the prey is asphyxiated.

Without hands or sharp cutting teeth to tear or slice up their meals, pythons are obliged to swallow them whole. This is quite an achievement when the meal may be as large as a wallaby! The python stretches its jaws wide apart and eases loose the locking mechanism of the lower jaw. It then starts to ingest the prey, usually head-first. One side of the upper jaw is moved forwards, and then the other, with the head swinging from side to side as the python 'drags' itself over the prey. This may take considerable time, sometimes more than an hour. A meal like a wallaby may last the python many months, such is their economy of energy use.

However, pythons can choose prey items that are

Above: Pythons can kill and consume prey as large as this tamar wallaby.

Photo – David Pearson

Left: A carpet python with a western rosella it ambushed after hiding in a gutter.

Photo – Paul Ensor

too large. One small python, found during a radio-tracking study, died after swallowing a large dove that split open its oesophagus and stomach. Another ate a possum and then became stuck trying to fit through a hole in a log.

Sometimes, pythons eat unusual items by mistake. There are records of pythons eating electric blankets, jumpers, hessian bags and raincoats. One family camping in Karijini National Park was amazed to find a three metre Pilbara olive python lying near their campsite with a huge meal in its stomach. The next morning, the python regurgitated their canvas tent bag! See 'Urban Antics' on page 54 for more about these amazing snakes.

Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting

LANDSCOPE



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Within 40 years, the numbat has risen from near extinction to endangered with 10 populations in WA and interstate. See 'Numbats Forever' (page 17).



The forces that shaped the geology and landforms of the south-west began more than 3,500 million years ago. Read the fascinating story on page 10.



The Marine Community Monitoring Program is a new and ambitious program to involve the community in keeping our oceans clean. See page 35.



Shark Bay Marine Park provides spectacular opportunities for divers and snorkellers. No wonder it is called Bay of Delights. See page 23.



The history of Aboriginal occupation in the Leeuwin-Naturaliste region spans 50,000 years. Find out more in 'History from the Caves' (page 40).

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C O V E R

Leschenaultias are some of the most widely known and recognisable plants in Western Australia. They have fantastic horticultural value and provide glorious floral displays. The wreath leschenaultia is a favourite with visitors during our wildflower season. See page 23.



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