

# URBAN ANTICS

## SNAKE TREK

Spring is the recurring frontier. This is a story of urban enterprise. A mission, when creatures with an urge to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new parameters boldly go where people have already gone before.

It is the time of year when all living things in the suburbs of the State's south-west are now doing what they've been dreaming about all winter—breeding, eating, sunning, growing and generally seeking to expand territorial boundaries. The march of the bobtail skinks now commences, along with the movements of many other lizards accompanied, of course, by the usual 'warning' about snakes.

Snakes and lizards are closely related. Together they comprise the Squamata, by far the largest of living orders of reptiles on the planet. It seems a shame, however, that in contrast to lizards, snakes are often feared and abhorred when most of the 2,800 species are inoffensive.

It is important for us to realise that our local pythons are harmless and, because of habitat destruction and 'bad press', may have dwindled from their virtual obscurity, into abject rarity.

The urban areas of our south-western coastal towns and cities lie within the natural distribution of only one constrictor, the carpet python (*Morelia spilota imbricata*). Here, where there is suitable shelter and food such as birds and small mammals, they silently wait in complete camouflage to carry on their cryptic habits.

One lucky Albany person, however, has been rewarded with some of the best urban antics through his willingness to share his backyard with a group of local carpet pythons.

It started some 12 years ago when a swarm of bees commandeered his woodshed. To deter the invaders, he lightly smoked the interior with a small grate fire and stayed to watch them exit. While the swarm headed en masse for the window, the neat piles of chopped wood started to dislodge and, in the gloom, large tongue-flicking heads suddenly arose. In an action reminiscent of the movie 'Indiana Jones', he was out of there, followed by several irritated serpents that headed straight through the wire fence and hissed off into the bush. Thankfully, after a few days of fresh air, they returned to their lodgings, each bringing a mate with them, and have since set up the 'Python Hotel'.

On the same property, a large python, which must have been living in the house roof, developed a tasssstey habit. 'Monty', as shown in the picture in 'Bush Telegraph' (page 5) was sssneaking from his quarters to catch wild rosellas that rested on the gutter. After parrot number four was conssssumed, the python was caught and placed in the woodshed with his cousins. Before long he was back and, after parrot number five succumbed, he was taken about two kilometres away and

released in the bush. Five weeks later, 'Monty' was back, ssssnacking on number six.

Although the snake now resides in a nearby national park, the woodshed is still sanctuary to nine other pythons. Snogging and resting in the sun under translucent roof panels between trips into the bush is an ongoing ritual. And the parrots are back.

At this time of the year, adult male pythons go wandering in search of curvaceous mates. Please watch out for them on the roads, as they are worthy neighbours, yet a diminishing heritage.

BY JOHN HUNTER

### DID YOU KNOW?

- *Pythons belong to an ancient group that evolved from lizards between 100 and 65 million years ago. They still carry the remnants of their ancestors' hind legs in two tiny pelvic spurs.*
- *WA has nine species of pythons; two species and two subspecies are endemic to the State.*
- *For more information, check out the article 'Pythons—masters of the waiting game' in LANDSCOPE, Summer 1994–95, and 'Bush Telegraph' in this issue.*

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

# LANDSCOPE



VOLUME SEVENTEEN, NUMBER 1, SPRING 2001



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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