



Western Australia's most geographically restricted vertebrate animal, the Lancelin Island skink, has found a new stronghold on Jurien Bay's Favorite Island.

# Island home for rare **Skink**

by Renée Hartley and David Pearson



The Lancelin Island skink was first discovered in 1961 and recognised as a distinct species in 1972. The species was named *Ctenotus lancelini* after its island home, following genetic research that differentiated it from the red-legged skink (*Ctenotus labillardieri*).

The small threatened lizard was once only known from the 7.5-hectare Lancelin Island and one site on the adjacent mainland. However, six years ago individuals bred at Perth Zoo were translocated to Favorite Island, approximately 200 kilometres north of Perth. This move made the skink one of only a handful of reptiles to be translocated for conservation purposes anywhere in the world. Since the species was restricted to one population, the chances of extinction due to some disturbance, such as the introduction of exotic animals or fire, were considerable. Genetic diversity is likely to be limited by its small population size, so the skink may be less equipped to cope with factors such as climate change.



Therefore, a translocation provides a 'backup' population should there be any detrimental impact on the natural population.

### Selecting a new home

After a survey of islands along the Midwest coast, Favorite Island was selected as a suitable new home for the species, due to its similar habitat to Lancelin Island. In addition, Favorite Island lacked species that might eat the skinks or be affected by the introduction of a new lizard. Only 2.4 hectares in size, the island has relatively

low visitation and has no introduced predators, such as feral cats.

Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) staff worked with members of the Lancelin Island Skink Recovery Team and the Perth Zoo in preparation for the translocation. The Perth Zoo's captive breeding program provided 133 Lancelin Island skinks for release on Favorite Island in 2002 and 2003. Upon release, all individuals were marked for identification to enable the tracking of individuals into the future. This will help to provide an indication of the health of the population and therefore the success of the translocation.

### Breeding success

The translocated population is monitored regularly and the results have been very positive. First generation skinks born on the island have now been recorded in breeding condition and the translocation has not shown any significant effect on the other skink species on the island.

Last December, monitoring of the Lancelin Island population found that 90 per cent of female skinks were gravid (pregnant), some carrying up to three eggs. Only one male was captured during the monitoring week. This is probably due to behavioural differences at this time of the year, with females being more active, looking for nesting sites and basking to help the development of their eggs. Females can lay clutches of up to five eggs in early summer and hatchlings emerge in mid to late summer.

Monitoring of the natural population on Lancelin Island in March 2008 was affected by cool weather. One adult female with breeding colouration (possessing a bright yellow belly) was captured, along with eight juveniles born earlier in the year, weighing between 0.7 and 1.2 grams.

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**Main** The Lancelin Island skink is the most geographically restricted animal in Western Australia.

*Photo - Ron Johnstone/WA Museum*

**Left** View of Lancelin Island from the mainland.

*Photo - Renée Hartley*







**Above left** Technical officers Sonja Crease and Michelle Swann weigh a juvenile skink.

**Top** Lancelin Island skink.

**Above** Juvenile Lancelin Island skink.

**Left** Female Lancelin Island skink in a pit trap.

Photos – Renée Hartley

## Threats

Some threats to the species on Lancelin Island include the impact of recreational visitors and habitat change due to weeds. With the support of the Friends of Lancelin Island group, a boardwalk was constructed on the island to provide easy access from one side to the other, while reducing damage to vegetation. Information boards are also in place to provide information on the species inhabiting

the island. Their habitat is very sensitive to disturbance and visitors are requested to use the boardwalk or stay on the beach. Weeds and human impacts on the island are monitored by the DEC ranger in Lancelin.

Research and monitoring of the species by DEC Science Division and Moora District staff will continue to ensure the Lancelin Island skink is provided with the best chance of survival for many years to come.

Renée Hartley is a Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) conservation officer based in Jurien Bay, working on the *Back from the Brink* project. The project aims to provide a better future for the threatened species of the Northern Agricultural Region. Renée's work focuses on the threatened fauna of the region as well as education and capacity building. She can be contacted on (08) 9652 1911 or by email ([renee.hartley@dec.wa.gov.au](mailto:renee.hartley@dec.wa.gov.au)).

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