

A scaly tale

For many people, keeping reptiles and amphibians (known as herpetofauna) as pets is a fascinating and fulfilling hobby. However, there is a sinister side to the global pet reptile trade with the alarming trend of poaching and smuggling of Western Australia's unique reptiles increasing each year. Parks and Wildlife officers work closely with their counterparts in other states, the Australian Border Force, Australia Post and WA Police to stop this cruel trade and bring those who offend to justice. Also crucial to this battle are the keen observations and input of community members.



by Matt Swan and Rhianna King



With masking tape wound around their bodies, from their noses to the tips of their tails, two bobtails are stuffed inside the body of an otherwise innocuous child's teddy bear. A Hong Kong national and self-proclaimed 'conservationist' reinserts the wadding into the bear, all but smothering the two reptiles. He carefully stitches the bear back together to hide its contents. The bear is packed in an Australia Post box and littered with toy soldiers in an effort to obstruct the bobtails from X-ray images. The parcel, bound for Hong Kong, is taken to an Australia Post office in Perth and handed over to an officer who, oblivious to the package's precious (and illegal) contents, diligently weighs and processes it and sends it on a journey which, sadly, is a well-travelled route for some of Australia's most unique reptiles.

On their gruelling journey, the bobtails are subjected to conditions akin to torture.

As an ectotherm, bobtails, like other reptiles, rely on the outside temperature to regulate their metabolic system. It's anyone's guess what temperature they might have reached inside the package, especially when being transported in hot, enclosed vehicles. This extreme heat would have been in stark contrast to the near-freezing temperatures they would have endured in the freight hold of an aircraft. The animals are denied food and water in the days leading up to their journey so the smell of their waste doesn't

give them away. And one can only imagine the aerobatics they would have endured at the hands of the baggage handlers and mail processors. The reasons for the masking tape are now obvious, to stop them from scratching and struggling in a vain attempt to free themselves.

Fortunately for these two animals, they were detected as they passed through an X-ray machine at the Perth International Mail Centre and survived their ordeal. Tony Ngai – who is known on Facebook as 'Tiliqua Tony' most likely after the scientific name for bobtails (*Tiliqua rugosa*) – was the subject of an extensive, multi-agency operation which found a further 26 bobtails, a sand swimmer skink and six crevice skinks all destined for the international black market. He was charged, convicted and sentenced to six months in prison. He claimed throughout the proceedings that he didn't believe he was doing anything wrong and his practices were not cruel. Tiliqua Tony still operates in Hong Kong trading in exotic reptiles including Australian bobtails.

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Main Western shield spiny-tailed gecko (*Strophurus wellingtonae*) – one of Western Australia's endearing reptiles – is found in arid parts of WA.

Photo – Parks and Wildlife

Inset left Endangered Rottne Island bobtails destined for Japan.

Photo – Rick Dawson/Parks and Wildlife

Inset right A bobtail was bound in masking tape from nose to tail.

Left, below and opposite page

- 1 Two bobtail lizards were stuffed inside a teddy bear destined for Hong Kong.
 - 2 Toy soldiers were scattered over the teddy in an attempt to obstruct the bobtails from being seen on X-ray machines.
 - 3 Wadding was reinserted back into the teddy, all but smothering the bobtails.
 - 4 The bobtails were bound with masking tape to prevent them moving.
 - 5 Fortunately these animals were detected at the Perth International Mail Centre.
- Photos – Matt Swan/Parks and Wildlife*

TRADE SHOW

No-one will ever know how many of the animals subjected to this kind of cruelty die, but there's little doubt that any animal that is transported in this way suffers. And they're victims of an illegal trade that is expanding as the popularity of reptile keeping increases around the world. TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, estimates that the



Right A Russian national was convicted for concealing these striped-tailed monitors, and others, in hollowed-out books in an attempt to smuggle them out of Australia.

Photo – Matt Swan/Parks and Wildlife

value of global wildlife smuggling could be as high as hundreds of millions of dollars, making it a major illegal trade alongside drugs, human trafficking and counterfeit products. In Western Australia alone there were 389 reptiles seized by wildlife officers in 2014–15. While the price of the reptiles is dependent on supply and demand, it is not uncommon for reptiles such as bobtails to fetch as much as AU\$4000 each in Hong Kong and as much as AU\$1000 each for particular subspecies or colour forms in New South Wales. Some of the rarer species of gecko or goanna can fetch more than AU\$5000 per individual.

Smuggling syndicates are becoming increasingly sophisticated thanks to smartphones and access to instant messaging and other forms of social media. Smugglers are using increasingly creative ways to conceal the animals for transport on their bodies or in their luggage, and ways to package the animals for post. Many reptiles are cruelly packed into small spaces.

The profiles of those involved in this illegal trade can be as varied as the species being poached and smuggled – recently a Russian national who manages a museum collection, was caught poaching and attempting to smuggle reptiles out of



Australia through the post with three other men. The reptiles were concealed in hollowed-out books. Some of the reptiles he collected were also euthanised and preserved in the field in a process known as ‘vouchering’. This was done presumably for ‘research purposes’ and the recognition that comes with making scientific discoveries. He and his associates were sentenced to 12 months in prison for their actions.

One the worst cases of cruelty occurred when a large number of bobtails were posted to an address in Germany but not collected and were subsequently returned to addresses in Australia. Fortunately most were intercepted quickly, but one bobtail (later nicknamed ‘Lucky’) was sent back from Germany to an address in Rockingham. After it went to and from Germany twice, the person at the address in WA finally opened the parcel to find a bobtail with its legs tightly taped inside. It was established that the animal had been in the parcel for 130 days. Wildlife officers nursed it back to health by feeding it baby food and exercising its legs until it was able to walk and eat properly again. But it was never well enough to be released to the wild.

POACHING AND SMUGGLING: WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

Wildlife smuggling and poaching are two different acts although often committed by the same person or group of people.

‘Wildlife poaching’ is the act of illegally catching the individual animal in its habitat and then not returning it to that habitat. Once an animal has been poached it is lost to the wild. These animals no longer have the ability to compete or contribute to the survival of the species. Poachers are ruthless in their pursuit of reptiles and will use an array of tools such as hammers, crow bars, pneumatic jacks and motor vehicles to tear apart habitats such as ancient rocky outcrops.

‘Wildlife smuggling’ or trafficking is the illegal gathering, transporting and distribution of animals. The targeted species are hidden in all variety of ways to avoid detection and often posted or ‘body packed’ on ‘mules’ who then carry them out of the country.

In Western Australia, certain species of snakes and lizards can be kept as pets but owners must obtain the necessary licences and adhere to certain conditions.

“No-one will ever know how many of the animals subjected to this kind of cruelty die, but there’s little doubt that any animal that is transported in this way suffers.”





Did you know?

The maximum penalties for offences under the Federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* are 10 years imprisonment or a fine of \$110,000, or both.

The maximum penalty for illegally exporting/importing and possessing wildlife under WA's *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950* is \$4000 or \$10,000 for specially protected species.

The State Government is aiming to increase these fines through the new Biodiversity Conservation Bill introduced into Parliament late last year. Important changes include the increase of maximum penalties for killing or smuggling critically endangered species from \$10,000 to \$500,000, and from \$4,000 to \$50,000 for non-threatened species, providing a real deterrent to those considering serious wildlife crimes.

For more information about keeping reptiles



Scan this QR code or visit www.dpaw.wa.gov.au.

Pet reptiles brought to WA must be licensed here, even if they've been licensed in another state. Not doing so constitutes 'illegal keeping'. In other cases people have taken the reptile from its natural environment and decided to keep it in an enclosure or terrarium in their house. Still

Above Western bearded dragon.
Photo – Matt Swan/Parks and Wildlife

Above right These green tree frogs were detected in a foiled poaching attempt.

Below Oblong turtles contained and concealed in socks.
Photos – Rick Dawson/Parks and Wildlife



others have purchased a pet on Gumtree contrary to requirements of their licence, only to find the 'seller' had now disappeared and they have been scammed.

Pythons are well-known to be carriers of diseases such as Sunshine Virus, Ferlavirus (previously OPMV) and Inclusion Body Disease (IBD). Although these diseases are not common, they pose a huge risk to WA pythons, should they be introduced to this State. For this reason, pythons are not permitted to be imported into WA. When imported pythons are detected, attempts are made to re-home these animals in another state either with a licensed keeper or an educational wildlife facility such as a zoo or wildlife park. If these options are not available then euthanasia is used as a last resort. This outcome is unfortunate but necessary to protect our precious native wildlife from fatal introduced diseases. It is also necessary to ensure introduced exotic species do not escape and establish populations in the wild.

Local animals are also illegally sourced and kept from within WA via the domestic black market. Unscrupulous poachers are known to take reptiles and then sell

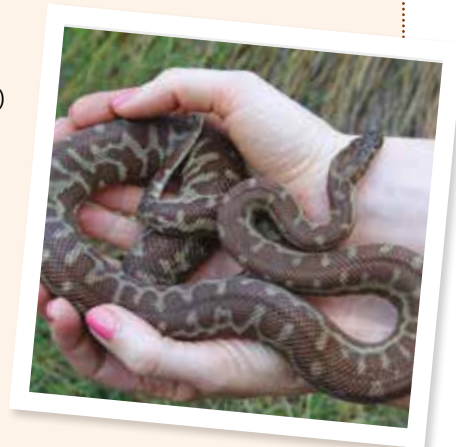


Choosing a pet

Like any other pet, keeping reptiles and amphibians as pets, requires commitment. Reptiles and amphibians have very specific needs, including temperature control and feeding regimes. Their vivariums can be expensive to purchase and set up, and can require ongoing maintenance. However, once correctly set up, most pet reptiles will generally settle well.

The following species are common for beginners:

- Northern green tree frog (*Litoria caerulea*)
- Motorbike frog (*Litoria moorei*)
- Bynoe's gecko (*Heteronotia binoei*)
- Northern spiny-tailed gecko (*Strophurus ciliaris*)
- South-west spiny-tailed gecko (*Strophurus spinigerus*)
- Variegated or tree dtella (*Gehyra variegata*)
- Western bearded dragon (*Pogona minor minor*)
- South-western crevice egeria (*Egernia napoleonis*)
- Centralian bluetongue (*Tiliqua multifasciata*)
- Western bluetongue (*Tiliqua occipitalis*)
- Bobtail (*Tiliqua rugosa*)
- Stimson's python (*Antaresia stimsoni stimsoni*)



them through trading posts and via word-of-mouth. These animals can be up to two-thirds cheaper than those purchased through reputable licensed retailers but cannot be kept legally and if detected will be seized.

SEE SOMETHING? SAY SOMETHING

Members of the community play a vital role in reporting and investigating smuggling and poaching. People who see something they think might be out of the ordinary are encouraged to report it to Parks and Wildlife, the WA Police, Crime Stoppers, the Australian Border Force or the Wildcare Helpline. Some things might just seem a bit odd – like an atypical tourist who treks out into the bush and returns with suspicious-looking containers or pillow cases. While other observations – like the presence of reptiles in hotel rooms – can offer more solid evidence of poaching and smuggling. Either way, every bit of information can help build cases that bring perpetrators to justice.

LICENSED TO KEEP

In 2002, legislation was passed enabling Western Australians to obtain

licences to keep reptiles and amphibians as pets and in 2014–15 Parks and Wildlife had 4575 people licensed for this purpose. Would-be pet owners lodge an application with Parks and Wildlife which is assessed and, subject to the applicant meeting certain criteria, they are granted a licence. Licensed reptile dealers are not permitted to sell reptiles to people who do not hold the necessary licences.

Managing the pet reptile and amphibian hobby through licensing plays an important role in ensuring the health and conservation of Western Australian native animals. Introduced exotic species can bring with them disease, and can disrupt the ecology of our natural areas if they escape and establish populations in the wild. It also enables enthusiasts in this

growing hobby to have the opportunity to acquire and keep a wide ranging variety of reptiles or amphibians as pets in a legal and humane way. Continued work to detect and prevent the illegal smuggling trade will ensure animals are not subjected to inhumane journeys for the sake of people overseas and locally making money and having the bragging rights over an exotic pet.



Above left Knob-tailed geckos are one of WA's precious reptile species.

Above right Stimson's pythons are a popular species among beginner herpetologists.

Right Sandplain geckos.
Photos – Matt Swan/Parks and Wildlife

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