

11(4)



# Western Wildlife

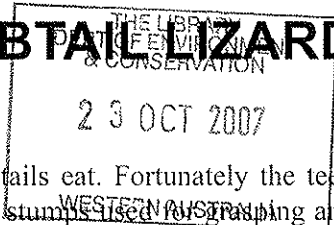
October 2007  
Vol. 11, Number 4

NEWSLETTER OF THE LAND FOR WILDLIFE SCHEME

REGISTERED BY AUSTRALIA POST PRINT POST: 606811/00007

## THE SECRET LIFE OF BOBTAIL LIZARDS

Ruth Haight



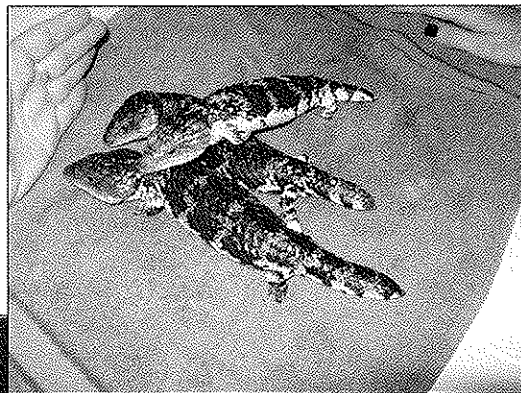
Years ago, bobtails (*Teliqua rugosa*) seemed to be everywhere; in the backyard, crossing the road or scaring the daylight out of us as we discovered them by accident while gardening. These monogamous sleepy lizards keep a low profile for most of the year, venturing out in spring to find their mate and disappearing as the days become hotter. Where do these sleepy lizards live and what are the threats they must overcome to survive in a rapidly changing landscape?

Bobtails are only found in the southern half of the state, from Shark Bay through to Kalgoorlie and over to Eucla and right through the southwest, with a smaller sub-species on Rottnest Island. Although they are best suited to drier climates they have adapted quite well to the hills along the Darling Range. The dark and light patchy body markings blend so well into the shadows and light sand of the coastal dunes. Further inland, bobtails are more orange and red to camouflage them in the pea gravel and iron rich soils.

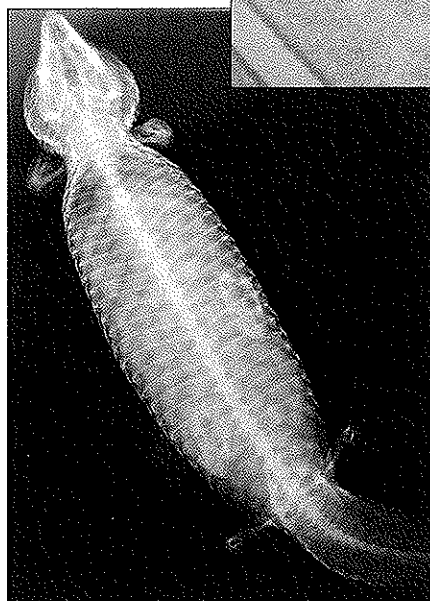
Bobtails are reclusive and have very few defenses. When threatened, they hiss with mouth wide open showing that fierce blue tongue to frighten off predators. They curl their body and present the tail as a decoy, which is often injured in encounters with dogs. If you happen to be bitten by a bobtail you will appreciate the strength, as the tears roll down your face, of those large bulging jaw muscles on top of the head. These are used to crush snails and the hard berries and plants

that bobtails eat. Fortunately the teeth are only short rounded stumps used for grasping and tearing, not for chewing or biting so they rarely draw blood. Folklore has it that a bobtail bite will never heal. Perhaps this is because reptiles can carry harmful bacteria that infect the wound and slow healing.

Small skinks that we see on the fence can drop their tails as a decoy but bobtails are large skinks and their



Newborn triplets



X ray of a bobtail pregnant with full term triplets

tail stays firmly attached. In fact it is used to store food and moisture, so a healthy bobtail has a plump rounded tail that will enable it to go for lengthy periods, of 6 months or more, without eating. Being a reptile,

food energy is not used to generate body heat instead heat energy is absorbed from the surrounding environment. When the air temperature drops below 15°C, production of digestive juices stops and they cannot digest food. This happens around mid to late autumn. Activity is slow during winter but on sunny days the lizards come out to soak up the warmth of the sun. The scales on their back act like solar cells and are very efficient in absorbing heat, raising the body temperature to match the surroundings in just 10 minutes.

In spring they actively seek out their

continued from page 1

## Bobtails

mate, usually the same partner year after year, and stay close until feeding resumes in late October. What do bobtails eat? Just about anything they find that doesn't move too fast. In the wild they love yellow flowers - dandelions, acacia flowers, native berries (*Scaevola crassifolia* is a favourite) and fruit as well as snails, ants and occasionally carrion. In captivity or your backyard, they seem strongly attracted to strawberries, watermelon, hibiscus flowers and egg yolk. Unfortunately, snail bait will kill bobtails. By placing shallow saucers of beer in your garden you will kill the snails and not the bobtails that feast on them.

Bobtail monogamy is well documented by researchers in South Australia who have studied these animals for over 20 years. These studies have shown how a female actively seeks out her mate by smell in preference to other males. Courtship is quite long and only after replenishing their food stores, mating finally occurs in early December. The male stays long enough to ward off other suitors then goes off alone. When temperatures rise above 32°C, bobtails retreat to the cool shade in thick vegetation or in burrows. Death will occur if they are exposed to higher heat as they cool down a lot slower than they heat up.

Bobtails give birth to live young. Females need to be 3 years old to breed and usually produce 1 large baby until their own body grows to full size (22 – 30cm snout to vent length), then they can carry 2 or 3 young. Each baby will be about half its mother's body length at birth. Bobtails have well developed diffused placentas that nourish the young for 150 days gestation. A large yolk sac also provides nutrition throughout the pregnancy reducing

# FAUNA

in size towards the end. It will take 2 years for a female to store enough fat to ovulate so they don't usually breed every year.

In autumn, when the overnight temperatures begin to fall, the female contracts and delivers these huge babies within minutes of each other. She stays close by while the newborn eats the entire afterbirth, which may take up to 30 minutes. Although newborn bobtails are well equipped for an independent life they often stay with their mother for up to 2 years, for protection against ravens, kookaburras, cats and snakes.

Human impact is by far the greatest threat to bobtails. Land clearing has fragmented the bush land, with roads intersecting a bobtail's 1 square kilometer home range. Road trauma is often the outcome when they set out to find their mate. This results in reduced genetics in isolated islands of shrinking habitat. Introduced predators, mainly dogs, cats and foxes, make a quick meal of this slow moving reptile. As ground feeders, bobtails can ingest toxins used in agriculture and industry.

Disease has always been Nature's way of weeding out the weak but when a species is under threat a new disease such as the Bobtail Flu, can decimate a population. Over the last decade, this very contagious flu-like disease has swept through the entire southern half of the state killing hundreds of bobtails in its wake. The flu spreads in the warmer months when bobtails are in contact with each other. If untreated they become too sick to eat and fail to store enough energy to get through the winter. A flat tail, especially at the end of the feeding period, is a sure sign of impending death.

Sadly there have been fewer sightings of bobtails in the last 5

years. So far no one has identified the cause of the disease, which usually starts with bubbling clear fluid from the eyes and nose, sneezing and lethargy in warm weather. As the disease progresses, the eyes become glued shut when the sticky fluid dries, activity stops, body condition reduces through starvation, the tail flattens and the gums become very pale. In this very vulnerable state they are an easy meal for predators. Wildlife rehabilitators at Kanyana in the Perth Hills have developed a treatment protocol and invested in 12 reptile vivariums to cater for the huge influx of cases. Over 85% of flu cases are now released back into the wild.

There are several ways you can help the bobtail to survive:

- Pressure local government to set aside wildlife corridors that link land for wildlife.
- Fence bush land with ring-lock mesh to allow bobtails to pass through but keep out dogs.
- Keep your dog under control when bobtails are on the move.
- Practice environmentally friendly gardening habits to reduce the level of toxins on plants and in the soil.
- Safely move bobtails off the road and place them into the bush in the direction they were heading.
- Take sick or injured bobtails to your local vet or call the WILDCARE HELPLINE 9474 9055 for a wildlife rehabilitator ASAP. Delays can be fatal.
- Keep flies away from injured bobtails, fly blown cavity wounds are impossible to treat.
- Visit [www.kanyanawildlife.org.au](http://www.kanyanawildlife.org.au) for information.

*Ruth Haight is a wildlife carer and volunteer at Kanyana Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre. Photos: Kanyana WRC.*