

ISSUE 42 - JULY 2015

SCALES & TAILS

Australia

OUT AND ABOUT
**'UNCLE TOM'S
CABIN.'**

MASSIVE
MULGA SNAKES

The Hunt for the
Western Desert Taipan.

'Till death do us part.'
Unique long-term monogamy in Bobtails.

John Cann (part 3)
INTERVIEW WITH A 'SNAKEY'.

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ISSN 1836-1188



9 771836 118023

\$10.95 inc gst

The Hunt for the Western Desert Taipan.

FIRST-TIME LUCKY, OR THIRD STRIKE AND OUT?



*Five mates, **Brad Maryan, Bruce Budrey, Brian Bush, Thomas Rasmussen and Simon Pynt**, set out on an epic road trip to locate the most elusive of elapids....*

The Western Desert or Central Ranges Taipan (*Oxyuranus temporalis*) generated much interest when it was discovered in late 2006, particularly amongst us Western Australian herpetologists. With this in mind, we headed out to

the Great Victoria Desert in October 2014, in an attempt to observe this species in the wild. For Bruce and Brian ('Busho'), this represented their third trip to the area in consecutive years, with no previous success. The rest of us were on our first expedition to this remote desert region in search of this elusive species. Hopefully, in our case, it would be 'first-time lucky'.

The Western Desert Taipan was formerly known only from the type specimen, but in March 2010 a large snake was killed

at the Ilkurlka Roadhouse and sent to the Western Australian Museum for identification. The roadhouse is situated in Spinifex Country, 170 kilometres west of the South Australian border on the Anne Beadell Highway. The dead snake was subsequently identified as an adult Western Desert Taipan, prompting further interest, including a fauna survey in the immediate area, which was undertaken in October of the same year. This was a brief biological survey conducted by a collaborative

Left. The track east of Laverton extends for more than 500 kilometres before reaching Ilkurlka. Photograph by Brian Bush.

Right. Every stick and stump adjacent to the track appeared to be occupied by a Central Netted Dragon (*Ctenophorus nuchalis*). Photograph by Brian Bush.



team that included traditional owners, government scientists and herpetologists from Western and South Australia.

Ilkurlka Roadhouse here we come!

We believed the vicinity of the roadhouse would offer us the greatest chance of success in finding this species. We all reside in Perth, which is slightly over 1,500 kilometres away from this location; the first 950 (to Laverton) on bitumen, and the next 550 on dirt. This is considerably closer than the type locality north of Giles, in the Central Ranges. We all have our own 4WD vehicles, but Bruce and Busho had hired a vehicle on previous trips, and chose to do the same on this occasion. The hire rate, including additional kilometres, of about \$1,200 per week all up is good value. Their concern with taking

one of their own vehicles was the recovery cost in the event of a major mechanical failure. However, they have decided that they will use their own vehicles in future, because the hire 4WDs are 'mine-spec' and the additional internal infrastructure (roll bar, second spare tyre mount, etc.) limits the amount of provisions, especially beer, they can carry. The trip necessitates travelling on Aboriginal land, and we always apply for the appropriate authorisations to do so well in advance. We also contacted Ilkurlka Roadhouse to ensure that they would have fuel available when we arrived.

Although unsuccessful in their attempts to obtain photographs of a Western Desert Taipan, it is worth first documenting a few details about Bruce and Busho's earlier trips to the area:

September 2012.

The boys have typically headed out about mid-morning, after picking up a hire vehicle, and have then driven all day, until well east of Laverton, before making camp. The final part of the journey on the following day is along a much rougher road, and takes as long as the first day's travel, although it only consists of half the distance.

The first trip in 2012 was unsuccessful as far as finding the taipan, but it did allow our two mates to get a handle on the lay of the land. Their drive out was uneventful, with thankfully no vehicle problems. Once east of Laverton, numerous lizards were seen active on or beside the track. Central Netted Dragons (*Ctenophorus nuchalis*) and Gould's Goannas (*Varanus gouldii flavirufus*) were



particularly common, with Central Military Dragons (*C. isolepis gularis*), Thorny Devils (*Moloch horridus*) and Western Bearded Dragons (*Pogona minor minor*) also seen, but in lesser numbers. This was the typical assemblage again encountered in subsequent trips.

There was great excitement when the lads spotted their first large elapid, just east of the Neale Junction Nature Reserve, at around 14:30 hours. They thought they had happened upon a taipan early in the trip when this snake headed onto the road just ahead of them. They pulled up in a cloud of dust and Busho jumped out with the snake hook while the vehicle was still rolling, leaving Bruce to bring it to a

complete stop. This plan had been discussed earlier – whoever was the passenger was to exit rapidly and restrain the snake with the hook; the driver would then grab the hoop bag and assist. Anyway, it worked perfectly, with Bruce quickly on the scene after Busho had captured the snake. On the walk back to their 4WD, Busho lamented the fact that he had not checked the anal scale before the snake went into the bag – he had forgotten in the excitement of the moment. They therefore had to wait until they arrived at their destination and a cooler time of day before they could confirm the identity of this snake, which turned out to be a very dark Western Brown Snake or Gwardar (*Pseudonaja*

1. The first large elapid found by Bruce and Busho was this Western Brown Snake or Gwardar (*Pseudonaja mengdeni*). Photograph by Brian Bush.
2. Bruce Budrey photographing a Mulga Snake (*Pseudechis australis*). Photograph by Brian Bush.
3. Beaded Gecko (*Lucasium damaeum*). There are no shortage of geckos near Ilkurlka. Photograph by Brian Bush.
4. This Desert Skink (*Liopholis inornata*) was one of several camp residents. Photograph by Brian Bush.

mengdeni). It would not be the last time they would mistake another species for a taipan....

Five days later, while cruising the morning run for diurnally-active snakes, Bruce (who was driving) was dreaming about a nice cold Masters Iced Coffee, while Busho's every muscle was tense with expectation. He was scanning each and every stick and shadow on the road, willing it to be a taipan. Then, about 30 kilometres west of Ilkurlka, he spotted a large yellow snake crossing the road from the north. He simply could not contain himself, yelling at the top of his voice, "Taipan!"

Busho was again out of the door before the vehicle had stopped. His



disappointment was tangible as soon as he realised it was not a taipan, but a Mulga Snake (*Pseudechis australis*).

The strategy adopted to attempt to locate a taipan in this vast area was to drive the road in the morning from about 07:00 until 10:00, then opportunistically forage on foot for an hour or so through what they perceived to be the most suitable habitat for this snake. The areas specifically targetted were the interdunes dominated by acacia, with particular attention given to large, woody spoil heaps. It was in this form of habitat that snake tracks were most abundant on the adjacent road. By midday, the boys would be back at camp to enjoy a few beers before an afternoon siesta. Then they would return to driving the road from about mid-afternoon; this sometimes continued into the night until 21:00 or 22:00, depending on the herp activity – dinner was put off until they eventually returned to camp. Flexibility is the key when in the field and this makes for a much more enjoyable trip than one in which everything is highly regimented.

The temperature at that time of the year was a little low, especially for stimulating nocturnal activity, and dropped rapidly once the sun had gone down. However, numerous Desert Skinks (*Liopholis inornata*) were often seen just on dusk and several geckos and small snakes were found spotlighting after dark; all were recorded and photographed. Although only the two large elapids were seen active during the day, there were numerous snake tracks criss-crossing the road. There had been a shower the day before our intrepid herpers arrived in the Ilkurlka area, which had swept away any trace of existing tracks. This, along with the lack of vehicular activity since the rain, made spotting fresh tracks from their moving vehicle quite simple. The GPS coordinates for all tracks were individually recorded and each was followed, in the hope that one may lead to the discovery of a snake, or at least a promising hole which warranted excavation. This



proved to be a fruitless exercise – on this trip and subsequent ones. Before driving on, the boys would erase each track with their boots or some brush. They considered themselves amazingly unlucky to have sighted so few snakes, due to the frequency and abundance of fresh tracks – they would regularly drive to a predetermined point, then do a U-turn, only to discover a fresh snake track meandering over the top of their tyre marks within minutes of commencing the return trip.

Reproductive activity appeared to be in full swing, as one might expect at that time of year, with many tracks showing several snakes traversing the same pathway. There were also numerous tracks made by Black-headed Monitors (*V. tristis tristis*), particularly near larger eucalypt trees, although rarely was one of these animals sighted actively moving from tree to tree.

October 2013.

Bruce and Busho set out again in October the following year; the

trip being notable for a puncture incurred while passing through Yeo Lake Nature Reserve. The boys were a little nervous because the hired Toyota had split rims and they did not have the equipment required to repair the tyre, so this meant that they had to drive the next 370 kilometres to the Ilkurlka campsite with no spare. They arrived without further mishap and Bruce fixed the tyre with a replacement tube the next day at the roadhouse, while Busho oversaw the job sucking on a can of coke.

Many more nocturnal reptiles were seen, due to warmer temperatures, but the snake tracks were not so abundant on this trip, probably because male reproductive activity had already reduced. Once again, there was no success in finding a taipan.

October 2014.

The third trip was planned for mid-October 2014, with an extra few days to be spent in the field that would hopefully only increase the chances





of encountering a taipan. This year three other good mates would join the search; Brad, Thomas and Simon would occupy a second vehicle, pulling a caravan, and we would all meet up in the desert. Bruce and Busho left a couple of days earlier and arrived at camp late Thursday afternoon. They settled in and enjoyed a few quiet beers after two days of driving.

Back, and ready for action!

The first two days spent travelling the roads produced very little so far as species not yet recorded for the area, but an obvious increase in activity after dark was a positive sign. Two species of knob-tailed geckos (*Nephrurus levis levis* and *N. laevisissimus*) were common, as was the Fat-tailed Gecko (*Diplodactylus conspicillatus*). An increase in abundance of the Western Hooded Scaly-foot (*Pygopus nigriceps*) was

also noted, with many individuals seen. On previous trips it had been rare to encounter more than one per night. A subadult Western Brown Snake was the first large elapid found active at night - another positive.

Things were looking great!

One handy piece of equipment taken on this trip was a metal ring used to entrap diurnally-active lizards, particularly striped skinks,



1. Brian Bush with a Western Desert Taipan (*Oxyuranus temporalis*).

Photograph by Bruce Budrey.

2. Western Desert Taipan (*Oxyuranus temporalis*). Check out the black eye in this snake. Photograph by Brian Bush.

3. Dark-spined Blind Snake (*Anilius bicolor*). Blind snakes became active on the surface of the ground at night when there was some rain about. Photograph by Brian Bush.

4. The Southern Shovel-nosed Snake (*Brachyuropsis semifasciatus*) appeared to alternate activity with the Eastern Narrow-banded Shovel-nosed Snake (*Brachyuropsis fasciolatus fasciatus*). Photograph by Brian Bush.

when in spinifex clumps. Trying to catch these quick lizards by hand is virtually impossible, so you have to stack the odds in your favour. After unsuccessfully driving the road for a taipan, we would spend some time quietly walking among the spinifex clumps until a skink was sighted. We would then encircle the clump and catch the skink, easy as you like! We caught up to half a dozen species this way, including Greer's Ctenotus (*Ctenotus greeri*) and the beautiful Blue-tailed Ctenotus (*C. calurus*). What a sight it is to watch the latter species wave its conspicuous blue tail when foraging. The diversity out in the desert is amazing, with sometimes up to eight species on a single sand dune, most of them actively foraging at different times like shift workers.

On the Saturday afternoon, Bruce and Busho hung around camp waiting for their three mates to arrive. They were expected at around 13:00, so the two friends enjoyed a few beers during the heat of the day, thinking that the others could not be far away. In reality, they did not arrive until 18:00, and this unplanned five-hour extended period of drinking caused Bruce and Busho to put a serious dent in the extra beverage provisions they had included for the trip. Previously they had run out prematurely because of the difficulty in estimating just how much one may consume when having fun in the desert! The considerable additional liquid they had brought along as a contingency was now diminishing rapidly. Needless to say, no road-spotting was done that evening.

Aw, well - it's a great life!

The next day, Bruce and Busho headed east while the rest of us went west in the hope of finding that elusive taipan active on the road. Wishful thinking of course, but you have to stay positive when looking for an alert, diurnally-active snake in the vastness of the desert.



Even if you are unsuccessful in finding the target species, there are always the other, more common reptiles you encounter that can keep you occupied and help fill in the day. Like the magnificent sight of a coloured-up male Crested Dragon (*Ctenophorus cristatus*) in all its breeding glory, or successfully spotting the little Black-collared

trying to sneak up to photograph it *in situ*. This can be challenging and does not often result in success. It forces you to hone your stalking skills, but it is very rewarding if you can get that 'magic' shot.

There was some productive activity that night, featuring the usual suspects along with a juvenile Mulga Snake. *Beauty!* It was encouraging to see another large elapid, and this also provided an additional subject for the following morning's photography session.

Monday morning started like any other day, with the billycan on at first light and breakfast (for some; Busho rarely eats) to keep up the stamina. Simon and Thomas, being

Bruce and Busho had put a serious dent in their extra beverage provisions - no road-spotting was done that evening!

Dragon (*Ctenophorus clayi*) perched on sticks beside the road and then





keen photographers, often stayed up extremely late photographing the night sky, so getting them out of bed before 10:00am was a real challenge. On this particular morning, Brad, Bruce and Busho made some 'excessive' noise and even threatened in loud voices to burn down the caravan while their two mates slept, which did the trick and got them to rise. After a quick discussion, it was decided that Brad, Thomas and Simon would head east, as they wanted to explore a timbered area they had seen on the first day. Bruce and Busho would follow behind a few minutes later.

Approximately four kilometres from camp, approaching a small bend, Bruce and Busho came across something that would change this trip completely. Thomas's car had stopped in the middle of the track, all doors were flung open and Simon was dancing on the roof as if high at a rock concert. It was a sight that was hilariously out of place amongst the acacia and spinifex of the Great Victoria Desert.

Could it be?

As they pulled to a halt, Bruce and Busho's hopes and suspicions were realised when Brad and Thomas appeared from around the front of the lead vehicle, with Brad holding the hoop bag, fist pumping, dancing and screaming, "Yahooooo!"

It was obvious that something

remarkable had just happened.

"We got one...we got a *temporalis* in the bag!" Brad bellowed.

The immediate high of our combined emotions at that moment was unforgettable.

After handshakes and backslaps all round, it was time to have a look at the beast. It was immediately apparent that it was a taipan; the black eyes, short head and relatively small midbody scales on this one-point-six-metre adult male obviously did not belong to a brown snake (genus *Pseudonaja*). The comment, 'How did the taxonomists miss this?' was echoed quite a few times by various members of the group during the remainder of the trip and is still often heard today.

An in-depth roadside explanation of the circumstances of the snake's capture then ensued, including some rather surprising behaviour exhibited by this specimen, compared to what its captors had expected, and considering what they knew of the other two taipan species – especially the flighty nature of the Coastal Taipan (*Oxyuranus scutellatus*). A large, brown snake had been spotted not far ahead, crossing the road from the south. Instead of fleeing immediately, it paused as if interested in the approaching vehicle. It was not until the occupants had exited the 4WD that the taipan decided to retreat

– almost casually and with no real urgency – heading back the way it came. There was ample time to place the black, triangular-shaped hoop bag directly in its path; the snake's willingness to enter was surreal and this proved to be the simplest and safest capture any of us could have hoped for.

"You bloody beauty!"

After the dust had settled, we quickly recorded important data such as GPS coordinates, time of day, temperature and adjacent habitat, which was also photographed. Time was wasting, and with the temperature rising we were all keen to continue the daily routine of driving the desert roads. We could get really lucky and snag another taipan.

The immense pressure to locate the target species that Bruce and Busho had earlier experienced was now gone, and it was as if a huge weight had been lifted from their shoulders. Now that the taipan was in the bag to photograph, they could relax and enjoy all the desert had to offer. The rest of the morning was relatively uneventful, and it was evident that the snake in the bag was totally distracting everyone from concentrating on any further herping, so we made our way back to camp for a bite to eat and a couple of celebratory beers.

Elated by the day's success, we

1. The Desert Banded Snake (*Simoselaps anomalus*) was the smallest elapid we observed. Photograph by Brian Bush.

2. The Ringed Brown Snake (*Pseudonaja modesta*) was not common in the Ilkurlka area. Photograph by Brian Bush.



discussed at length this elusive desert taipan. Emboldened by the beverages, it wasn't long before we considered ourselves experts on this poorly-known species. One thing's for sure; many more questions arose than were answered during that extended discussion, and the consensus was that future field studies would be needed to unlock the mystery of this snake's ecology.

With five more days left in the field there was still plenty of herping to be done, and when dusk had passed we were off for another night of road-spotting. Early indications were great, with plenty of lizards moving, including those mentioned earlier

plus Beaded Geckos (*Lucasium damaeum*), Desert Wood Geckos (*Diplodactylus wiru*) and Beaked Geckos (*Rynchoedura ornata*). The frequency at which we encountered pygopods and small burrowing snakes was also high compared to earlier nights. The females of all species were obviously gravid, with the next generation of local desert reptiles assured. Another adult Mulga Snake was bagged to be photographed the next morning. It was relatively dark compared to the pale ones previously recorded. All large venomous snakes that we captured were held overnight until the cooler early morning

temperatures made handling and photographing them significantly safer.

Tuesday morning soon arrived and it was time to photograph the Western Desert Taipan. None of us was sure of the reception we would receive when we removed it from the bag, because this species was a first for all five of us. A makeshift hide box was placed on the ground and we took up strategic positions around

Unfortunately, this photography session was over all too soon, when the taipan decided the hide was no longer to its liking and started looking for other options, like playing with its newfound friends. At no stage did it demonstrate any extreme defensive behaviour, although it was obvious that it had had enough and the decision was made to re-bag it and try once more the following morning.

“More questions arose than were answered, and the consensus was that future field studies would be needed to unlock the mystery of this snake's ecology.”

it and watched as Busho removed the taipan from its bag and gently encouraged it to enter the hide through a small hole cut in the side.

Being of a courteous nature, Busho concentrated on wrangling the snake; positioning it under the hide box and the lifting the lid to expose it several times, to allow the rest of us to get some images. Hoop bags and hooks were placed in arm's reach of everyone taking photos. We progressively switched wranglers, and this not only ensured that Busho got his shots too, but gave us all a chance to experience handling the snake.

There were still a lot more subjects to photograph, including an array of geckos, pygopods, burrowing snakes and the dark Mulga Snake we collected the previous night. It proved to be a great workshop for

several of us as Simon shared his knowledge of photography in general and of understanding camera settings to achieve improved results.

Climatic conditions play an important role in reptile behaviour and this we believe was the cause of the increasing activity experienced as the days progressed. A build up of cloud cover and thunderstorms associated with an approaching low-pressure system worked in our favour, as the Interior Blind Snake (*Anilius endoterus*) appeared especially stimulated by the moist air and was found with increasing frequency - including in our camp.

We also noticed an interesting phenomenon in the skewed activity of two locally-abundant burrowing snakes. Large numbers of Southern Shovel-nosed Snakes (*Brachyuophis semifasciatus*) and Eastern Narrow-banded Shovel-nosed Snakes (*B. fasciolatus fasciatus*) would be seen on consecutive nights, but not on the same night. For example, we would see more than ten Southern Shovel-nosed Snakes, but only one Eastern Narrow-banded Shovel-nosed Snake on one night, while a complete reversal in abundance of the two species would be observed twenty-four hours later. Field observations like this add to an ever-growing list of questions as to why reptiles behave as they do. It's no big deal though - just another reason to keep going back out there!

We eventually released the taipan at the exact spot where we originally caught it. We watched the snake for a while and were mesmerised by its curious behaviour and reluctance to flee, which was similar to how it behaved when first encountered on the road. Despite our presence and the cameras poking in its face with repeated flashes, no pronounced defensive attitude was displayed. Instead, the taipan just casually moved along at a steady pace,

intermittently raising its head and forebody and not showing any interest in seeking cover in the spinifex clumps it passed. When one of us unintentionally put pressure on the snake, it would suddenly display a burst of speed; 'motoring' along to get away from us, only to resume its steady rate again a few metres away. This behaviour, especially during the day, was unlike anything we have seen in other large elapids, which generally seek cover when confronted with active people in

across the road. Initially they just drove on, believing it was unsecured rubbish falling from the back of a local's utility en route to the tip. Eventually they caught up with the lead vehicle, only to find that the whole back end of the caravan had been so severely shaken that it had completely disintegrated, allowing much of the internal furnishings and other bits and pieces to fall out. Fortunately none of their camera gear, nor anything else of great value, had been lost or damaged.

“The taipan's behaviour was unlike anything we have seen in other large elapids.”

Thanks, fellas, for all the shared laughs and a great trip!

Finally, we would like to thank Robyn and Graham, the operators of the Ilkurlka

Roadhouse, for their generous hospitality and shared enthusiasm for the local herpetofauna. Busho and Bruce are especially grateful for the use of the workshop that enabled them to fix the tyre on their second trip.

We will be back!

close proximity.

Talk about happy days in the desert - we recorded over fifty reptile species, our camera memory cards were full and we definitely had luck on our side in finding the Western Desert Taipan!

This was not the first time Thomas's caravan had been bush, but it will definitely be the last until it receives some serious repairs. Busho and Bruce were in the trailing vehicle on the journey home, and at one point started seeing bits of metal sheeting, old mattresses and pillows strewn



Left. Thomas, Bruce, Busho, Brad and Simon celebrating after success at Ilkurlka. Photograph by Bruce Budrey.