

6

The Snake in the Toy Box



Anne Magnusson teaching six-year-old Jeni to drive a tractor on her farm in 1999.
Photo by Bill Magnusson.

Lizards have always been one of the reasons I like to travel. I am not a ticker in the sense of birdwatchers who want to tick off all the species of birds in an area, but I am always interested in seeing the lizards that are typical of each place I go. At first, I thought that I would need to travel into pristine bushland to see different species, but this may have been because I was so used to seeing lizards around Sydney that I no longer appreciated them. Many lizards and snakes live around houses.

Most of my time in Australia was spent well south of the Tropic of Capricorn. Even Brisbane, the capital of the State of Queensland 1000 km north of Sydney, is relatively cold in winter. Albertina, Jeni and I spent a year there in 1979. We found large water dragons almost everywhere there was a stream running through the suburbs. Nearby reserves also had bearded dragons⁸⁸ with heads as big as Jeni's hands, which were impressive for a five-year old. Lace monitors stalked around picnic areas looking for handouts, and we often came across northern leaf-tailed geckos⁸⁹ at night in the rainforest of Lamington National Park, just west of the city. The rainforest also had land mullets⁹⁰, the biggest skinks in Australia, which were shiny metallic grey and as thick as my forearm. Jeni and I spent a lot of time trying to creep up on the illusive lizards, but they generally just shot off into the undergrowth as soon as we were close enough to take a photo.

Perhaps it was because of Jeni that I started to see urban lizards again. As we get older, we become accustomed to the wildlife around us and cease to appreciate it. A five-year-old is not jaded and can still see the wonder in the World. I remember the excitement she radiated when she was holding a blue-tongued lizard or watching a black snake in the Lamington National Park passing within meters of unaware picnickers. Perhaps we need a child beside us to rediscover the child that lives within us.



Photo 6.1 Jeni with a blue tongue lizard in 1999. A child's curiosity can reignite our sense of wonder about the creatures around us. Photo by Bill Magnusson.

By the time I was a teenager in the early 1970's, I had become so accustomed to seeing the lizards and snakes around Sydney that I had started to lose some of the wonder. However, just a few short trips and the experience of others brought it back. When I finished my last exams at high school, my parents took me to northern NSW. I had always lived in that state, but Sydney was halfway down its coastline, just south of the line that separated the temperate species from the subtropical species. In part, the trip was a present after the stress of the exams, but it was also because we were scouting possible farmland for sale. Anne, my sister, and her partner Peter were looking for somewhere near bushland where they could live a rural life style and raise their children. Peter was a bureaucrat in the national capital and Anne did secretarial work. Neither enjoyed their work or the artificiality of the relationships in Australia's most political city.

I thought that it would be nicer to live in the subtropical region because of the climate, so my parents and I traveled along the north coast of NSW. Unfortunately, most of the land near the coast had been cleared for sugar cane and we decided to look for sites further up the mountains. The country was not very appealing, cold, and much like the overgrazed highlands to the south of Sydney. However, I found lizards about the thickness of my thumb living in cracks in the granite rocks. In form, they looked just like the White's skinks I had seen around Sydney, and they behaved like their Sydney cousins, but these were a uniform bluish grey with fine longitudinal lines running down the body.

I was ecstatic because I thought I had found a new species and I knew little about the process of describing new species and the difficulties that being overanxious can produce. I would now look for the contact zone between the two forms to see whether they intergraded before deciding that they were distinct, but at that time I just thought that the fact that they looked different would do.

Soon after we returned to Sydney, I took the lizards to the Australian Museum and showed them to Harold Cogger, Australia's foremost herpetologist at the time. He looked at them and said "Yes, it probably is a different species, *Egernia modesta*, but it has been recognized before." Well, better late than never!



Anne and Peter bought a farm nestled between a block of State forest and Wallis Lake, which is north of Sydney, but just as cold. Fortunately, they are much tougher than I when it comes to temperature. The previous owner had cleared about half the land for cattle grazing, but it still had mangroves, eucalypt and temperate rain forests. The State forest has since been incorporated

into a National Park. I loved to walk through the rainforest looking for southern angle headed dragons⁹¹. These lizards have bizarre crests on their head that make them look prehistoric. They sit on tree trunks and rarely move unless catching insects or hiding from a potential predator. If you walk near them, they just move around to the other side of the tree, usually before you have seen them.



Photo 6.2 Southern angle-headed dragon, *Lophosaurus spinipes*, in Lamington National Park. These lizards usually remain motionless on trees and are hard to find.
Photo by Bill Magnusson.

The local council put up all sorts of impediments to their building a conventional house, so Anne and Peter have lived in a corrugated iron shanty associated with caravans and sheds for the last 40 years. That isn't as bad as it seems as their home is very cozy country style and surrounded by gardens that have grown into a rainforest over the years. There is a sort of continuum from

the house to the garden to the chicken pens that makes it a great place to see wildlife. I reached up to take something off the shelf over the kitchen sink and part of the wall moved back slightly. In fact, it wasn't a wall, but a diamond python that often comes into the house. That's good for controlling rats, but must give some visitors a surprise.

Living around humans isn't always good for snakes, and I didn't realize how dangerous ordinary chicken wire can be for them. Anne told the story of the diamond python's brush with death.

“After a few weeks away from the farm, we discovered our resident diamond python had tried to go through the chicken-wire garden fence. It had obviously become stuck and in an attempt to find traction had chosen the deadly decision to thread itself through another small hole further along the fence. It was trapped in two locations and had literally skinned a large portion of its body.

We used wire cutters and eventually freed the body till only the head had to be released. I was trying to hold its head still and could feel it becoming agitated. I gently released the pressure till it was virtually lying in my hand and it stopped struggling and quietly let us cut the remaining wire. Finally free, it slowly and painfully eased its way across the lawn and dragged its raw, damaged body up a smooth round pole and disappeared into the roof. I was dreading the anticipated death and decay of the large creature in the ceiling. She survived and healed and is still with us. When we were renovating the house, she took up residence in the exposed ceiling rafters and wall studs. Every day, while Peter was noisily hammering and drilling the new corrugated iron roof, she came out and lay on the roof near him, curiously watching him work for some time before moving off on private snakey business.”



*Photo 6.3 Jeni points to a diamond python, *Morelia spilota*, curled up beside the kitchen sink in Anne's and Peter's farm. The snake has lived there for over a decade.
Photo by Bill Magnusson.*

Peter likes life on a farm, but his relationship with wild animals is much more of tolerance than affinity. Anne was visiting her mother in Sydney and Peter told her over the phone that a black snake had got caught up in the wire mesh of the chicken coup. The following passages are her words.

“I was in Sydney speaking on the phone to Pete who was home at the farm. Pete casually mentioned there was a black snake tangled in bird net that had been left on the ground in the garden. When I arrived home two weeks later, I was astounded to find the poor snake still alive and horribly entangled in the net. I have no idea why I subconsciously assumed Peter had released it. Anyway, we slowly cut away the net, dropped the poor snake into a pillow case and released it 200 m away on the other side of the creek.

A month later, the kids found a black snake inside the house in their toy cupboard. Pete exploded ‘You bloody Magnussons and your bloody snakes. It's back!’

I defensively told him not to be ridiculous, we weren't some kind of snake whisperers and it was obviously a different snake. As I nervously caught the 1.5 m snake, which, unlike me, was very calm considering the circumstances, I desperately hoped Pete wouldn't notice the distinctive pattern of scars left on its body by the bird net. We released it a kilometer away this time.”



You don't have to be on a farm to find snakes. Many species, especially the small burrowing snakes of the family Typhlopidae occur in urban areas. The most common species around Sydney is brown to pink on top and white underneath. Unlike most species of snakes, its belly scales are small, like those on its back, and its tiny eyes are just small dark spots under the thick head scales it uses to push through the soil looking for ants and termites. A neighbor once showed me the “red bellied black snakes” he killed by chopping into bits with a shovel. How someone can confuse a white bellied pink snake with a mouth so small that it can't bite a human with a red bellied black snake with a painful bite I can't imagine, but all logic seems to disappear when a human finds a snake.



Photo 6.4 Harmless green tree snakes are often killed by ignorant people even though there are no dangerous green snakes in Australia. Photo by Ruchira Somaweera.

Urban snakes can be very useful. I accompanied Albertina once when she was studying frogs around streams in Brisbane. I lost interest in the frogs when I found a carpet snake, which is the northern variety of the diamond python, swallowing an introduced black rat. The less rats, the better for human health, but if people can confuse a worm snake with a black snake, I don't like to think what they might do to a carpet snake.

I remembered an incident when I was still a teenager in Sydney. Someone had told the police from the suburb of Engadine, about 15 km from where I lived, that I kept snakes. I have no idea how they found out, but one afternoon a hefty police officer knocked on the door. I was not always on the right side of the law as a teenager, and I was a bit nervous, but he wasn't there to arrest me. He had come to ask if I could catch a snake that had invaded someone's garage

at Engadine. The snake was in the rafters and he had left his partner guarding it while he tried to find where I lived, which had taken several hours.

When I entered the garage, I found the second policeman with his pistol drawn and aimed at a green tree snake²⁹ in the rafters. He must have been in that position for hours. I told him that the snake wasn't dangerous and used a ladder to climb up and catch it. I assume that they hadn't tried to shoot it because they were in a suburban area and a bullet from a .38 would make a big hole in the roof. However, I am fairly sure that if the snake had been on the ground where it could be reached with a stick or a shovel it would have been long dead, even though there are no dangerously venomous green snakes in Australia.

Very few species of snakes pose a threat to humans, and most are beneficial in controlling pests in urban settings. However, I don't know how to convey that to the general public. There are too many innocuous species for lay people to identify easily. Just teaching them to identify the highly venomous species gives the impression that all snakes are dangerous. I think that it is going to be a long while before most people are like my sister and get a warm protective feeling when they find a snake in the children's toy box.