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Child's Play



A striped forest whiptail, *Kentropyx calcarata*, similar to the one Jeni followed as a child. Photo by Bill Magnusson.

My daughter, Jeni, was ten years old when she went with her parents on a field trip to Reserva Ducke on the outskirts of Manaus in the heart of the Amazon jungle. Her mother, Albertina, and I were busy looking after university students who were collecting animals along a dirt road through the forest, and Jeni was entertaining herself watching the katydids, spiders and other little creatures that she found on the bushes overgrowing the road. She was crouched over a log that had fallen beside the track some years before and was now covered in mosses and ferns. I walked over to see what she was doing and found her following a lizard along the log. It was a bit thicker than my thumb and the rich brown color on its back was broken by three green stripes that ran from its nose down the middle of its back and along its sides⁵.

The lizard ignored Jeni, whose nose was only a hand span above it, and it flicked its forked tongue into crevices in the decaying log as it moved along with jerky movements. She had followed it for several meters when an arrow-head viper⁶ struck and swallowed the lizard up to its back legs. Curled up on the log, the snake had appeared to be a bunch of fallen leaves and, like the lizard, ignored Jeni's presence to guarantee its next meal. Jeni gave a little squeal and backed off momentarily, but then leaned forward to watch the snake swallow the wriggling lizard from a distance that would have made me nervous if the snake hadn't had its mouth full.

Apart from being concerned about having my daughter so close to a very venomous snake, the incident catalyzed my thinking about snakes and lizards and how they interact with humans. Most people, except those who live in very cold places, such as the Arctic, or aboard seagoing ships, are used to seeing lizards regularly. However, seeing a snake is always reason for comment, even by people who have no irrational fear of them. Our collective experience would seem to indicate that lizards are common and snakes are rare.



Photo 1.1 Arrow-head vipers, *Bothrops atrox*, are common in Reserva Ducke, but are rarely seen because they look like a bunch of dead leaves when curled up.
Photo by Bill Magnusson.

I am using the names snake and lizard as though they refer to different biological groups, but that doesn't make sense in terms of evolution. Many lizards lack legs, but we only call some of the legless lizards snakes. Many typical lizards with legs are much more closely related to what we call snakes than they are to other lizards. Snakes are therefore just one or a few of the evolutionary lines within the lizard radiation. So, why do we treat them so specially?

The first answer to this question is usually that some of them are sufficiently venomous to pose a threat to humans. However, that doesn't seem to be enough to explain their uniqueness. As a biologist, I recognize that snakes are special, even though I know that they are just one group of legless lizards⁷. They represent about 40% of lizard species, but usually less than 1% of lizard

sightings. In Reserva Ducke, where Jeni encountered the lance-head viper, there are about 35 species of what we conventionally call lizards, and about 66 species of lizards that are called snakes⁸. However, at Ducke, I probably see ten lizards for every snake. I don't have the data to prove it, but I suspect that there are not only many more species of snakes in Reserva Ducke, there are also many more individual snakes than there are individual lizards. It is as though the snakes occupy a parallel universe and only come into our world for brief moments before returning to somewhere beyond our understanding.

Lizards have been described as model organisms for scientific research⁹, but that gives the impression that we study them only for convenience. This is certainly not true for those species conventionally called lizards, and even less so for snakes. It is as though they attract us and command us to study them. I have been fascinated by lizards, and even more by snakes since I was a small child, and I certainly then had very little idea of what science is about. Nevertheless, I followed that call, and this book is about the journey it took me on.



One of the few things I remember from the time I was a toddler was holding my mother's hand and watching a blue tongue lizard¹⁰ in the garden below our kitchen window. Blue tongues are big as lizards go, and they can be as thick as a child's forearm with a head the size of a pear. To a three-year old, they are massive powerful creatures. My mother was not afraid of the lizard, but did not try to catch it as it pushed itself into a tangle of small plants with its short legs, which seemed much too small for its thick body. Blue tongues are still found in many Sydney gardens, where they do good service eating snails. I can't imagine how they avoid the domestic dogs and cats that Australians maintain at ridiculously high densities in urban areas. When threatened, they open their

mouths to show their bright blue tongues, but their bite is relatively weak and they must have other survival tricks we know nothing about.



*Photo 1.2 The blue-tongued lizard, *Tiliqua scincoides*, is one of the largest of the Australian skinks. Individuals are common in east-Australian gardens, where they help control garden pests. Photo by Bill Magnusson.*

Blue tongues were not the only or the most abundant lizards in our back yard. Four species, the weasel skink¹¹, the three-toed skink¹², the common garden skink¹³ and the grass skink¹⁴, I had encountered as far back as my memory goes. The weasel skinks and two-toed skinks were usually hidden under leaf litter or other objects, but the garden skinks and the grass skinks skipped around on the paths, rocks and leaves, and I could often find several in a square meter. As an old man and a trained ecologist, I am astounded that so many species of lizards can be found in Sydney gardens. However, familiarity breeds contempt, and as a child I took them for granted.

Sydney is cold at night and the lizards crawled onto paths or rocks to warm in the morning before starting to fossick under leaves for tiny insects. If they spent too long in the shade, they would move back into the sun to warm up again. This behavior is called shuttling, and the lizards were using solar energy to fuel their foraging. I would study that behavior as an adult, but when I was a child it was just what lizards do, and I never thought about how wonderfully complex their habits might be.

Strangely, the only tiny skink that aroused my interest while I was in primary school was the fence skink¹⁵. We often visited my grandparents in the suburb of Hurstville. The old brick house was surrounded by concrete paths and well-kept lawns that did not support the species of skinks I watched in our garden. However, even this environment close to the inner city supported fence skinks. They scuttled across the hardwood-paling fence and never let a curious child push his nose up close, as did the garden skinks. The tiny black lizards had bright white stripes down the side and stood out on the grey planks and red bricks. When I got close, they disappeared around the other side of whatever they were climbing on.

The fence skinks were as agile as they were pretty, but it would be many decades before I would make the link between bright colors and agile movements in lizards. I was much too young to even think about sex, and it never crossed my mind that the bright colors might be related to reproduction. They were just wild creatures that saved me from the boredom of the family discussions going on inside.





Photo 1.3 *The garden skink, Lampropholis guichenoti, is one of the commonest species of lizard in Sydney gardens, individuals often occur at high densities and many can be seen basking close together on cold mornings. Photo by Bill Magnusson.*

My primary school was just one block away from Kiwong Street where I lived, and I could hear the kids playing when I was home sick. The suburb of Yowie Bay had been pristine bushland when my parents bought their block and there were still patches of forest among the fibro-cement clad houses that were springing up in the district. The school was modern, with substantial brick buildings and well-kept grounds, but the park behind it was still semi-natural heathland and low eucalypt forest. The deputy headmaster showed us snakes he had found in the bush behind the toilet block and cut in half with a shovel. When he sent them to the Australian Museum, the curator replied that they were Burton's legless lizards¹⁶ and no threat to children. I looked for the legless lizards, but it would be some time before I caught one.

The few hectares of bushland behind the school had somehow escaped the development around it and were representative of much of Yowie Bay's original vegetation. The higher ground consisted of a rock platform covered by a thin layer of sandy soil and two- to three-meter high heathland plants with prickly leaves. Water seeped over the rock, forming shallow pools that were breeding grounds for many species of frogs. The lower areas had deeper soil and taller trees that dropped copious leaf litter to make a haven for many species of lizards, including copper-tailed skinks¹⁷ with orange tails and contrasting black, white and brown lines along the body. As a child, I didn't know their official name and we called them speedo lizards because they were much too fast for us to capture with little hands and no experience.

Bushland in the Sydney suburbs was quickly degraded because most was surrounded by houses. The suburban people used the natural areas as a dump for garden refuse and rubbish that didn't fit into their garbage bins, but "my" patch of bushland was protected on one side by the school playgrounds and on two other sides by roads. Its neighbors on the remaining side were unusual urbanites who never threw rubbish over their fences. Playing in almost pristine bushland was one of the delights of my childhood, and it seemed that many generations of children would have access to it as an introduction to the natural world. This was not to be, and the bush would be destroyed by a little white lie, but I'll leave that story till later.





Photo 1.4 Fence skinks live on walls and posts and can even be found in the inner city.
Photo by Bill Magnusson.

We spent my father's annual holidays camped at Narrawallee on the south coast of New South Wales. Our tent was always pitched away from other campers and close to the bush that surrounded the open ground cleared for the holiday makers. My father fished in the sea and we ate fish three meals a day, but while I was too young to fish, and when we weren't swimming, I explored the camp ground. Not far from our tent and just on the bushland side of a barbed-wire fence was a sheet of corrugated iron. I lifted it carefully and found a beautiful black snake¹⁸ with a vivid red underside curled up in the grass. It was as thick as a garden hose. The snake did not move as I lifted the sheet metal and it just watched as though waiting to see what I would do. I carefully lowered its cover into place and went running back to the camp to tell everyone about my find.

My father said “A snake! Where?” I could see that he was not as thrilled as I was, but I said that I would show him if he promised not to kill it. He had no sooner lifted the corrugated iron than he grabbed a stick and struck the snake in the middle of its coils. I don’t know if he mortally wounded it because the grass took some of the impact, but the snake uncoiled and disappeared into the bush.

I was heartbroken. I ran after my father calling him “Dirty murderer, dirty murderer!”, then sulked away. Now, as an adult, I can appreciate his carrying out what he considered his duty when he found a snake he believed to be deadly poisonous close to where children play. The snake was not deadly poisonous, and I have never heard of anyone dying from a blacksnake bite, though it is said to be excruciatingly painful. But that is just adult justification for not killing the snake. As a child, all I knew was that I had the privilege of seeing something beautiful from an alien world, and a beloved adult had betrayed my trust and taken it away from me.



When I was about eight years old, my father gave me a bike he had reconstructed from parts people had discarded. The frame was from a machine that had 28-inch wheels, but he fitted it with 26-inch wheels so that it was a bit like modern mountain bikes, but much heavier. He painted it black and red, and I was very proud of it, especially because I generally won competitions with my friends along the rough bush tracks on the abandoned lots where we played. However, I wasn’t that social and I valued it most for the extra mobility it gave me.



Photo 1.5 Red-bellied black snakes, *Pseudechis porphyriacus*, are common in the bush and in farmland. Although they have a bad reputation, they are generally inoffensive. Photo by Bill Magnusson.

I much preferred the bush to interacting with people. My sister says “Every weekend when you were a little kid you would disappear off into the bush or exploring the district and only return when it got dark. My memories are of stressed parents needing to visit relatives on the weekend and having no idea how to find you. When you finally appeared there would be trouble and you would promise not to do it again. You apparently had a very short memory, the whole performance would be repeated the next weekend, and I would bunker down to weather the storm.”

The remaining bushland was mainly around streams and I visited many within a few kilometers of my house. As I walked along the rocky bank of a small stream, I saw a copper-colored lizard with dark markings along its side

moving agilely near the water. When it saw me, it dived and swam under a small rock. I sat and watched for several minutes before it swam back and lay in the shallows with just its head above water. I was intrigued that it could spend so much time underwater because I knew that a mammal or bird would have drowned if submerged for so long.

I caught the lizard, which I recognized as a baby water skink¹⁹. Because I was so intrigued by its ability to hold its breath, I devised an experiment. I made an underwater enclosure of flat stones and imprisoned it there for twice as long as it had stayed underwater voluntarily. When I lifted the top stone, the lizard swam vigorously for the bank. I was astounded and repeated the experiment, this time keeping it underwater for about ten minutes. When I lifted the stone, the lizard just remained limp. It seems strange looking back, but it had not occurred to me that I could only determine its diving limit by drowning it.

I was heartbroken by my stupidity and cried as I pedaled with its limp body stretched out on the handlebar. It had been so beautiful and was now so pitiful lying on its back. After a few hundred meters, my bleary eyes registered a tiny movement of the lizard's belly and I dismounted. The lizard started to breathe again, and after a few minutes it could right itself. I was so happy that it is hard to describe. A child's world is one of ecstasy and agony very different from the controlled behavior of adults.

That was my first scientific experiment, and it surely would not have been approved by an ethics committee. However, for me it was a concentrated introduction to experimental design, comparative physiology, and animal rights. The fact that I can remember it so vividly after more than 50 years testifies to how much it affected me.



Photo 1.6 Water skinks, *Eulamprus quoyii*, live around streams and dive into the water if they are threatened. They will often remain underwater for several minutes before venturing timidly back onto the bank. Photo by David Kirshner.

I had a different relationship with my bike than my friends. Their bikes were status symbols and they got great pleasure from cycling almost anywhere. The pleasure came from pedaling, and the distance they went was more important than the destination. For me, the bike was just a means of transport. When I got older, I found that my relationship with cars differed from those of my friends in the same way.

One day, I pedaled to a stream a few kilometers from my house that was near the local shopping center. I left the bike propped against the bridge pylons and explored upstream for about fifteen minutes. When I returned, the bike was gone. Someone had stolen it. I was sorry to have lost it, but I could walk as far as I could ride. My greatest sorrow was at disappointing my father, who had so

painstakingly constructed the bike for me. I should not have left the bike, but if I hadn't, how could I have explored the stream? To this day, I am ambivalent about how equipment liberates you, but restricts you at the same time. I guess that's why I'll always be a natural historian rather than a scientist. Many years later, an American from that part of North America sandwiched between Mexico and Canada told me that he was an ecologist and I replied "So am I."

He responded "No Bill, you're not an ecologist, you are just a quantitative natural historian." That's true, but I am a very happy quantitative natural historian!



We often visited my uncle, who lived at Sans Souci on the northern bank of the Georges River. Getting there on the barge from Taren Point was fun for kids, but sitting around the kitchen table talking about chickens or politics wasn't. I fossicked in the abandoned lots beside my uncle's property and found black-bellied swamp snakes²⁰ under discarded sheets of corrugated iron. I kept them in my room in a cage adapted from a leaky aquarium. The largest snakes were only about the thickness of my little finger, but they were a delicate olive-brown color, with a fine white line along the side of the head and white lip scales.

Most of my friends' parents would not have let them keep even a harmless snake, and I will always be grateful that my parents let me do things my way. I was expected to excel, but it didn't matter at what. My father once said "I don't care if he wants to be a garbage collector, as long as he wants to be the best garbage collector in the World." After I started collecting snakes, which many people would think is worse than garbage collecting, some of my mother's friends never visited her again.



Photo 1.7 *The black-bellied marsh snake, Hemiaspis signata, is a common mildly-venomous snake from eastern Australia that eats small skinks and frogs. Photo by Adam Stow.*

The cage only received the early-morning sun for a few hours each day, and the snake always had cool places to avoid overheating. The little swamp snake was very pretty, and I was fascinated by its eye, which seemed to be taking in everything, even though the snake spent most of its time curled up in a corner. I fed it garden skinks, and I could see its body tense when I threw a lizard into its cage, but it didn't move until the lizard crawled into just the right position for a strike, which usually took it at mid body. The lizard would roll and distort the snake's body, sometimes twisting around and biting the predator. However, the snake just held on, clamping down rhythmically and driving in venom for several minutes until the lizard went limp.

The little snake then untangled its body and dragged the lizard back a few centimeters before starting to inch its jaws along its victim's body, which was as thick as its own. Each jaw moved independently. First, the teeth on the upper jaw on the side closest to the lizard's head would be pushed forward and up to release their hold, then driven in further along the body. The teeth on the lower jaw on that side would repeat the process on the underside of the lizard and the teeth on the other jaws followed in the same pattern, three jaws always firmly anchored while the fourth was inched along the body.

When the snake reached the lizard's head, it swung it around and used the same creeping jaw movements to pull the lizard into its mouth and down its throat. By the time the snake got to the belly of the lizard, its head was stretched to what looked like breaking point, with only ligaments connecting the upper and lower jaws. Rhythmic contractions of the snake's body slowly pushed the lizard into its stomach, and the snake yawned and flexed its jaws back into position. I knew that snakes could swallow things much bigger than their heads, but I had never before seen the process close up.

I was fairly sure that the snake could have subdued the lizard without using venom, but I could see that injecting saliva into the lizard was important to ensure that it was digested before the internal organs started to rot. Presumably, venom first evolved to aid digestion, and only later was called upon for dominating prey and intimidating predators. After feeding, the snake spent much more time basking in the sun, which raised its temperature and speeded up absorption.





Photo 1.8 A beached yellow-bellied sea snake. Photo by Ruchira Somaweera.

When I was about eight, the camp ground at Narrawallee was sold for housing development and we started to holiday at the council grounds at Redhead, about 10 km further north. Redhead was even more spectacular than Narawallee, and the camp ground was situated at the back of a headland that was covered in natural bushland. It was a wild place and I liked to sit on the cliffs over the sea and watch the storm fronts we called southerly busters sweeping up the coast after particularly hot days.

The beaches were strewn with flotsam after strong storms, and I walked along the strand line searching for marine life, such as leafy sea dragons and box fish that had been washed up with tangled masses of kelp. The wind and overcast skies made the isolated beaches seem wild and untainted by the artificial contrivances of civilization, though occasional lengths of gill net and fishing buoys were testimony to the influence of humans even in the open ocean.

I sometimes found dead yellow-bellied sea snakes²¹ washed up on the beach, and one of my principal reasons for patrolling the beaches was the hope of finding a live one. However, the only live snake I found was in its last feeble attempts to crawl and died in my hands.

The snake was only a couple of finger widths deep at the widest part of its vertically flattened tail, and it tapered from the tail to the tiny head that was only the size of the first joint on my index finger. It was dark black on the back, which contrasted with the bright yellow of its sides. There were irregular black markings on its flattened oar-like tail. The species is pelagic, and individuals spend their whole lives at sea capturing fish that take refuge under their floating bodies. As the species is mainly tropical, the snakes I found may have been washed up due to their inability to swim strongly in the cold southern water.

Yellow-bellied sea snakes were the only aquatic snakes I found as a child. They are a member of the Elapidae, a family of snakes that has its main radiation in the Australian region. However, most elapids spend almost all their time on land, and those in the subfamily Hydrophiinae that evolved for life in the sea only occur in tropical regions. Perhaps it is not strange that there are no primarily aquatic freshwater Australian elapids, because Australia is the driest of the habitable continents.

The heath on the top of the headland was home to rabbits and small wallabies, and I sometimes found a big diamond python²² curled up in the sun in the early morning. I could get very close to the pythons, but they just ignored me. Their glossy black backs were studded with brilliant yellow spots and they had deep pits along their lip scales that gave them an old gnarled appearance, but I knew that those were heat-sensitive pits that allowed them to catch animals that were hotter than the background, such as nocturnal mammals and birds, even in complete darkness. The largest of them were thicker than my arm and I thought

about taking them home as pets, but I didn't want to have to breed rats to feed them.



Photo 1.9 A diamond python, *Morelia spilota*. This is the largest snake in southern Australia. The pits along its lower lips are used to detect prey that is warmer than the background, such as birds and mammals at night. Photo by Bill Magnusson.

I wandered long distances through the bush looking for lizards and snakes, but the best hunting was in the dunes behind the beach to the south of the headland. Jacky lizards²³ sat on the pine-like leaves of the casuarinas or perched on low trees. They were about as thick as my thumb and members of the family Agamidae, which Australians call dragon lizards. Mottled grey, with rough scales, the lizards were well camouflaged on the flaky bark of the low trees. I occasionally saw one run after a flying insect that landed on the casuarina needles, but they usually only moved because I got too close. In fact, I generally only detected them if they ran. I was seeing a combination of cryptic color,

infrequent movement and a diet of active prey that would only make sense many decades later. As a child, I just watched them because they were beautiful.

The only large trees that grew directly behind the dunes were coastal banksias, which had sparse serrated leaves and thick trunks with corky bark. When they died, their trunks rotted from the inside out, making crumbly galleries occupied by many animals, including small-eyed snakes²⁴. These snakes are dark grey to almost black with with cream or pink bellies. As their common name implies, their eyes are small and just as black as the rest of the body. Like many snakes that spend most of their time in leaf litter, underground or in rotting trunks, their scales were shiny, smooth and almost iridescent. I broke open the banksia trunks and caught the small-eyed snakes, but they were hard to hold because of the smooth scales and muscular movements they used to push through tiny underground cracks.

The small-eyed snakes were not much bigger than the marsh snakes, and I kept several in a large aquarium on a desk at the foot of my bed. My room was on the eastern side of our house, which was good because it caught the early morning sun. However, it was separated from the part of the house where everyone else slept by a large dining room and a long corridor. It was sometimes a lonely place for a small child to sleep. I must have been about eight when I had a nightmare in which I was covered in wriggling snakes. Still young enough to seek comfort from adults, I went into my parent's room, woke my mother, and told her I was having a nightmare.



Photo 1.10 *Eastern small-eyed snake, Cryptophis nigrescens, is a secretive snake that was once considered to be harmless, but is now listed as highly venomous. Photo by Bill Magnusson.*

My mother took me back to my room and shook my tangled blankets so that I could get into bed. Out fell three of my small-eyed snakes. I had not closed their cage properly and they had climbed into my bed, perhaps seeking warmth on the cold autumn night. I had been awake and it was no nightmare. At that time, people thought that small-eyed snakes were relatively harmless to humans, but since then there have been reports of serious consequences of envenomation by the species. We are lucky that most snakes avoid biting people, even when we give them plenty of reason to do so!



I had just started high school when a friend told me about a man who kept snakes as a hobby. His name was Merv Hay and he lived in a recently-established housing estate with modern red-brick houses. Although the estate was only about a fifteen-minute walk from my new school, the houses were very different from the fibro-cement clad dwellings of Kiwong Street. I went with my friend to visit Merv Hay the following weekend, but I was apprehensive that he would not want to spend time talking to inexperienced school kids. I need not have worried. He immediately invited us to see his menagerie of lizards and snakes.

Merv was of average height and rather thin, with dark hair swept back in 1950s style. His fingers were tobacco stained from the cigarettes he rolled and smoked regularly. He worked night shift and often slept during the day, so his skin was pallid and rarely tanned. Although he came from a city background very different from that of my father, who had been a bushman and now worked in the construction industry, they had a lot in common. They were a generation apart, but still came from a time before everything was mass produced and they could lend their hands to any practical task, whether it be fixing a car or building a new room for the house. Merv was in his thirties when I first met him.

The menagerie was better organized than many zoos. The first enclosure, with huge windows facing the north and east, was the size of a small sitting room and housed many species of lizards that climbed on the ornamental logs or scuttled across the floor. The dominant animal in that area was Old George, a water dragon²⁵ that must have weighed a kilogram, which Merv had captured more than 20 years before.

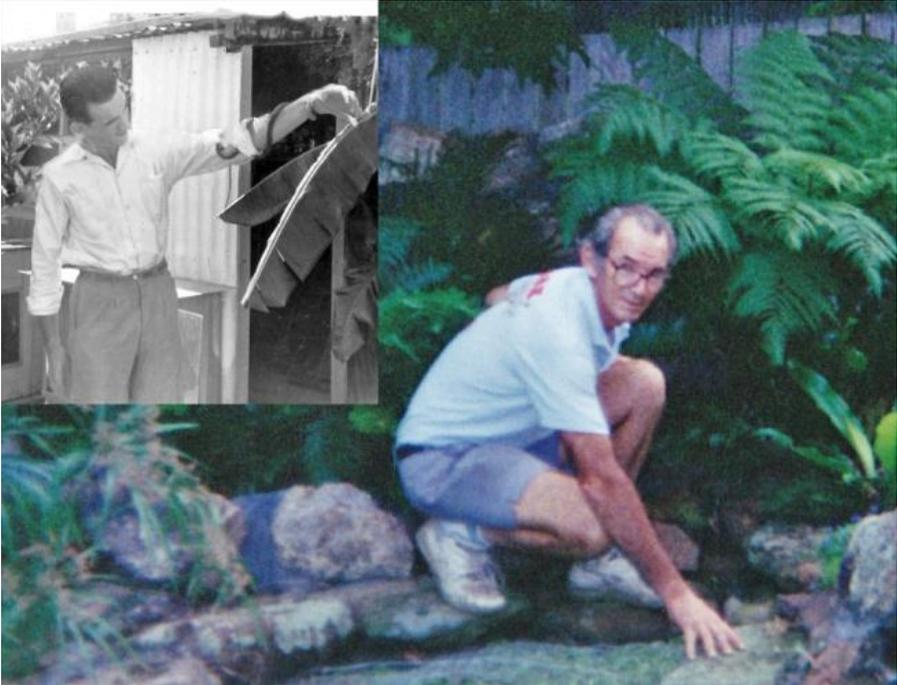


Photo 1.11 Merv Hay as a young man before Bill met him (inset) and in the 1990s when the only reptiles he kept were pond turtles. Photographers unknown.

Large glass vivariums occupied a second room, slightly smaller than the first. There, Merv kept a variety of snakes, including deadly death adders²⁶ and brown snakes²⁷, and species that are harmless to humans, such as black headed pythons²⁸, diamond pythons and green tree snakes²⁹. I had a copy of Eric Worrell's *Reptiles of Australia*³⁰. Like most members of my and Merv's generations, it was Worrell's book that allowed us to identify reptiles. However, seeing the animals close up was very different from seeing pictures in a book or getting a fleeting glimpse as they disappeared into the undergrowth.

The last enclosure was open on top and enclosed only by chest-high fibro-cement walls. There, Merv kept lace monitors³¹ and sand goannas³². The largest animal was about as long as I was high, and Merv treated him with respect. Monitor lizards³³, which Australians call goannas, have sharp teeth that

can cause nasty wounds. Some of them, such as the Indonesian Komodo dragons, are also thought to have venom glands that aggravate the deep lacerations. Merv's biggest lizard was perched almost vertically, with its tail on the ground and its head lying on the top of a meter-high stump. It stared at us imperiously, as though defying us to enter its territory.

A few people have had profound effects on my life, and Merv was one of them. I visited him often, and one day he offered me a baby copperhead from a clutch that one of his females had produced. Copperheads³⁴ are very venomous snakes, though they have been responsible for few deaths, and I was pretty sure that my parents would not be happy about me keeping it.

The copperhead was small, only about the thickness of a knitting needle and didn't look very intimidating, but I assumed that if I told my parents that Merv had given it to me they would tell me to give it back. Therefore, I told them that I had caught it in the bush behind the school, and I housed it in a small wooden cage with a glass front that was about the size of a one-liter ice-cream container.

I didn't have the copperhead long before it died, probably because I had to continually move the cage from the desk in my room outside to where the snake could bask, and that led to its death, either because it overheated or because I did not give it enough sun. Unknown to me, my mother told the school teachers that a baby copperhead had been caught behind the school, which implied that there must have been adults of the deadly species as well. The headmaster contacted the local council, which sent a bulldozer to destroy the bushland. Today the area is just covered in short grass with isolated trees, and the heathland, frogs, copper-tail skinks, and most of the other native wildlife are gone forever, victims of a little boy's white lie.



Photo 1.12 *Bill Magnusson in 2017 contemplates the barren lawn the council used to replace the complex heathland behind Yowie Bay Public School because of his little white lie 55 years before. Photo by Albertina Lima.*

The first big snake that I kept was a red-bellied black snake a bit over a meter long. I caught it while on holidays, and Dad let me bring it back in a large can with hessian tied over the open top. I am surprised that it didn't escape and roam around the car on the four-hour trip home. I fed it marsh frogs and water skinks, but it needed better conditions than I could provide in my room and Dad helped me convert a shed he had constructed for his chickens into a reptile menagerie. I made glass fronted vivariums and arranged them on waist-high benches. The black snake was calm and I could move him around by picking him up at mid body and carrying him slowly. He would sometimes swing around and investigate my hand by flicking out his forked tongue, but never attempted to bite.

I have mixed feelings about keeping snakes and lizards as pets. Few species breed regularly in captivity and taking them from the wild may threaten some local populations. Often, we do not know what the animals need and they may suffer before finally dying. However, it is the children who keep reptiles who grow up to be researchers and conservation biologists, fighting to save species and habitats that most people do not know exist.

I no longer keep captive animals and I am sometimes sad about the suffering that my pets may have endured, but many people are much better keepers than I was. Some researchers who started their careers as reptile collectors still keep animals they obtained as children. Laurie Vitt had a Gila monster for 27 years, Adam Stow³⁵ has two Children's pythons he got as hatchlings 32 years ago, and Anthony Stimson³⁶ has had a Cunningham's skink that he captured as an adult for 36 years. David Kirshner has had a lace monitor he got as a hatchling for 17 years and you can see his YouTube video of how it has adapted to life in an apartment³⁷. It is a shame that there are now so many restrictions on keeping reptiles as pets, and I fear for the species in the wild when the last of the reptile-collector generation dies out and there will be no one who has spent enough time with lizards and snakes to understand what truly wonderful creatures they are.

