

PYTHONS IN KIMBERLEY VINE THICKETS

On 5 December 2001 David Pearson, a Senior Research Scientist in CALM, addressed a keen audience of about 50 members and visitors. He first showed slides from two trips he made to the Kimberley to survey fauna including his special interest—pythons. Of principal interest was a search for the rare Rough-scaled Python. David followed this with a viewing of a video made for Yorkshire Television by British naturalist Mark O'Shea with the aid of a film crew.

Pythons, except the Rough-scaled Python, have smooth scales. The latter has keeled scales and one enormous scale on its head. At the time only six had been recorded, all from a restricted area in the north Kimberley.

On the first trip David and Mark Cowan set off from Wyndham in March soon after cyclone Vance in a flat bottomed water jet craft with Customs; the *Andrew Fisher*. The shallow draft enabled it to navigate shallow water in the rivers. They were to meet with John Weigel. John runs the Reptile Park in Gosford NSW and he had recently obtained a CALM permit, which, up to this time, they had refused, to collect the Rough-scaled Python. He wanted to breed them in captivity to learn about its ecology and provide hatchlings to zoological institutions for display.

David showed slides of the rugged coastline taken as they made their way westwards and into the mouth of the King George River. They set Elliot traps without much success and then headed south to Prince Frederick Harbour. Unfortunately at this stage, before they met up with John, they had to head back to Darwin because there was a possibility that they were carrying introduced zebra mussels on the hull. Customs cancelled the rest of the trip. John waited in vain for two weeks at Prince Frederick Harbour.

The second trip involved a large party including a doctor equipped with anti-venom. They set up camp on an arm of the Hunter River near Donkins Falls. This involved many helicopter flights. David showed some breathtaking views of the rugged country with vertical red cliffs and water falls and with patches of green rain forest seemingly inaccessible deep in the gorges. This was followed by a close up shot of Mertens Water Monitor and shots of the common frog, *Litoria coplandii*, a Quoll in a trap (a number of which were caught) and a shot of a Bower Bird bower in mint condition. They made their way down the Hunter River and we were impressed by the damage caused by the recent flooding—mangroves laid flat with the water probably 50 feet deep. No one could identify a photogenic orchid for David. They climbed Donkins Hill and we were shown views of the rugged country. Only a small amount of Aboriginal art was evident. We were shown a green Superb Dragon with its curious long limbs and toes and the large Geckoe, *Oedura gracilis*. However no

pythons were caught until the sixth day and another on the final morning. This individual was saved from an Olive Python attempting to swallow it!

The video commenced with a bit of sensationalism with Mark O'Shea handling a Banded tree snake a bit roughly to make it bite him. This was followed by shots of the Rough-scaled Python. This was one of the captured ones. Then the film jumped to the Kimberley with Mark, John and film crew. On traversing the gorge where the python had been discovered they were distressed to find the patch of rain forest concerned had been completely devastated by the flood. Day after day they went out, searching other remnant patches without success, but the video was livened by the catching of a Mertens water monitor from under an overhanging rock in the stream and a *Varanus glauertii* or Rock Monitor from high in a tree. Mark climbed athletically up a smooth nearby sapling carrying a long pole which he used to coax the animal down. But only so far until it suddenly leapt into space over John's head. John, who had been waiting near the tree, leapt into the air and brought down the animal with a mark that would have done justice to an Australian Rules champion.

A lengthy question time followed. Pythons are different from other snakes in that the former have a pelvic girdle, different skulls, and, along the lower jaw, rows of pits which are heat sensitive. They are comparatively large and heavy with 30 plus rows of mid-body scales compared with less than 28 in other snakes. Pythons are hard to find but are not necessarily rare. Pythons can go 8–10 months without food while reproducing. The Rough-scaled Python is the rarest of the Australian pythons, probably due to the rugged nature of its habitat. They grow to about 2 metres in length. The Australian Reptile Park has now bred the Rough-scaled Python for the first time in captivity and two of the progeny have recently been sent to the Perth Zoo. They will be held in quarantine for 6 months before going on display to the public. The quarantine period is very long due to their slow metabolic rate so it takes time for any disease to show.

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