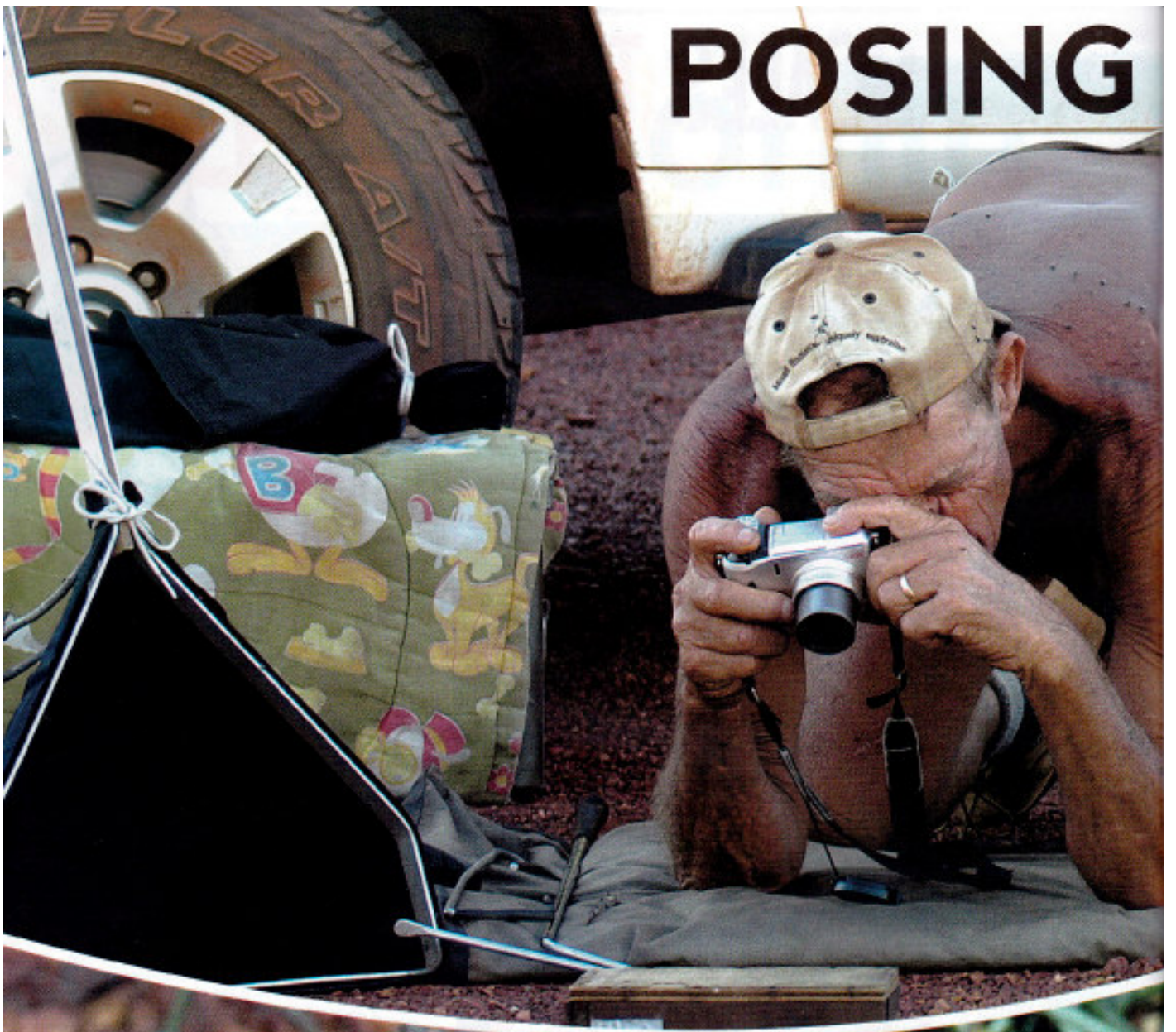


POSING



"I love the challenge of getting the perfect shot!"

IN THE PILBARA

Self-described 'geriatric herper' Brian Bush has to pit all of his experience, skills and tenacity against the elements, simply to photograph a common species in its natural environment.

It is five in the morning and already twenty-six degrees in the shade. A subtle breeze blows from the east, but it is only just perceptibly as a slight coolness on your bare skin. At this time of the day, there is some relief from the previous evening's humidity, but there is no respite from the insects. As soon as you leave your swag and the protection of the mossie dome, swarms of miniscule sand flies attack your ankles, resulting in a multitude of little pricks that itch immediately. Fortunately, this irritation does not last too long and once your boots are on, they can annoy you no more...

Ouch! A bloodsucking March fly drinks its full from an area below your shoulder blade, just out of reach of your hand. Two types of little black bush fly congregate on your body wherever there is a little moisture, just waiting for an opportunity to enter your eyes and mouth, the places they appear to like best. The typical bush fly is reasonably timid, but a slightly smaller, 'stick-fast' cousin that is far more difficult to discourage is equally prolific in the area. So dumb is this pest that when you run your hand down the opposite arm, it does not fly off in alarm as you would expect, but remains on your skin to be squashed in the hundreds. The horrible smell left behind by their crushed bodies causes you to involuntarily sniff your hand every few minutes to see if it remains. Each time you do so, it's just as disgusting as before.

Damn, why do I keep doing that?

Joining this assemblage of flies each morning, although in much smaller numbers, is the ever-present mosquito. The myriad of insects have combined forces and now, working in unison, their onslaught is complete. Only a truly resilient person could continue working under these conditions, exposing themselves day after day to

this debilitating assault, but fortunately, that's me!

In another couple of hours, when the temperature rises to the low forties, the bloodsuckers will be gone and the numbers of flies will have declined, but this job needs doing quickly while the temperature is still low.



The region, the work and the species.

It is February in the Pilbara region of Western Australian, and I am on my own, as usual, two hundred kilometres east of Port Hedland, photographing reptiles found during the previous evening's spotlighting. It has been a great season with tremendously high rainfall here on Yarrie Pastoral Station. The reptiles are all fat and slow, making it easy for this wrinkled, weather-beaten, geriatric herpetologist to bag more than would usually be the case. However, the more one bags, the more time is consumed photographing animals under deplorable conditions. Although the flies, mossies, heat, humidity and long days of little reptile activity can be (understandably) very trying for most people, this old codger has frequented the region for over thirty years now, and my experience, tenacity, long-term conditioning and loner persona now allow me to get on with my herp business with nothing more than minor inconvenience. However, every now and then, even for me, the situation suddenly deteriorates - like when a March fly bites a tender spot on my buttocks, just above the belt line, or I breathe in a bush fly and then have great difficulty dislodging it from my throat, where I can feel it continually scratching around.

Anyway, I have to continue the job at hand if I am going to complete it this morning, so I can liberate the reptiles tonight. I have been camped here for three days now, with my last night being this evening, so I have to get everything photographed because it is the last chance I have, as I cannot take the animals with me. I have a Pilbara Smooth Knob-tailed Gecko (*Nephurus levis pilbarensis*), a Coppertail Whipsnake (*Demansia psammophis cupreiceps*), a Mulga Snake (*Pseudechis australis*), three Western Brown Snakes (*Pseudonaja mengdeni*) and a Rosen's Snake (*Suta fasciata*) I bagged last night to get shots of, so I had better get on with it.

No two individual reptiles are ever identical, so it is important to photograph as many specimens of each species as possible. The Coppertail Whipsnake usually has a brown head, but the big individual I now have to photograph has a black head, and you can never get bored with the tremendous colour variation exhibited by the Western Brown Snake. The dozen or so specimens found on this trip have all been quite different. The belly of many brown snakes

can be quite pale and washed out, but is also often brilliant yellow with bold orange spots.

Rosen's Snake is common throughout the Goldfields and Pilbara regions of Western Australia, but I have only found one at this site. This species is often said to have elliptical pupils, but that is definitely not the case. Its bulbous eyes and round pupils are quite unique amongst the local snakes.

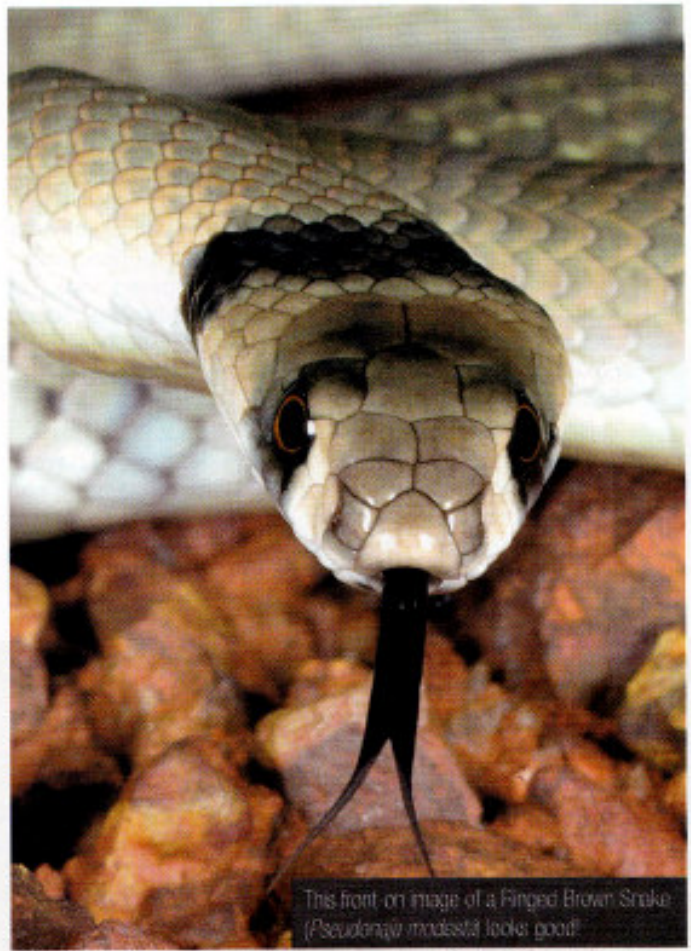
I do most of the photography on the shaded side of my vehicle in an open area devoid of ants - once they know something is going on, they turn up *en masse*, making the job a whole lot more difficult. My campsite is on typical stony Pilbara ground, but a short walk takes me to an area where the substrate consists of coarse sand. There I can photograph the knob-tail first, before preparing for the venomous snakes. When one is alone, belly down on the ground and looking through the viewfinder of a camera at a large, mobile elapid, it gets a bit hairy when the snake decides to do a runner, or takes offence at being poked and prodded and fronts up to the photographer in a pugnacious fashion. I have had to employ some not-so-elegant moves and extremely fancy footwork on numerous occasions in an attempt to get that elusive perfect shot.



When visiting the Pilbara, don't forget your mossie dome.



A Pilbara Smooth Knob-tailed Gecko (*Aleocharinus lewis pilbarensis*) collected while spotlighting at Yarru Pastoral Station.



This front on image of a Fingert Brown Snake (*Pseudonaja modesta*) looks good!



The Mulga Snake (*Pseudochis australis*) is the most common large elapid seen in the Pilbara.



You can never get bored with the tremendous colour variation exhibited by the Western Brown Snake (*Pseudonaja mengoni*).



The body of brown snakes is often brilliant yellow with bold orange spots.



Thornies Long Spine Thorny Devil

Is it real? or is it Natureworks!

Enhance your world with life size museum quality reproductions of reptiles, mammals, birds, marine life & amphibians. Coming Soon 11 metre carpet snake!

Send us an email for a full colour catalogue whilst our website is being updated.

Natureworks Pty Ltd, 732 Mt. Gibraltar Rd, Highvale (near Samford), Queensland Australia 4520

Phone: + 617 3289 7555 Fax: + 617 3289 7788 Email: info@natureworks.com.au www.natureworks.com.au



The tools and technique.

To provide the snake with a convenient refuge to escape into, I position one of my self-manufactured, triangular-framed hoop bags on either side of me, with the handle propped up against a stick, directing the opening towards where the snake is to be posed. Very close at hand on my right is one of my standard (103cm) tapered-hook manipulating tools, along with a much shorter one (50cm) and a long, thin stick of sufficient length to allow me to poke and prod the subject into a reasonable portrait pose without needing to get too close to the sharp end. I also have a third triangular-framed hoop bag and hook within arm's reach on my right-hand side in case I have to chase the snake across open ground in order to re-bag it. Rather than lying directly on the ground, to provide some cushioning for my ageing body and protection for my camera gear, I drag my swag into position and lie on that. It also provides another escape route for the snake;

because the swag's leading edge is off the ground, many snakes that have done a runner have gone straight under it, giving me ample time to put my camera down, get to my feet and recapture my reluctant subject. Although I do the photography during the coolest part of the day, the temperature up here at this time of the year is such that the snakes are always nice and mobile.

My camera gear comprises my mobile telephone, my 'point and shoot' utility digital Olympus C740 and my 35mm digital SLR Olympus E510 with a 50mm macro. This lens provides me with considerable versatility, especially when combined with a twin flash. The mobile phone shots are convenient to SMS to my mates to keep them motivated and maybe make them a little jealous, especially if they spend most of their time working in the city.



The big bulbous eyes in this cold-tolerant Rosin's Snake (*Suta fasciata*) are unique amongst the local snakes.

"Some idiot is bringing snakes to school on Monday to show us!"

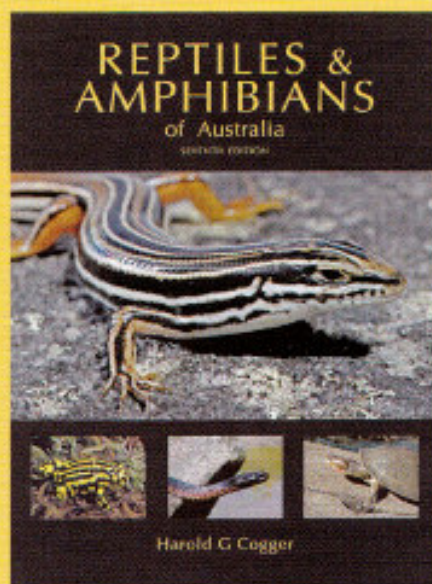
First combine a larrikin sense of humour and a penchant for practical jokes with a healthy disregard for personal safety. Then add a liberal dose of some of the most dangerous reptiles on the planet, together with an eclectic ensemble cast of larger-than-life characters that at times reads like a who's who of Australian herpetology. The result is a compelling read that hurtles along at a cracking pace.



Presale purchase available now direct from Neville

Order your book today!
Strictly limited numbers of signed copies available - don't delay!

Please call
02 4759 1832
or email
nevilleburns@bigpond.com



New edition of the classic guide

CSIROPUBLISHING
www.publish.csiro.au

T: 1300 788 000 E: publishing.sales@csiro.au

I carry a few different-sized, flat hide boxes with me to assist in posing snakes in a compact manner. Once allowed to enter one of these structures, most snakes will settle down quite well, but if one continues to give me a hard time and won't pose, I will re-bag it after several minutes and move on to the next reptile. Rarely do you find an individual snake that is impossible to pose, although I exclude blind snakes from that statement, as they always give the photographer grief.

When attempting to photograph a twitchy and highly-strung reptile that is proving to be a very difficult subject, it is common for the photographer to also become agitated. When this happens, do what I do and take a break, walk away and boil the billy. Otherwise, it is self-perpetuating and increases the difficulty of the task by highlighting every other annoyance that was previously pushed to the back of your mind. Under stressed conditions, that mossie bite under the arm is extremely itchy and those flies on your face are driving you crazy!

Killing Time.

There is little diurnal reptile activity during the extreme temperatures up here, so one has to kill the long days doing something. It is far too hot to sleep, so once the photography is completed, I enjoy several coffees while listening to talkback radio for a few hours. By mid-to-late morning, I crank up the CD and listen to some country music while downing a couple of cans of mid-strength beer. The heat must regularly get the better of me, because after a few beers I always do my daily exercise to keep fit. This involves some great dance moves out on the flat, all the time with the sun beating down on my bare back.

By the way, if you have never experienced the sun on your bare back, you should give it a go - it is nothing short of 'organismic' as it fills one's body with energy. Apart from the exercise, an additional benefit of dancing violently is that the flies have little opportunity to settle around your eyes and mouth.

By late afternoon I am a little worn out from this strenuous activity. The shadow cast by my vehicle has widened again, so I lie down on my swag in the shade and have a nap for a couple of hours in preparation for the night's spotlighting.

A banded Western Brown Snake (*Pseudonaja mengobardi*).



Flat out.

As mentioned previously, the season has been good and this explains why the three local female Western Brown Snakes examined over the last couple of days were gravid in February. Previous studies have shown that brown snakes can multiple-clutch from a single mating. I estimate that they are producing their third clutch for this reproductive year. During poor seasons, they would be unlikely to produce more than one clutch. Most of the other snakes seen during this trip are carrying considerable condition too. Several times, I mistakenly believed oviparous species other than the western browns to be gravid, but found this not to be the case after feeling for eggs.

The only other member of genus *Pseudonaja* that I collected on this trip was the Ringed Brown Snake (*P. modesta*), but none were in a gravid condition. It is unlikely that this snake produces multiple clutches, unlike its larger cousins, because of the high proportion of energy the female invests in her clutch. I have recorded an egg mass equivalent to 150% of the female's body weight, as compared to commonly less than 70% for the western brown.

One night I spotted a ringed brown crossing the track, heading somewhere in a hurry, so I grabbed

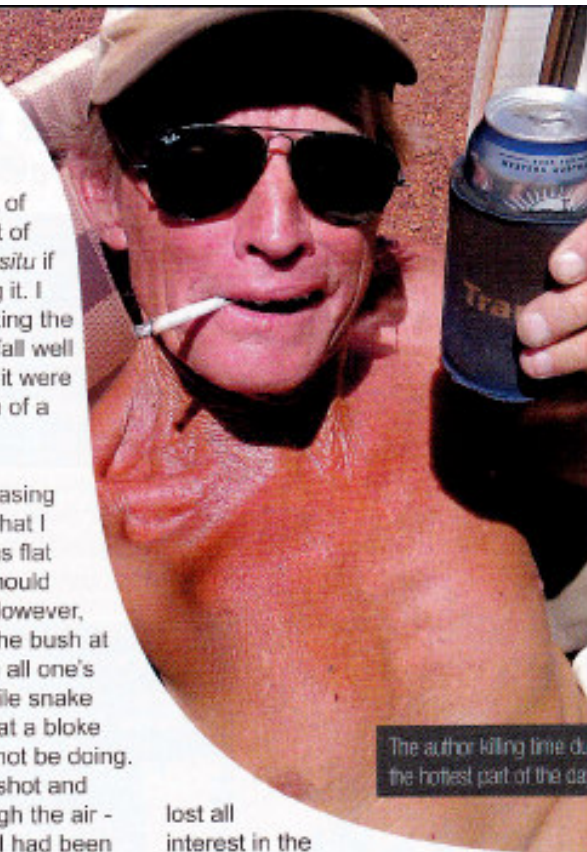
my torch and camera out of the vehicle with the intent of trying to photograph it *in situ* if possible, without bagging it. I love the challenge of getting the perfect shot, but usually fall well short of the mark. Hey, if it were easy, it wouldn't be much of a challenge!

The area where I was chasing the ringed brown, from what I could see in the dark, was flat spinifex sandplain and should have been easy going. However, running flat out through the bush at night while concentrating all one's attention on a small mobile snake is probably something that a bloke pushing seventy should not be doing. I suddenly stopped as if shot and found myself flying through the air - with the initial belief that I had been hit by a vehicle. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to lead with my elbows, so my utility camera and two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar Pelican torch would be somewhat protected when I slammed into the ground, which was what happened next.

Oooooomph! Bugger, that hurt!

I lay there for several minutes gathering my thoughts and to ensure there were no broken bones before attempting to rise, which I successfully accomplished. I had

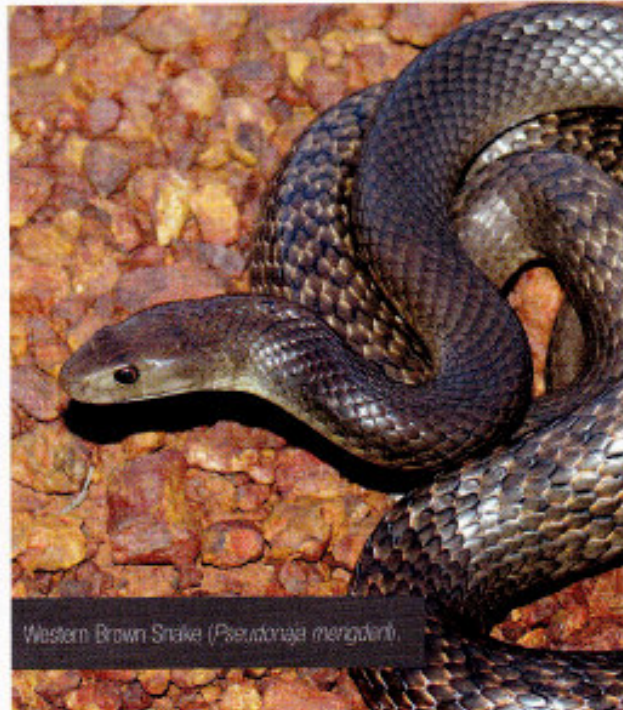
lost all interest in the snake, which was now long gone anyway, and turned the torch light back in the direction I had just come from. There, blocking my path and almost completely hidden by the tall grass, was a small termite mound about one metre high. It had taken my legs out from under me, causing me to fly headlong over the top of it. As I walked back to the track, I felt something wet in my boots. With the aid of the torch, I discovered that they were filling with blood from my flayed legs!



The author killing time during the hottest part of the day.



A Western Brown Snake (*Pseudonaja mengdeni*) found at Yarie Pastoral Station.



Western Brown Snake (*Pseudonaja mengdeni*).

The Reptile Doctor

Dr Shane Simpson
B.V.Sc.(Hons), GCMPVP, CMAVA

Veterinarian with a special interest in
Reptiles and Amphibians

KVH
KARINGAL VET
HOSPITAL

328 Cranbourne Road
Frankston Victoria 3199

☎ **9789 3444**
☎ 9776 6127

✉ info@thereptiledoctor.com.au
🌐 www.thereptiledoctor.com.au
📘 www.facebook.com/TheReptileDoctor

Veterinary care for
Reptiles & Amphibians

Member

THE GREEN EFFECT

there will be more of us
at the end of the year

WWW.THEGREENEFFECTS.COM.AU

Fortunately, I did not hit my head or break any bones that could have seen me lying out there in the spinifex for I do not know how long. I was lucky this time and recovered quickly after a few days of feeling stiff and sore. However, it did reinforce the need to be exceptionally cautious when working alone in remote areas. Accidents can happen so simply and quickly that my company's occupational health and safety policy now prohibits its sole field employee from moving across the ground, when on foot, any faster than can be achieved with a brisk walk!

In this brief article, I have attempted to convey a little about the environment I work in, and conditions that I believe can only be handled by the truly committed in modern times. I am a reptile photographer, biodiversity

environmentalist and old feller who spends two-thirds of each year parked up alone in the bush. I do so as well to encourage others to have a crack at a similar lifestyle and get out there, far away from the truly false and sanitised routine of first-world suburbia.

I am extremely fortunate how things have turned out for me. I know from the response of workers I meet visiting remote mining camps that many are envious of my tough, independent, footloose and fancy-free existence. There is a little of the pioneer in many of us, but few will ever get the opportunity to experience this kind of life today. I consider myself to be one of the very lucky ones, and am fond of saying, in parting, to those who will listen, that, "Now you will be able to tell your grandchildren that you have met the last of Australia's hard men!"



Copper-tail Whip snakes (*Demansia psammophis cooleceps*) usually have a brown head, but this large individual has a black head.