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ACTHA Inc. News
Apr - May '14

Newsletter of the ACT Herpetological Association Inc.

Your Committee for 2013 - 2014

President	Dennis Dyer
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	Peter Child
Student Representatives	Angelique Harrison
	Sophie Sloane

* *Denotes Life Members*

In this issue

ACTHA's New Website is here!! Angus Kennedy has been spending long hours rebuilding ACTHA's Website and the details can be found on page 2.

An art exhibition entitled **'Wildlife Art @ Discovery'** will be launched in Canberra on **15 May:** page 2.

Frogwatch Autumn 2014 update: page 3.

ACT Wildlife: Marg Peachey was February's guest speaker, explaining how ACTHA's recent Grant will be used to help our local injured reptiles, from page 4.

Aussie signs you're unlikely to forget: , page 7.

The Australian & International Scene:
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Diary date

The *bi-monthly* meetings of the Association are usually held on the **third Tuesday of the month at 7.30pm**. Our usual venue is:

***Belconnen Soccer Club*, Hawker**
(cnr Belconnen Way & Springvale Drive)

Upcoming meeting

Tuesday, 15 April 2014

Mozes Blom, a PhD student at ANU's Moritz Lab, will be our guest speaker at this month's meeting.

"I will go through various aspects of my research and in particular will highlight three of my thesis components. Firstly, I will present and explain our approach in resolving the phylogenetic tree for all currently named Australian *Cryptoblepharus* species. Secondly, I will take you through some of our recent fieldwork trips in the Monsoonal Tropics of Northern Australia and present data on the potential relationship between habitat (rocks or trees), morphology and speciation. Finally, I would also like to provide you with an overview of my plans for the coming two years, in which I want to extrapolate my approach and describe the evolutionary relationships between the Australian, African, Indonesian and Pacific taxa.

ACTHA's new Website DEVELOPED & MAINTAINED BY ANGUS KENNEDY

Snakes Alive! 2014 has come to a wrap and, as always, was a great success. It doesn't end here though; once the dust settles on our flagship event, ACTHA continues to actively pursue online and social media to promote an understanding and appreciation of Australian herpetofauna and the work of the Association year round.

The ACTHA website has been rebuilt on a new, more stable platform. The website remains one of our main points of contact with the public and we continue to get regular enquiries and significant visitor volume. You can view the new website at **http://actha.org.au/** Critical feedback and suggestions would be very welcome as the last of the content from the old website is put online - let us know what you think!

Some highlights:

http://actha.org.au/news.html

http://actha.org.au/snakes-alive.html

http://actha.org.au/research.html

Further, the ACT Herpetological Association Facebook page is being very well run by our young members
Alisdair Robertson and Beth Josey at http://facebook.com/actherpetologicalassociation. I want to thank them for their hard work and encourage you to check out the page, like it and share it with your friends. Alisdair and Beth have been busy posting new and original content and really selling ACTHA's work, particularly *Snakes Alive!*. Show them and the Association some support by promoting ACTHA on Facebook!

As always, if you have any suggestions or feedback on the work of the Association in the online arena, do not hesitate to let us know.

Wildlife Art @ Discovery

Forwarded through ACTHA's website

The art exhibition 'Wildlife Art @ Discovery' will be launched in Canberra at **6pm on 15 May 2014** and coincides with a three day symposium titled: *'Discover Wildlife: Art and Science*' (hosted by Wildlife and Botanical Artists in partnership with CSIRO). The exhibition will focus on threatened Australian fauna, and will include artworks from some of Australia's best wildlife artists. Exhibition dates are 16–31 May 2014, with the gallery open weekdays 9am-5pm, and from 11am-3pm on Saturdays. Artists from around Australia are invited to submit artworks for the exhibition, which should reflect on Australian wildlife and related conservation issues. See the WABA website *www.waba.net.au* for further information and how to enter.

The symposium 'Discover Wildlife: Art and Science' will be held over three days on 15-17 May 2014 and will highlight the contribution of Australian wildlife artists to Australian history, science and culture. A range of topics will be covered during the symposium: from indigenous art through to contemporary expressions of wildlife art, the links between art and science, wildlife conservation – advocacy and education through art, as well as discussions about innovation and ideas for the future of wildlife art in Australia. The symposium will feature some of Australia's most prominent artists, art historians, scientists and conservationists as speakers, and will include wildlife art demonstrations, art and science workshops, and fieldtrips to CSIRO wildlife scientific organisations. Further information about the Symposium will be available soon.

Please feel free to forward this information to your networks and/or advertise in your workplace or on your website.

Glenda Shelley
Vice-President
Wildlife and Botanical Artists Inc.

Frogwatch
Autumn 2014

Anke Maria Hoefer, Frogwatch Coordinator

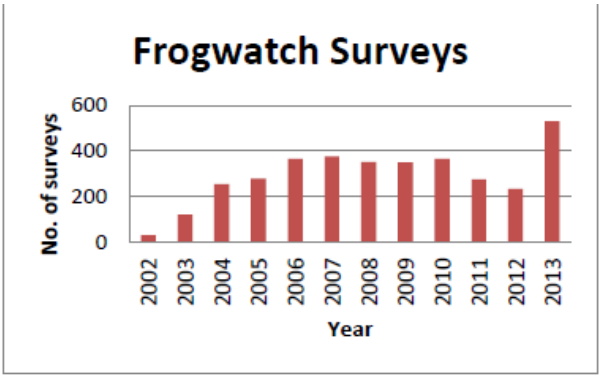
As most of you know, Frogwatch will run out of funding by the end of this year! To collect ideas and work on a strategy on how to secure the Frogwatch program well into the future, a brainstorming session was held earlier this month.

Some of the ideas brought forward included establishing a Friends of Frogwatch, running a Frogwatch Appeal, improved marketing for Frogwatch education and increasing online data availability. More ideas are urgently needed and would be gladly received!.

The Frogwatch 'nerve centre' is also in need of people power in four identified action groups:

- **corporate funding**
- **sponsorship/fundraising**
- **grant applications and**
- **web page improvement.**

Support is also sought in **graphic design**, **multimedia/social media**, **project management** and **marketing**. If you have any of this skills which would help Frogwatch achieve their goals please let Anke Maria know ASAP on 6278 3309, or by email: frogwatch@ginninderralandcare.org.au



The 2013 Frogwatch Census has been the biggest one ever, with over 500 surveys compared to just over 200 surveys in 2012. A fantastic effort!

Ongoing monitoring of frog watch sites

Thanks to everyone who has adopted a frog watch site for regular monitoring throughout the year. Great to see this group is growing slowly but surely!! Last year (in September 2013) the Arboretum Frogwatch group, led by Roger Hnatiuk, found *Neobatrachus sudelli* during their regular surveys at three out of four ponds. These were the first records of this species for the arboretum.

ACT Wildlife:
RESCUE REHABILITATE RELEASE

By Mandy Conway

Marg Peachey was ACTHA's guest speaker at our February 2014 meeting. ACT Wildlife, a relatively new organisation, is now responsible for the rescue, rehabilitation and subsequent release of injured, sick and orphaned native wildlife in Canberra. Reptiles are often amongst the casualties and Marg explained how ACTHA's recent Grant will help provide education materials for public awareness and carer training.

Marg started her presentation by highlighting the fact that all members of ACT Wildlife are volunteers, many of whom have been wildlife carers in former care organisations such as the RSPCA. Further orientation and training days will see more people come on board to begin what for many will be a lifelong passion.

ACT Wildlife works under the umbrella of the Animal Welfare Act, which is responsible for the legislation covering the neglect of native animals kept as pets, as well as the Nature Conservation Act. It also operates under a number of different codes of practice (COP), one of which is the Reptile COP nearing the legislative stage. Others include a Sale COP and Wildlife COP.

"There is a lot of ignorance in the community about reptiles and indeed wildlife in general," Marg said. "Carers often receive calls such as "There's a snake on my doorstep and it won't go away!" and subsequently find the 'snake' is in fact a lizard. This presents an opportunity to talk to people about our local reptiles which inhabit most gardens. Topics commonly include a reptile's yearly lifecycle, the torpor and active parts of the year, and how good reptiles are at keeping pests like snails and insects under control."

In some calls for advice, people have asked how they can keep their pet cat or dog safe from reptiles at certain times of the year. Providing shallow water containers and hide material such as half logs in the garden for reptiles to access will help keep them away from external doors while they seek water or shelter, thus avoiding where pets tend to linger. "Keeping pets safe in the home when reptiles are moving about in the warmer months is an even better." Marg, a strong supporter of 24 hour cat containment, recounted an annoying example of public ignorance. A person brought in a baby blue-tongued lizard which was seen to emerge from under a hot water tank before being caught by their cat. Another one, obviously a sibling, was brought in the next day. The person was advised to keep the cat indoors until the brood of blue-tongues had dispersed. "No, I don't want the cat inside all day and it's an outside cat anyway," was the reply. The third day produced another casualty. On the fourth day the person said "I think I'll keep the cat inside for a while."

"Wildlife carers receive injured animals from all corners of our Territory and every interaction with a member of the public is an education opportunity." Marg said. "New carers are also able to seek advice from mentors who have species expertise if they need to. Treating and caring for wildlife such as our common reptiles is an ongoing learning experience, where communication with informed species relevant groups, such as ACTHA for example, can make a big difference."

ACT Wildlife

Vision

The welfare and biodiversity of native wildlife in the ACT is protected and maintained.

Mission Statement

The purpose of ACT Wildlife is to:

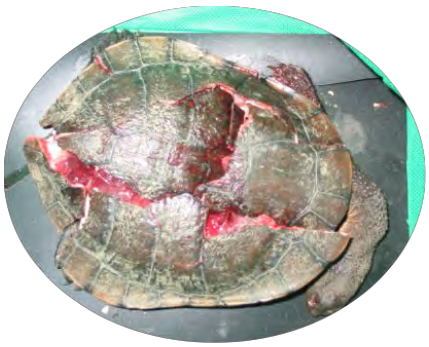
- Rescue, rehabilitate and release injured, sick and orphaned native wildlife.
- Educate the public about sharing the urban interface with native wildlife.
- Provide professional training to carers to ensure a high standard of welfare for wildlife in care.

(ACT Wildlife, cont'd...)

Injured reptiles commonly seen

Eastern Long-necked Turtle

Turtles with cracked shells are commonly seen by carers and are usually the result of car strikes. People just don't know what to do or where to go with injured wildlife like turtles. Marg showed a picture of a turtle with its intestines hanging out during her presentation: the finder thought Marg could just pushed the intestine back in and the turtle would be all right. Explaining to a well-meaning member of the public that euthanasia is far better than the animal dying slowly somewhere is a task every wildlife carer deals with on a daily basis.



Treatments for damaged turtle shells have come a long way over the years. Where once a shell would have been covered with fibreglass and the turtle released, it is now known that little or no healing of the tissue takes place under something like fibreglass. Cracked shells today are initially held together with something like masking tape before being treated as open wounds, with various clips used to hold the shell together while it mends. Human Op site products are successfully used on smaller cracks, or fractures and holes in the shell.

Blue-tongued Lizards

Many injured blue-tongued lizards are found in suburban backyards as a direct result of an attack by the occupant's pet dog. Similarly, smaller skinks are preyed upon by pet cats. Puncture marks on opposing sides of the body are a good indication of a pet attack.

Severely damaged spines and lost tails are just some of the injuries seen, along with life-threatening infections. To survive an attack, injured lizards need to receive antibiotics within 24 hours.

Gardening accidents also occur in the suburban backyard. Whipper-snippers, and pick or shovel injuries are common, with injured lizards taking weeks to recover in a wildlife carer's care.

***Above**: a Shingle-back Lizard who was virtually scalped by a lawnmower. The area circled indicates scale regrowth after 5 months in care.*

***Below**: a Blue-tongued Lizard with facial injuries caused by a whipper-snipper. It was euthanased.*

***Right**: a Blue-tongued Lizard that was hit by a shovel. It didn't regain the use of its hind legs and was euthanased.*

Displaced reptiles are also encountered

"A young python was handed in to the RSPCA once. A teenager had kept it under his bed in a pillowcase for a long time before his mother discovered it. She brought it in, where it was examined and found to be in very poor condition, with pneumonia. It recovered and is now on display at Tidbinbilla. We suspect he got it from a mate who didn't want it anymore."

Pet reptiles that have either escaped or been intentionally released into surrounding bushland do come into care. They are easily identified by their demeanour, handle-ability and often poor condition. "Some people have no idea what is involved in keeping reptiles as pets. They want to enter the reptile keeping hobby and often do so with little or no adequate information on what is involved in either keeping them or taking into account their longitivity." Marg said. "The number one reptile species on most people's shopping list is

(ACT Wildlife, cont'd...)

very young turtles. Too many little turtles present as lethargic, with very soft shells. Their diets obviously lacked calcium as well as access to natural sunlight (which provides vitamin D3 to enable calcium to be metabolised).

There was some discussion about the provision of care sheets to new and inexperienced pet reptile owners. A new Sale Code of Practice is now in effect in the Territory and applies to pet shop owners as well as private breeders or keepers who either sell or give-away animals, even via the Internet. This is to ensure all, or at least help to ensure, people are fully informed when they purchase or receive an animal as a pet.

Watching for disease

Wildlife carers see a lot of wild animals at close hand and are often the first people who can potentially notice the emergence of any new diseases or flare-ups, particularly zoonotic diseases. When it comes to birds, for example, there are indicators for bird flu which carer's within wildlife groups could bring to the attention of authorities sooner rather than later, saving valuable time and resources. Many wild animal populations have been known to carry and transmit disease, although we are quite lucky that in Australia we are relatively isolated from many fauna migrations.

The spread of species specific disease is also something that carers want to avoid. Banana box frogs for example, which arrive at our local supermarkets, are no longer returned to their home State. The potential spread of the chytrid fungus means that all of these displaced frogs are either euthanased or kept permanently in private collections. Advances in disease identification has meant that returning most animals back into their native habitat is risky and unadvisable.

Marg finished her presentation by thanking ACTHA for its support by way of a recent Grant, which will be used to produce reptile training materials for wildlife carers as well as pamphlets aimed at the general public. Marg hopes to work closely with ACTHA to identify gaps in the information dissemination process, which will include linking our respective Websites.

***Above**: a surrendered Blue-tongued Lizard showing classic signs of Metabolic Bone Disease from inadequate Calcium in the diet.*
***Below**: a juvenile and five baby turtles (averaging two months of age) which presented to a vet surgery, all in one week. All had very soft shells, were underweight, and died within days of each other.*

*ACTHA member **Janet Wild** sent in the images that appear on this page; not bad! (although I do hope that whoever took the pic below managed to remove the can... Ed.)*

Scientists collect goanna sperm in a bid to create gene bank to save species from extinction

ABC News, 19 January 2014

***Above**: Scientists say the goanna is facing a population decline in WA due to cane toads. Image: Matt Bins*

For the first time in Australia, a team of scientists attempting to create a gene bank have successfully collected sperm from a goanna.

The move is part of a wider project to preserve the genetics of animals facing population decline or extinction in the West Australian Kimberley, due to cane toads.

Researchers collected the sperm using a technique called electro ejaculation, which until now has only been performed on reptiles in the US.

The University of Newcastle's Simon Clulow says it is the beginning of the "Kimberley Ark".

"For the first time, anywhere in Australia and only the second in the world, we've managed to obtain sperm samples from a reptile species, which is the beginning of our gene bank known as the Kimberley Ark," he said.

He says it was an interesting experience.

"All lizards and snakes actually have two penises known as hemipenes, so we've got a bit to play with there," he said.

Mr Clulow says gene banking is needed to mitigate the impacts of cane toad migration into the Kimberley region of Western Australia.

"Goannas decline by up to 96 per cent and quolls can go locally extinct so the point is preserve that diversity and then actually try to bring that diversity back after declines happen," he said.

The next challenge is to find a way to store the samples indefinitely, so they can be used to "re-create" species if they go extinct.

Pic: Scientists say the goanna is facing a population decline in WA due to cane toads, image Matt Bins

It's a snake-eat-snake world!

Ben Westcott and Fleta Page, The Canberra Times, 12 January 2014

Gavin Fletcher of Bonython got quite a surprise when the "ball of rope rolling around" on a walking track turned out to be two of Australia's most venomous snakes locked in a deadly duel.

It was a warm evening last week and he had taken his seven-year-old son, Jack, fishing at Stranger Pond when they stumbled upon a brown snake eating a red-bellied black snake.

"It was just on the track, we'd been fishing down there for 15 or 20 minutes and we decided to change spots … when we turned around he was right behind us," he said.

"I didn't realise it was snakes, it was Jack who said 'is that a snake over there' … he's got a bit of a fascination with snakes – we both do – so he's always on the lookout."

They watched on as the brown snake, which Mr Fletcher estimated to be about five-feet long, overpowered then ate the much smaller red-bellied black snake.

"The red-bellied black was obviously trying to get out and get away, but I think once the venom took hold he stopped wriggling and that was it for him – it was just a matter of time before he got eaten.

Antony Pezzella, owner of the Gold Creek Canberra Reptile Zoo, said a snake eating another snake was not all that uncommon, despite reptiles' usual preference for mammals.

"Most of the Australian snakes are known to eat reptiles if they get the opportunity," he said.

"The red bellies are more likely to be eating the browns; the red bellies normally eat frogs as a specialty, and so the majority of the time you would find the red belly would eat the brown snake but … if the brown is a good deal bigger than the red-belly, there's a good chance he'll try and eat him."

Canberra Nature Park North District Senior Ranger Nina Bruns said on warm days snakes tended to seek shade and water like any animal, which can spell trouble for Canberrans heading to water holes or natural pools.

"People need to be very vigilant in the summer months regarding snakes, in particular the bush capital of Canberra," she said.

Ms Bruns urged ACT residents heading to outdoor swimming spots in the territory to watch out for overgrown areas and make sure they can see around themselves.

"Snakes might bask in the sun but on really, really hot days they seek shelter like everyone else so they might be in the grassy areas and they might go for a swim themselves," she said.

Adam Samios of Bruce found that out the hard way; he was hospitalised overnight after being bitten by a snake while fishing at Lake Ginninderra.

"I stepped back and felt a scratch on my leg. I looked down and there was red belly black snake. I took myself back to hospital and I spent the rest of the day and the next day there.

Ms Bruns warned snakes can be found throughout the suburbs of Canberra, particularly near houses with bushy native gardens or frog ponds, but she said there was still only a slim chance that Canberrans would actually encounter a snake.

"They're very shy animals. People just need to be aware that they could be around," she said.

"Don't provoke snakes, don't try and interfere with them in any way because that's usually when people are bitten; when they're trying to kill them or move them along. They just need to leave them well alone."

In the unlikely event that you or someone you know is bitten by a snake, Ms Bruns said the most important thing is that you remain still.

"The nearest person to them should call an ambulance and they should find a cool place to lay down and stay still. Staying still is of the utmost importance," she said. "There's no need to identify the snake either. Don't wash the wound."

***Above**: A Brown Snake starts to devour a Red-bellied Black Snake…. Gavin Fletcher took this photo at Stranger Pond in Bonython*

The social side of lizards

The University of Sydney, 7 Feb 2014, Sciencealert

One of the first studies conducted on young reptiles reared without contact with their siblings is challenging the assumption that only mammals and birds are shaped by social interactions.

"Our results demonstrate that rearing these animals in different environments strongly affects their social development," said Cissy Ballen, a PhD candidate in the University of Sydney's School of Biological Sciences and lead author of the paper published in *Animal Behaviour*.

"These chameleons catch insects using a 'ballistic' rapid fire tongue movement and use dramatic colour changes to signal dominance. The lizards raised in isolation were more submissive, were slower at attacking certain food and displayed darker and duller colours than those raised with their siblings."

Most people know that to rear a baby on its own would have devastating consequences for its development. Until very recently, scientists have believed that only the 'social' species, such as birds and mammals, were disadvantaged by being reared in isolation.

It has been assumed that reptiles, as 'lower' animals, are non-social, so their behaviour is determined by their genes, not by their interactions with members of the same species.

The research was conducted using young veiled chameleons (*Chamaeleo calyptratus*), large tree-dwelling lizards native to Yemen and Saudi

Arabia that are popular as pets and in zoos. While their mother usually leaves after giving birth, they often encounter their brothers and sisters as they grow up.

The chameleons were raised alone or in groups of four.

In addition to their slower food attack times and duller colours when young isolated chameleons had contact with siblings, they fled and curled into balls. In contrast, those reared in groups interacted and exhibited their colours in a competitive display.

"Young chameleons, like many reptiles, often engage in intense combat with each other. The absence of this opportunity appears to slow the development of behaviours that help the lizard intimidate rivals and succeed in acquiring food."

Early research assumed that reptiles' behavioural traits were highly stereotyped and fixed, differing between species but not changing in response to the conditions that an individual experienced during its lifetime. However, there is emerging evidence of complex social systems among some lizards, including the ability to solve cognitive tasks, exhibit social learning and demonstrate specific variations in mating behaviour.

"The idea of lizards as machine-like creatures who do not respond to local conditions is being replaced by a new appreciation of the subtlety and flexibility of reptile behaviour as influenced by their local environment and genetic factors," said Ballen.

"Future research could explore the possibility that some reptiles are far more responsive to social cues than we expect.

"Our results also have obvious implications for the captive rearing of reptiles. These animals are commonly raised by zoos, private keepers and pet owners in social isolation, under the assumption that social cues are irrelevant to their development. Our results call that into question and suggest that for many reptiles, an environment rich in social interaction may provide important benefits for their wellbeing."

'Affordable housing' for reptiles

Sciencealert, NERP, 11 Feb 2014

Image above: Reptiles can help restore woodland ecosystems, Shelley Kirby/Shutterstock

Naturally regrowing woodlands in the subtropics can help to reduce declines in Australia's reptiles, scientists have proposed.

Research at the National Environmental Research Program's (NERP) Environmental Decisions Hub has found that woodlands in the Australian subtropics can be restored as a haven for native reptiles if cleared areas are left to regrow.

In turn, reptiles such as skinks, dragons, and geckos help restore the woodland ecosystems by providing links in the food chain.

Regrowth can deliver major environmental benefits to subtropical areas in New South Wales, Victoria and the Northern Territory, as well as international regions such as South America," says Professor Clive McAlpine of NERP and The University of Queensland (UQ). "But, in Australia, Queensland has the best opportunity to restore its biodiversity because it has 700,000 hectares of land that are suitable for regrowth."

Researcher Melissa Bruton of UQ explains that by 2000, nearly half of Queensland's regional ecosystems had lost more than 70 per cent of their original area due to extensive land clearing over the previous 150 years. In 2004, the State established laws that significantly reduced clearing activities to protect its threatened ecosystems.

"Subtropical areas that were previously cleared have since been abandoned and left to regrow," Ms Bruton explains.

To find out whether regrowth woodlands can help restore biodiversity, the NERP researchers surveyed and compared reptile communities in cleared, regrowth and intact – uncultivated – woodlands in Queensland's Brigalow Belt Bioregion.

"We found that reptile communities in the regrowth woodlands were indistinguishable from their corresponding communities in intact woodlands," she says. "There was no difference in reptile diversity, species dominance and the composition of reptile communities in regrowth and intact woodlands.

We were surprised by the results because of how 'young' these regrowth woodlands were. They were between 10 and 23 years old, with the trees only half the height of those in the remnant/intact woodlands. This means regrowth doesn't have to be 'old' to provide high quality habitat for reptiles."

Prof. McAlpine explains that the quick re-colonisation is caused by the woodlands' native plants – eucalypts (gum trees) and acacias (wattles). "These plants dominate the regrowth areas, and because they naturally send up shoots from roots left in the ground, the cleared sites quickly regrow and become homes for the reptiles."

"This shows that we don't have to spend millions of dollars on replanting trees to restore biodiversity," Prof. McAlpine says.

For subtropical woodlands, simply leaving cleared lands to regrow offers quick, cost-effective and large scale opportunities to reduce the biodiversity declines caused by the over-enthusiastic clearing of vegetation in the past."

"Our study reveals that regrowth areas that are adjacent to remnant woodlands should be prioritised for protection because they provide high quality habitat for reptiles," Ms Bruton says. "However, conservation of existing woodlands must always be considered a higher priority."

Snake vs crocodile

By Blythe Moore with Emma Cillekens, ABC North West, 4 March 2014

Photographers have captured a dramatic fight to the death between a snake and a crocodile at Lake Moondarra near Mount Isa in north-west Queensland.

Marvin Muller snapped this picture of the final moments of the epic wrestling match. The entire battle took about four hours and attracted the attention of several people with cameras at Lake Moondarra. "Pretty cool experience, not something you think you're going to see but I guess up in Mount Isa in the outback you see some pretty cool things," Mr Muller said.

Tiffany Corlis took this pic. "[The crocodile] was fighting at the start, it was trying to keep its head out of of water and survive. But as the morning progressed you could tell both of them were getting a little weaker as the struggle was going on, finally the croc sort of gave in. "She says the sight became even more interesting once the snake had finished eating. "You could see the croc in the snake's belly which I think was probably the more remarkable thing," she said. You could actually see its legs and its scales and everything..."

Ed. You can also see this article on our Website: http://www.actha.org.au/news.html

ACTHA's next meeting

Tuesday, 15 April 2014

Mozes Blom, a PhD student at ANU's Moritz Lab, will be our guest speaker at this month's meeting.

"I will go through various aspects of my research and in particular will highlight three of my thesis components. Firstly, I will present and explain our approach in resolving the phylogenetic tree for all currently named Australian *Cryptoblepharus* species. Secondly, I will take you through some of our recent fieldwork trips in the Monsoonal Tropics of Northern Australia and present data on the potential relationship between habitat (rocks or trees), morphology and speciation. Finally, I would also like to provide you with an overview of my plans for the coming two years, in which I want to extrapolate my approach and describe the evolutionary relationships between the Australian, African, Indonesian and Pacific taxa.

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