

Discovering Elapidae

by Sue Monfries

serpens bestia [Latin] crawling beast

I remember viewing the reptile exhibit of the Detroit Zoo shortly before coming to Australia. Essential 'snake facts' reminded me that the greatest population and variety of poisonous snakes on earth could be found in Australia. OK...let's rethink this plan. Sure, we have bears and mountain lions around the place, but I've managed to live a relatively active outdoor life for 35 years without so much as a claw mark.

My first snake encounter occurred on a walk near Mt. Compass, shortly after arriving in Australia. I'd been walking since the start of the season, but this was my first real 'bush' walk, as the early term walks were held in park lands around the city. I was at the front with two other women, having just mentioned that the tall grass on either side of the track would be perfect for snakes to be lurking. Their low laughter and dismissive comments were still crisp in the air when my next half-step was filled with a rapidly moving black glistening form. It seemed to take forever to fully cross my path, flowing like poured oil. The next few seconds are a bit of a blur. My chest pounding, not yet fully breathing, I launched myself skyward and tore off straight ahead, my feet touching the ground as lightly as a Jacana on waterlilies. I didn't quite know where I was going, but absolutely certain that this thing was right behind me. I finally stopped when I came to a gravel road, ensuring to position myself directly in the centre providing a clear equal radius of comfort on all sides. Several minutes passed. Where were the others? Surely something terrible has happened back there. My concerns were replaced by embarrassment as the approaching voices assured me that all had enjoyed my lively performance. Legend has it that the snake went back to his people, reporting "I think I may have just seen a Canadian, but I can't be sure - it was moving pretty quick".

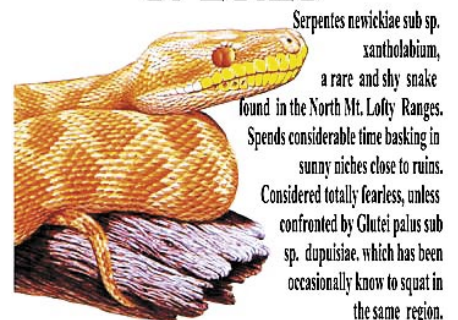
Still in my early walking days, Julian and I had a day out walking through Kyeema. Once again I was at the front, walking along a single file, quite overgrown track. I was a bit snake nervous, but up ahead could see that the track opened to a sunny low-grassed area. As I broke into the open, quite like stepping on a rake a straight black figure shot up a few meters in front of me. In a split second I was behind Julian, having climbed his back in search of higher ground. Half clinging to his pack, desperately trying to keep my feet in the air, I watched over Julian's shoulder as this upright ophidian weaved in front of us. It seemed to me that Julian was far too calm and controlled, as this incubus (since determined to be a black tiger snake) gently melted to the ground and slipped off in another direction.

A few years ago Colin Edwards led us on an overnight walk through the Newickie Creek area. It was last the few kilometers on the last day. Trees and bush were at a premium since we left the creek, so my full bladder was relieved to see that we were having a short stop at a ruin along the way. There was just one leafless bush behind the ruin, clearly my only choice for a private moment. Concerned that I may be on transparent display behind this sparse shelter, I circled the far perimeter, crouching down to have a good look at the porosity of the branches.

Satisfied with the 'if I can't see them, they can't see me' rule, I swung comfortably close to the bush and peeled down clothing. In a half-crouch, endeavouring to steady myself on a branch, I was suddenly face to face (so to speak) with an enormous brown snake, draped seductively on the dark dry branches of the bush. Immediately I was aware that my breathing stopped, the only sound a deep thudding from the inside of my chest. Phrases like 'lightning quick' and 'coiled to strike' flashed through my mind. Knees bent, shorts at half mast, I took slow sideways steps. Reflecting on this now, I recall that I was looking at a very beautiful creature- deep golden brown, smooth and powerful with light yellow lips. We never lost eye contact as I safely backed away. Why didn't it strike? Could it be that I posed no threat, therefore I was allowed to pass? Perhaps the poor fellow was simply blinded by the iridescent glow of my right butt cheek. Either way, I felt blessed. Curiously, my bladder matter was no longer an issue as I was quite happy to finish the walk without another break.

Sometime last year, Bob Randall led a few of us on a nice walk through Parra Wirra. Once again, I was at the front, with Bob immediately behind me. About to cross a small creek, I spotted a sizeable black

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ENDANGERED SPECIES



NEWICKIE CREEK YELLOW LIPPED PYTHON

*T-shirt made up for Sue by
husband Julian*

serpent on the path ahead. My initial reaction was surprisingly controlled, as I froze to the spot. For a short moment, it seemed as if the snake was indecisive as to where it would slither, when instantly it faced us and raced in our direction. As I perched myself safely on Bob's back, I watched from his shoulder viewing area as the long dark form disappeared into a log about two meters in front of us. Clearly I was honing my skills as a back climber, but climbing down after the fact never fails to be a mortifying experience.

Easter 2001 found us in the most heavenly Grampians. The walk from Jimmy Creek, across the Major Mitchell Plateau, through Boundary Gap and up to Mt. William is absolutely spectacular. We had to make an early start to fit it all into one day. I was stoked. It was a glorious morning with nearly horizontal rays of sunshine managing to pierce the lush bush as we began the long steady climb to the plateau. I led the way (will I ever learn?) bounding from rock to rock enjoying the crisp cool morning air. Does it ever get any better than this? Shattering my trance, I heard a pained gasp from the track behind me. I raced back to find Bob stopped on the track, a writhing snake immediately in front of him. Without realising what I had done, I had somehow stepped on this poor creature, flattening it just behind the head. I was overcome with remorse as I watched the crippled open mouth search through the air for relief. I chose to believe Bob when he decided that the injury wasn't so severe as to not expect a full recovery, although he didn't rule out a killer headache. David had now caught up to us and it was decided that the safest course of action would be to move the poor wounded thing off the track. Carefully manoeuvring two sticks, David and Bob worked together to lift my flat headed friend off the ground, placing him in bushes away from the track. I modified my position in the group for the remainder of the walk, selecting the post of back-marker. Although the remainder of the walk continued to be wonderfully satisfying and incredibly beautiful, I thought about the little fellow throughout the day. He was most likely enjoying the morning just as much as I was, looking forward to a relaxing day under a rock. Little did he suspect the Scarpa treatment.

My latest adventure was a few weeks ago at Thomas Hill. I was not alone at the front this time, joined instead by Colin, Cliff and Eve spread in line across a fire track. The track graded down around a sharp bend, when Colin suddenly spun vertically through the air to avoid putting his weight down on a large brown snake. Cliff ran backwards out of harms way, opening the circle to reveal the flapping serpent struggling to launch itself up the low embankment into the tall grass. Twice it leaped and twice it fell, exposing white belly scales as it wriggled madly in front of us. It was then that I took notice of Eve, my own right hand clasped tightly around her left wrist, preventing her from deciding any survival action of her own. Was I trying to protect my friend, or was I too afraid to be left alone? Perhaps instinctively I knew that, although her body was that of a trained athlete, her decidedly feminine frame might not support my full weight if I attempted the climb. The third leap attempted by the snake was successful, and as we watched it disappear into the yellow grass I relaxed my grip, finally releasing my prisoner. I'm hoping that this is one of those things that we'll laugh about one day...

I've now been bushwalking regularly in Australia for eleven years. I've certainly lost that Canadian hysteria and innocence and have decided that snakes - preferably from a safe distance - are beautiful creatures that play an important role and definitely belong in the Australian bush. But alas, I'm nobody's hero.

Sue Monfries