



# Snakes Alive!

By Phil Tripp with photography by Animax

This is being written on New Year's Eve day at our house in Coffs Harbour where we are with our two dogs, pair of parrots and one new member of the pet household. A three metre diamond carpet python has joined our family but we won't be taking her back to Sydney, and I can assure you, we won't be letting her get close to the birds or even the dogs.

We know the snake's a she because we discovered her outside our house under a heap of cardboard wrapped around a clutch of about 20 eggs. We're glad to have her here as she'll keep the mouse and rat population in check as will her babies when they hatch and spread around the property staking their turf.

Petula (Pet for short) is a magnificent specimen, as big around as a forearm in her midsection and though she normally wouldn't be feeding while incubating her eggs for 6-8 weeks, we can attest to her hunger and efficiency at dispatching the rats, mice and two guinea pigs we bought for her from the local pet stores. And yes, we did subdue the animals to grogginess by chilling them prior to being dispatched.

It's an amazing thing to watch a reptile consume live food and I can understand why people would want to keep them as pets in captivity. In the course of learning more about this type of snake, I met a broad range of reptile enthusiasts including Steve McEwen, the operator of a herp show in Coffs, the operators of two different pet shops in town—old school and new age—as well as the owner of a newly opened reptile accessories store called Lounge Lizards. I was also emailed with advice by the team at Colourful Critters who make enclosures. Plus I consulted my avian and critter vet Alex Rosenwax with questions from afar.

I'd owned an iguana 25 years ago and had to give her up when I moved to Australia along with the female tarantula spider. As a youngster, I used to play with harmless garter snakes and lizards and on moving to Australia, was fascinated by the new sights of goannas, blue tongue lizard and 'land mullets'. It's made it easy for me to understand why people get a fascination with these life forms and want to keep them as pets. I can also understand why many pet shops want the law changed so they can serve this market.

It takes a special person with a lot of knowledge and care to house and maintain a reptile or amphibian. At present, most wildlife are prohibited as pets and one may only acquire one if a special license is obtained and this only applies to limited breeds. You have to take a course in care to apply for the license and can only be granted one by a certified instructor. Many people join herp societies or clubs to do this.

Some reptiles are easier to keep than others—the bearded dragon for instance—while snakes and larger more exotic reptiles require a closely monitored and controlled environment of light, heat, humidity and a careful schedule of feeding and maintenance. This includes regular vet checks and a hefty knowledge of reptilian behaviour and potential problems.

Clearly, reptiles are not for everyone. And the rules that are in place preventing the sale of reptiles by pet retailers appear to be unfair when compared to other states where the trade is more open. You can easily buy a reptile by mail from South Australia for example and have it shipped overnight. But you can't walk into a pet store and take your pick.

And this is a good thing in many ways. Too often, people who buy pets on impulse get the wrong breed or species for their lifestyle whether it's dog, cat or other pet. Far too often, it's a certain brand of mongrel

who sees a lizard or snake as an extension of their ego and image without any idea of the care and maintenance involved—the same type of lughead who would procure a pit bull or dangerous breed of dog to make them look tougher. I know it's a cliché, but I've seen it happen time and again.

There are also the sorts of people we call 'collectors' who go beyond enthusiasm and proper animal husbandry and turn into keepers of mass amounts of wildlife and exotics. These are the dangerous owners who often take on venomous creatures in the escalating and misdirected desire to have more variety and more risk.

When Lisa and I were in the US for a pet products convention in California, we had the opportunity to check out one of the largest reptile and amphibian retailers in the country—East Bay Vivarium in Berkeley [www.eastbayvivarium.com](http://www.eastbayvivarium.com)—which has an amazing variety of livestock and an equally varied clientele. The reptiles and amphibians are scrupulously maintained in large attractive housing, the amount of information available is matched by an amazing array of products and the staff is exceptional in their caring and knowledgeable nature.

The strongest point of the store is that they are very selective as to who they sell to. They practically grill potential buyers and often refuse to sell to those they consider lack the compassion and care or are simply trying to get a fashion item or status symbol rather than a living creature that needs extensive care.

The downside of this trade though is that prices are very cheap. Reptiles have been bred for decades in the US while not allowed to be here. Therefore, there is a greater volume of animals, larger range of exotics that are available for alarmingly low prices—think an anaconda for \$400 or a frill neck lizard for \$30. The carpet python in the yard would be only \$150 there and an albino Burmese python is \$225. You'll see what I mean when you go to the price list on their site.

We were asked by the Pet Industry Association of Australia to get behind their campaign to have the laws in NSW changed to allow pet shops to sell reptiles, which is currently prohibited. They point to the trade in illegal reptiles from market stalls, the backs of cars at swap meets, through ads in the Trading Post and other media as well as the illicit trade in prohibited exotics smuggled or bred in Australia and sold on the black market.

It didn't take much thought to stack reasons on both sides of the argument and decide not to support this move. And now having experienced a wild snake in nature, I'm even more committed to not allowing the sale of wildlife to consumers in such an easy manner as through ordinary pet livestock retailers.

Reptiles aren't dogs or cats, they're not domesticated. Like birds, they're often one step from the wild life they came from and have basic instincts of the wild that are not bred out of them. I know! I copped a bleeding bite when handling Petula after we had several sessions to acclimate to each other when a sudden noise scared her out of her familiarity with me. I'd become a threat to her and her eggs while we were engaged only a few metres from the nest during one of her sunning periods.

Aside from somewhat complex care and feeding that is beyond the abilities of most potential pet owners as well as the appropriate large environment when housed, reptiles aren't the sort of pet you can drop off at a kennel or cattery when you want to take off on a weekend or extended holiday. And unlike dogs, cats, birds or even bunnies, they can't voice pain or distress and are easily killed by accident, most often when let loose in the house. I know. A friend of mine 'lost' his boa constrictor after it escaped from its enclosure and was sat upon while in the springs of a couch where it was hiding.

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I had dinner with Sarah, owner of Brontosaurus Pets in Coffs and related my conundrum about the affection and fascination I had for Petula with my doubts about human ownership of exotic pets. She agreed even though she sells livestock in her store. "Just last week, some people brought in this gorgeous frog they had found in the bush and were planning to drive it back to Sydney to put in a fish tank. They had no idea, the poor creature was already dehydrated and heart racing with no chance to live. We also see people coming in who have found a python or reptile in their yard and immediately want to get a tank, a book and some food, thinking they can become instant experts without planning."

I encountered Steve McEwen while driving around town in his brightly branded Reptile World vehicle and called him for some advice on how best to preserve the outdoor environment around Petula's nest and not disturb her gestation. He's an amazing fellow and has a true love for his snakes and reptiles. He's also a registered breeder. His view of the potential sale of them as pets was balanced.

"There are people who are very suited to care for—I don't like to use the word 'own'—a basic reptile, but most people never take the time, advance studies and sheer work necessary to properly care for them." Steve shared. "But there are a lot of people whose temperament and skills are unsuitable for wildlife. And although there is a terrific amount of illegal trade, selling reptiles in pet shops is not going to stop it."

I've been to most pet stores in the Sydney region over the past two years we've published Urban Animal and I'm not confident in most of them being able to service and sell this specialist pet. It's far too often that we see ignorant teenagers running stores in their owners' or managers' absence giving bad advice, unknowledgable information or just plain lying about the dogs, cats and other livestock they sell. Even if the owner, manager or a senior staffer is licensed and trained, that is not going to necessarily filter down to the kids on the floor.

I've heard the arguments from the other side. They can easily be bought out of the back of a car, at a market stall, from interstate suppliers by mail or from local breeders and by regulating the trade, this illicit trade will be stopped. It won't. There will always be an illegal trade in exotic wildlife because of human nature and it's better not to let the genie out of the bottle wholesale, much less retail.

The former PIAA exec who implored me in 2006 to accept trade in reptiles at retail here pointed to other states where it's done and he wasn't exactly able to counter the reply that those same states allow the sale of drug paraphernalia from stores—bongs, crack pipes, ice pipes, and other bogus products including scales and hydroponic equipment. And that hasn't negatively impacted the drug trade either.

But the final telling argument that sealed it for us to deny the PIAA support for sale of reptiles is the simple fact that they have an 'Accredited Retailer' scheme that is a Gold Standard of store that they certify as meeting the highest standards of livestock care and sale among other criteria. At present, it's impotent and not in pace with the times.

The problem is that they have not certified a new store since about October 2004 when we started this magazine, there are only a handful of accredited stores and it would appear that none of these have really been reinspected since they were certified. Though the PIAA have advertised this Gold Standard in magazines, it has seen well-publicised problems with some of these stores—and some that claim to be accredited but were in fact not—and in some case, the accreditation was taken away.

In many cases in the past, the certification was done by people who had no real training for this, reps who are selling product to the stores in some instances, and I've not seen the kind of credible enforcement on standards that give me the confidence to support the PIAA's current, highly advertised and marketed accreditation. Especially since it's unlikely that they will have in place any new certifications, by their own admission, in the second quarter of 2007.

Currently retailers can sell products and accessories for reptiles and can also conduct classes on care and to secure certification for ownership. This is a good thing. And we're also seeing new levels of reptile product suppliers with enclosures that are humane, advice that is relevant and a whole new approach to reptile care, not collections.

There is a balance that can be found. The laws in place now aren't perfect but they don't need to be overturned simply for a commercial imperative. I'm already troubled with the conditions I've seen in some substandard stores for captive livestock, but I'm also heartened by the incredible care and attention in more evolved pet shops where display, feeding, exercise, stimulation, enrichment and health are primary goals.



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Just as banning the sale of dogs, cats, birds and fish in pet shops will not stop abandoned pets and abuse, I can't support the sale of more complex (or simple depending on how you look at it) life forms as a form of entertainment display and macho posturing.

I was happy to leave Petula in the paddock when we left Coffs a month after I started this article, which is where she belongs. She has a purpose there, my house is rat free and mice are few on the ground. I went to great lengths to protect her nest and even freaked out when I found four ticks on her head, but realised nature takes care of these things and not to treat it. Though I would have loved to have her come home to Sydney, it's an unnatural environment, even for humans!

But I did get a memento. When the termite inspector went into the roof on an annual check, after seeing Petula in her nest, he brought down a three metre complete shed skin for me to take back home. It's the only form of reptile I can take care of—no feeding, no care and no case.



We don't lick it,  
we kick it!



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Photo by Animax