



The Lizard of Oz

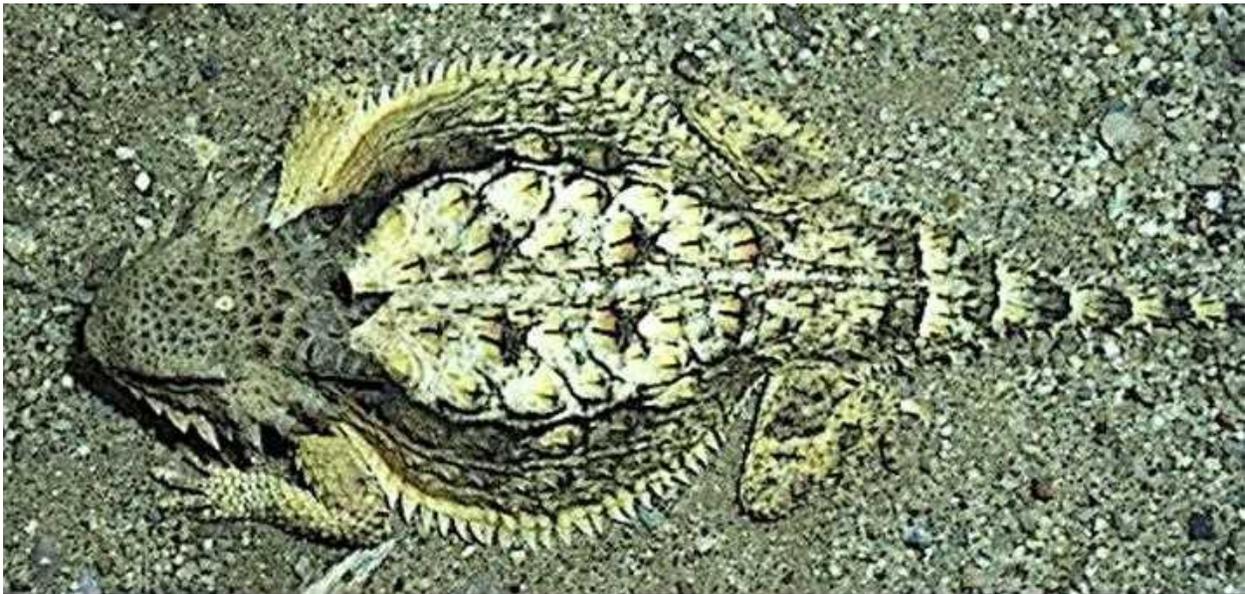
An Australian Herp Fantasy

Robert L. Bezy

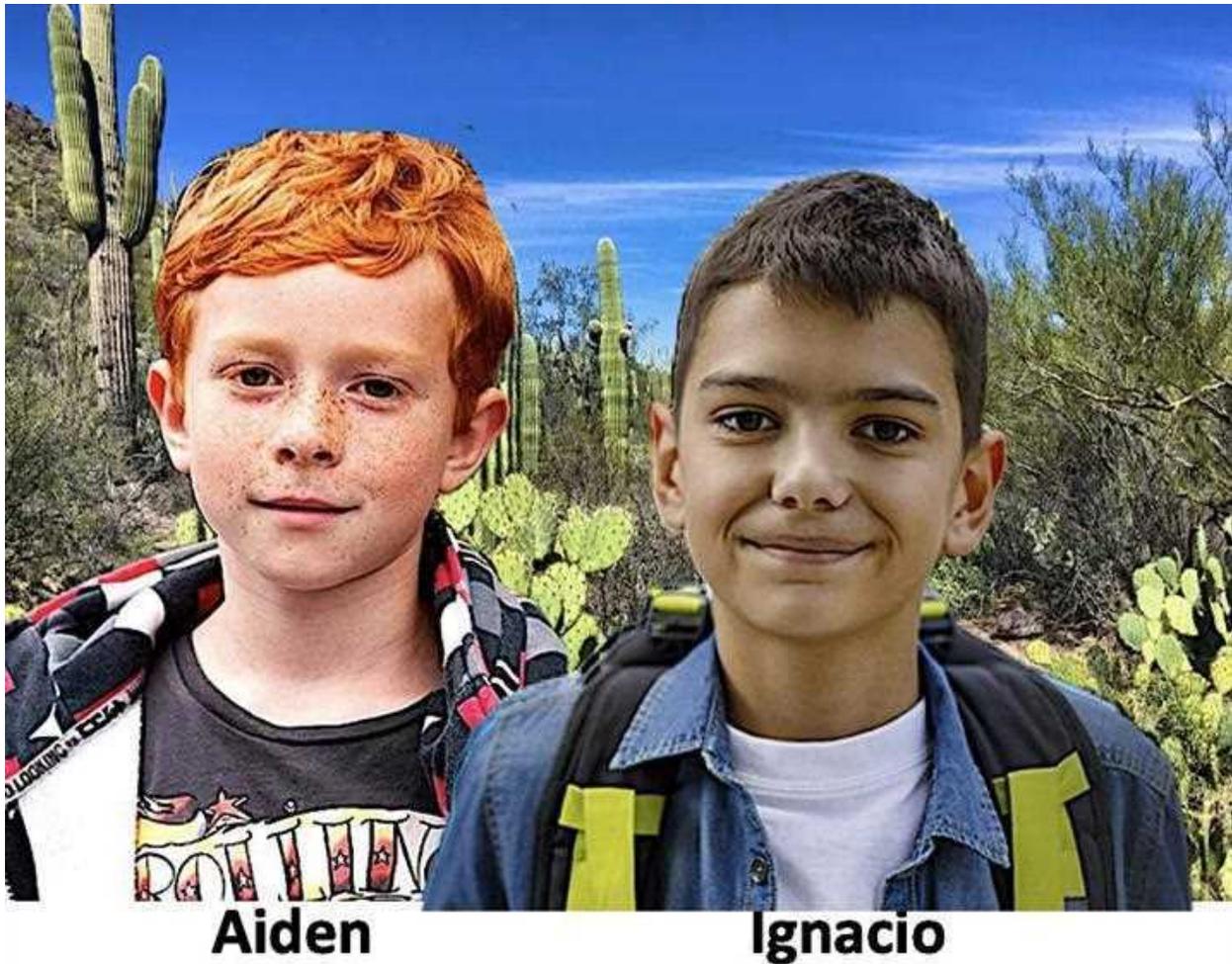
The Lizard of Oz
An Australian Herp Fantasy
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1. I was a lonely kid and wished very much that I had a brother, but my parents were highly engaged academics and felt that one child was all they wanted to have. So I befriended the many lizards that lived in my Sonoran Desert neighborhood and they became my brothers. I spent my days roaming the desert alone, stalking and catching the lizards with the noose on my telescoping fishing rod, and I would stay up at night reading herpetology books.

Things changed for the better when I turned 13 and Ignacio moved into the neighborhood. He quickly became my constant bro and together we explored the desert chasing lizards and watching the *Phrynosoma solare* (Regal Horned) snapping up *Pogonomyrmex* ants in the morning sun. He would often sleep over at my house. We would lay on the bed late into the night looking at the pictures in my books and I liked the bro feelings that swept over me when he held his head close to mine. We shared names, as Ignacio and Aiden denote fire in Spanish and Gaelic, respectively.



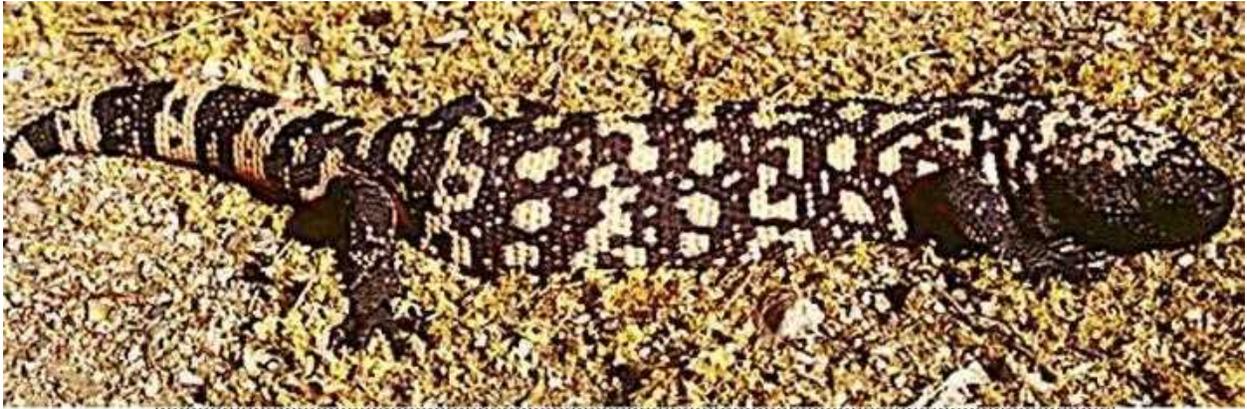
***Phrynosoma solare* by Kathryn Bolles**



2. Because of our fascination with reptiles, and with each other, Ignacio and I were considered weird at Foothills High School, and we hung out with the science nerds and computer geeks. We were shunned by the boys interested in sports, girls, and cars. A few of our off-beat friends occasionally visited Ignacio and me on the weekends, and I liked showing them how to noose lizards and carrying forth about the evolution and biogeography of reptiles and amphibians. Ignacio and I were outcasts also because we did not use marijuana, as we felt it had a bad effect on our ability to think.

For my 16th birthday Mom and Dad bought me a VW bug, and Ignacio and I started exploring herps all over Arizona. He was particularly fond of snakes, and we went road cruising many nights, and I began collecting images with my Nikon of all the species we encountered. When we found our first *Heloderma suspectum* (Gila Monster) we hugged each other and Ignacio sometimes put his arm on my shoulder while we were driving and I liked the bro feelings. Due in part to his

Hispanic background he was much less inhibited about expressing his emotions than are most Anglos.



***Heloderma suspectum* by Kit Bezy**



Aiden

Ignacio

3. When I turned 17 I was gifted Harold Cogger's volume on the amphibians and reptiles of Australia. Ignacio and I poured over the thousand pages every night and we began dreaming of an Oz herp adventure. Mom and Dad said that for our high school graduation they would pay for Ignacio and me to have a long herp sojourn in Australia, if we could figure out how to make arrangements to explore the outback.

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

of Australia

UPDATED SEVENTH EDITION



Harold G Cogger

**Aiden****Ignacio**

4. Ignacio and I began searching the internet for potential ways to explore herps in the outback of Australia. We definitely did not want to join a group of any sort. Mom was an anthropologist and she contacted two Australian colleagues about approaches for our adventure. They recommended an anthropology professor at the University of Adelaide with students studying the Aboriginals' knowledge of reptiles.

I began emailing her and one of the students, David, was interested in traveling with Ignacio and me and we began developing a plan. He was Arrenti and periodically visited his people as well as other Aboriginal groups to document their knowledge of reptiles. Ignacio and I made plans to fly to Adelaide and then travel with David around central Australia to see the reptiles and to interact with the aboriginal people.

During our senior at Foothills year Ignacio and I were both admitted to the University of Arizona with full academic scholarships, and we decided to move into a house together. We were delighted to find a casa within walking distance of the campus and it had some magnificent saguaros and even a few *Aspidoscelis tigris* (Tiger Whiptails). Although Mom and Dad were very liberal parents, Ignacio and I were happy to be together with just the two of us.



***Aspidoscelis tigris* by Kit Bezy**



Casa de Saguaros

5. As we said goodbye to Mom and Dad and boarded the flight to Adelaide our spirits were soaring like eagles. It was a grueling 19 hour flight and we took out Cogger's big book and read very species account. I was happy that Ignacio slept with his head on my shoulders.

We eventually arrived in Adelaide and made our way through customs. As we were exiting with our duffels, we were shocked when Dr. McConnell and David stepped forth to introduce themselves. She was very delightful and we were swept up by her enthusiasm. David was shy, but we immediately took to him.

"Gee, Dr. McConnell, we certainly did not expect you to come to the airport," I exclaimed.

"Well, your mom, Dr. Kennedy, has done so much for me, I figured the least I could do is smooth your arrival. You must be exhausted from the long flight."

We threw our duffels in the back of Dr. McConnell's Rover and she drove us to the University of Adelaide where she had made arrangements for us to live in a dormitory for a few days to rest up from the flight and get our feet on the ground before heading to the outback with David.

Walking to the Anthropology building we were inspired by the beauty of the campus and we were delighted to see a large *Tiliqua scincoides* (Common blue-tongued skink). Dr. McConnell was head of the department and she introduced us to her students. I was heartened by the prevalence of "nerd" personality types.





***Tiliqua scincoides* by birds_and_beasties**



Dr. McConnell

David



University of Adelaide

6. Dr. McConnel invited Ignacio and me to her home to have dinner with her, David, and his bro Jimba to get more acquainted. It took us a while to connect, but with her encouragement David danced for us, and Jimba played the yidaki. That did the trick.

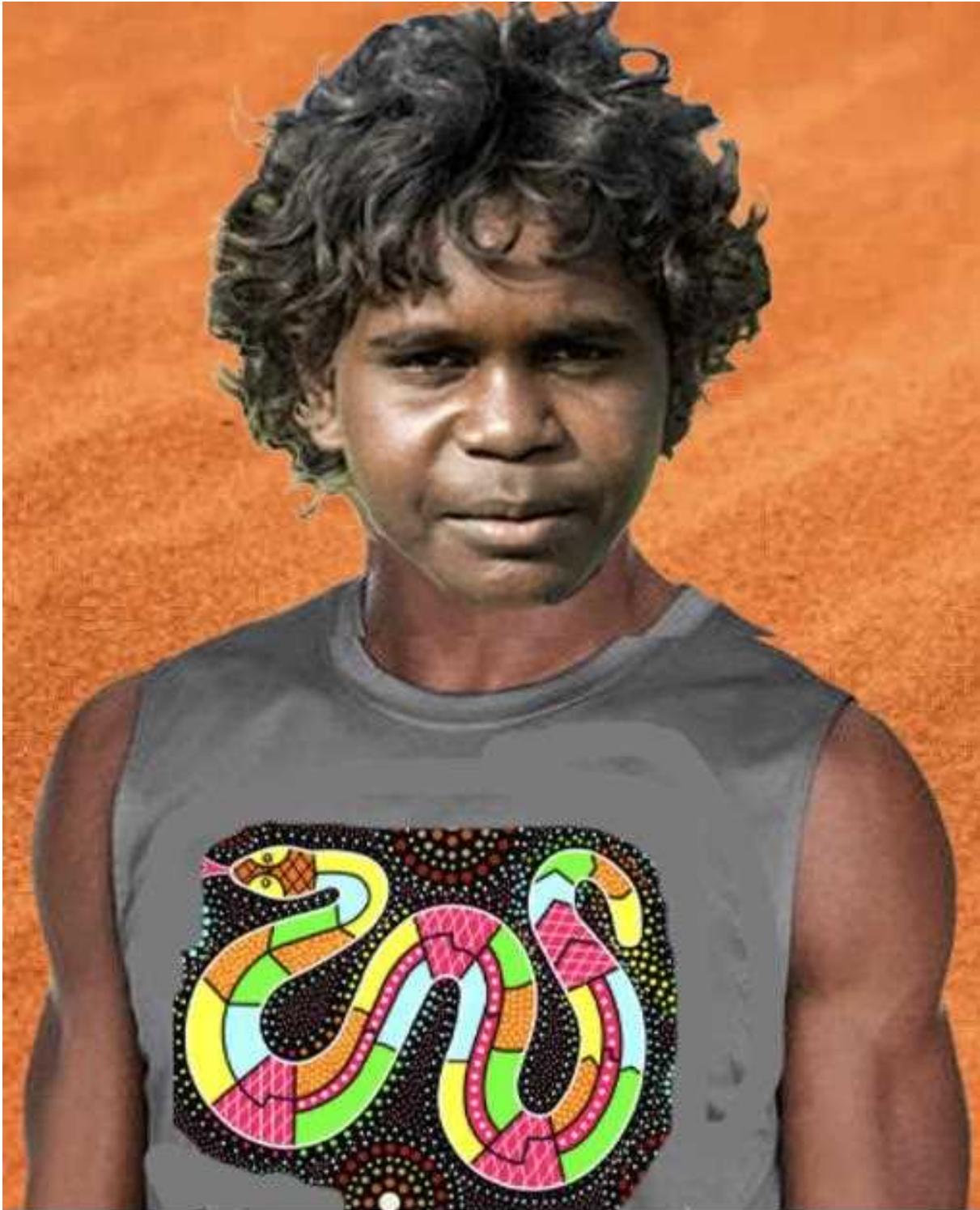
Walking back to the dormitory that night we heard frogs calling and we managed to locate one. It was a *Litoria calliscelis*, (South Australian Tree Frog,) that reminded us very much of *Pseudacris maculata* (Boreal Chorus Frog) we had seen in Arizona.



Litoria calliscelis by Tom Hunt



***Pseudacris maculata* by kbmacroart**



Jimba



David Gulpilil

7. Dr. McConnel delivered the university Land Rover she had arranged for our use and we threw our things into the back. Jimba was thoroughly experienced at driving Rovers on outback tracks and he climbed into the driver's seat with David beside him, Ignacio and I hopped into the back. As we headed off on our three month ethno-herpetology adventure our spirits soared to heights only youths know.

But almost immediately I went into full-blown cultural shock. Nacho and I did not know how to connect with David and Jimba. They did not chat incessantly like we do, they didn't smile and laugh and joke like us, and quite frankly they did not look like us. It wasn't just their skin color, but their whole body structure was different, and I started to ponder if they were a different species.

"Aiden, you are being just plain silly," I thought. Species are defined genetically, not culturally. But, the genetics of Aboriginal Australians is not fully understood. They have some Denisovan genes and some Neanderthal genes, plus some genes from an unknown "ghost" population, reflecting their isolation down under for at least fifty thousand years.

"Holy smokes, what have Nachobro and I gotten ourselves into?" I thought.

Fortunately Jimba and David knew how to interact with us. They no longer lived with their people and they had learned to deal with "white fella" ways and talk.

After an hour in the Rover Jimba declared, "Smoko" and took a track into the bush and we all climbed out. They took off their clothes, got out the billy, sloshed in some water, threw in some tea leaves and sugar from the tucker box, gathered wood, and started the fire. We sat under the eucalyptus sipping the tea and afterwards Jimba played the yidaki and David put on a dance.



***Ctenotus leonhardii* by Lachlan Copeland**



Rover



Jimba with yidaki

8. Ignacio started to see the dancing and yidaki might be bridges that would allow us to connect with David and Jimba at a deeper level.

“David, could you teach me how to play the yidaki?” Ignacio asked.

“Some white fellas learn good.”

I found the Yidaki difficult but Ignacio picked it up quickly.

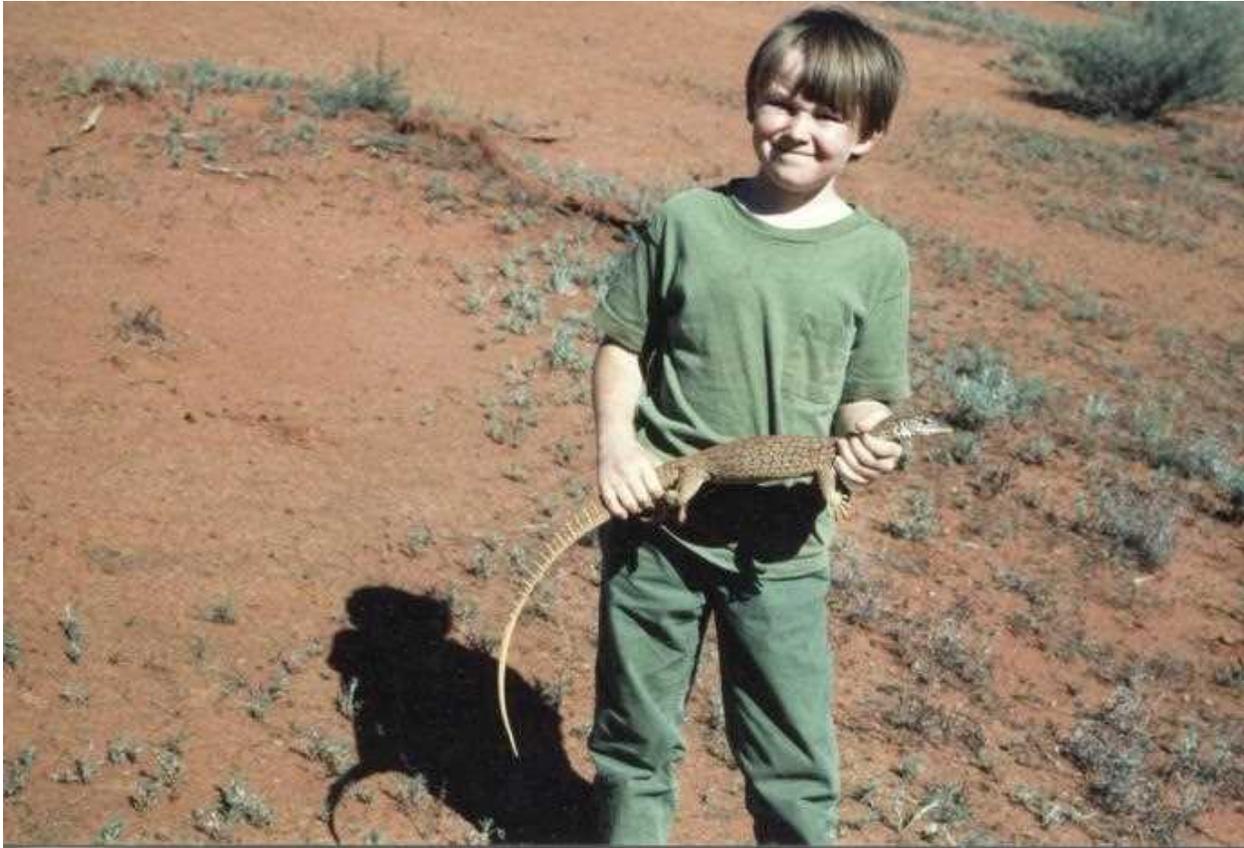
Sitting in the morning sun, sipping the tea, and listening to the yidaki I began to develop a research plan. Ignacio and I will take digital photographs of the lizards and snakes we encounter and David and Jimba will interview the people individually and show them each image one by one on the computer screen and score their responses. We will gather the data to address several questions: Do they have a name for the species? Do they use the same name for more than one species? Do they use more than one name for a species? Do they have different names for males, females, and juveniles of a species. Is recognition higher for reptile groups that are more important food items? Is the person's species discrimination score correlated with their gender, age, kinship, or native language retention?

I was really pleased with my research plan, but Ignacio detected that David and Jimba were not totally happy with this “white fella way of thinking,” as we were evaluating their culture by our standards. Ignacio was starting to appreciate the Aboriginal way and enjoyed sitting in the shade and living in the moment. I was stuck in the mode of formulating plans, but I could see that the three of them were much happier than I.

Just then a *Varanus gouldii* (Sand Monitor) came into view and Jimba chased and caught it. We got lots of good photos for our ethnographic tests.



Jimba with *Varanus gouldi*



Kit Bezy with *Varanus gouldii*

9. Jimba and David decided that we would just spend the day and night at the smoko stop. They headed out on a hunt with their spear and boomerang and three hours later returned with four rabbits. They skinned them and inserted a stick skewer in each and roasted on the fire. We devoured the rabbits and afterwards Jimba played the yidaki and David danced. Ignacio even made brave to sing, “El Sol de la Negra.”

We donned the headlamps and went on a nocturnal walk and were delighted to find an *Underwoodisaurus milii* (Fat-tailed Gecko), and we got lots of photos for the study. The cold Antarctic air chilled Ignacio and me to the bone we hunkered down with Koala in our sleeping bags. David and Jimba did not need a cover.



***Underwoodisaurus milii* by Kees Green**



10. I was beginning to adopt David's psychology and just live for the moment. That is the aboriginal way and they have lived here for fifty thousand years. We were close enough to the south coast that it was foggy in the morning and we savored the hot tea. When the sun finally burned through and heated the sand, we went on a morning on a lizard walk. Ignacio noosed a *Ctenophorus fionii* (Peninsular Dragon). David and Jimba did not know the species, most likely because it is restricted to the coast and they are from the center. We got lots of photos.

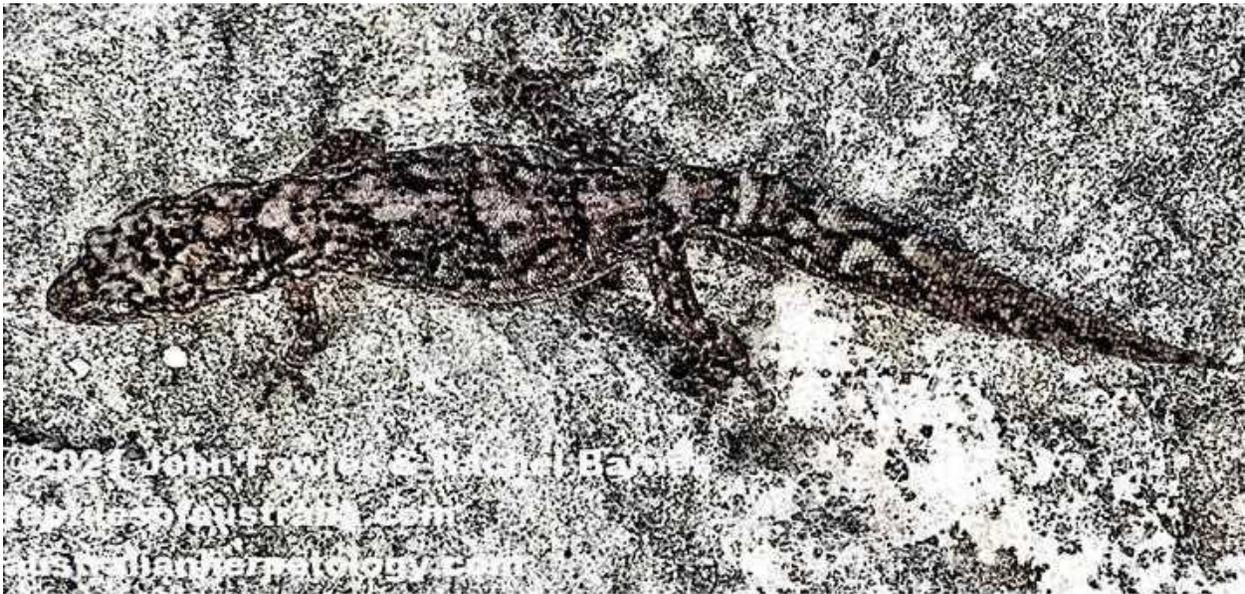
“Can I go with you hunting rabbits.” Ignacio asked David.

“If no scare em,”

When they returned with the four rabbits, Ignacio was all smiles. He had learned to use the use the boomerang and had gotten one of the rabbits with it.

After our rabbit feast we headed out with the headlamps and were delighted to find a *Christinus marmoratus* (Marbled Gecko), another far south endemic that they did not recognize.

When we got out our sleeping bags, David announced “we sleep away” and they walked off for the night. Iggy and I were happy to have some bro time together.



***Christinus marmoratus* by John Fowler and Rachael Barnes**



***Ctenophorus fionni* by jvanweenen**

11. “Walk billabong,” Jimba said and off we went. I really liked this leisurely approach to walking, a meander really. Hours later we reached the billabong, and Ignacio decreed, “Last one in is a rotten egg, and David looked really puzzled. We all dove in and the cool water was really refreshing.

“I hope the Salties don’t get us.” I exclaimed.

“No Salties here.” David assured me.

Jimba reached up into a branch and grabbed a magnificent *Anastesia childreni* (Children’s Python) and we got lots of photos.



Anastesia childreni by sunOfErat



***Anastesia childreni* by Mathew Bonnet**





Jimba with *Anastesia childreni*

12. As we were resting after the billabong swim we could see a person on a horse headed our way. It turned out to be a boy riding out from his homestead. Tommy dismounted and watched us photographing the python.

“Gee that’s a big Children’s Python. Where did you find it?” Tommy inquired.

“Jimba found it in that tree over there. I see you are wearing a snake pendant. Are you interested in snakes?”

“I love reptiles. I have started a snake group with the other kids around this area and we go out looking for them all the time.”

“Well, Ignacio and I are herpetologists visiting from the U.S. and David and Jimba are ethnologists from University of Adelaide and we are studying Aboriginal knowledge of reptiles.”

“Wow, that is really interesting. The other snake kids are coming to my house this afternoon. Would you like to meet them and tell them about your research and maybe a bit about American snakes?”

“That sounds like a lot of fun,” I responded.

When we got to the station, Erik welcomed us and invited us to stay in the bunkhouse. I conferred with David and Jimba and they thought it would be good with them to stay there as long as we had a walkabout once in a while.

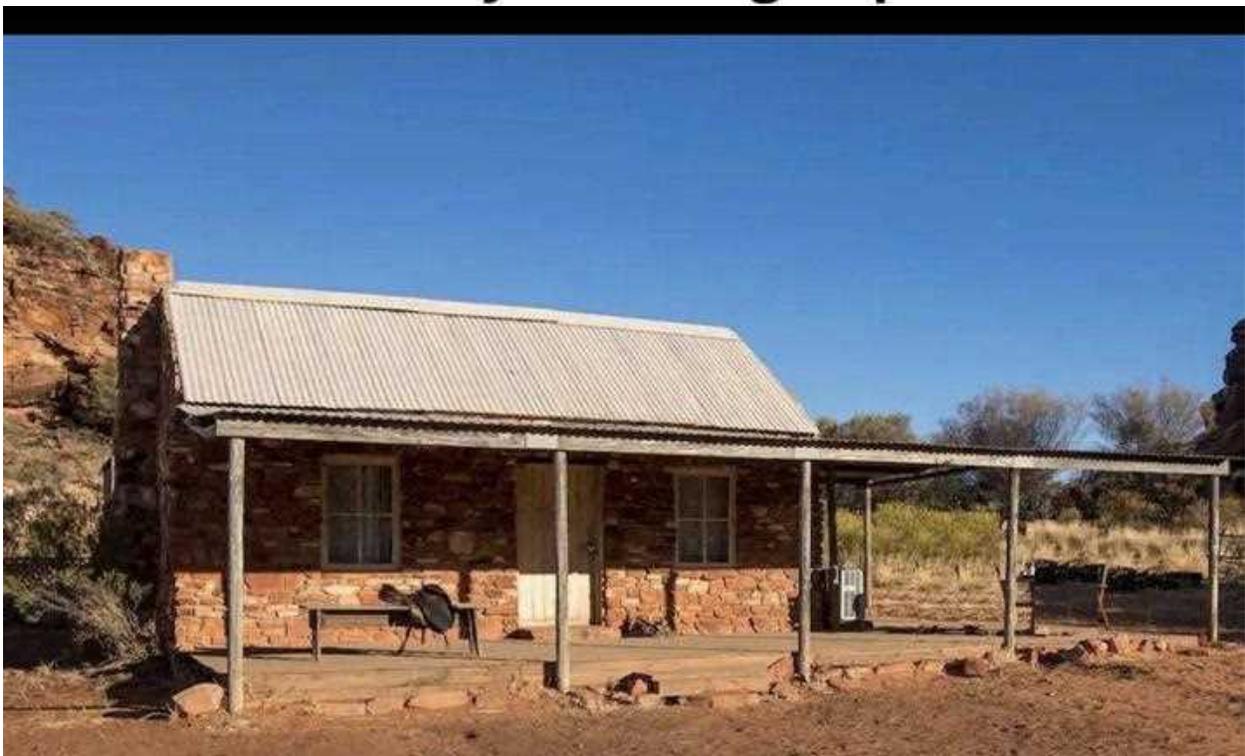
The four boys in Tommy’s snake group were a delight and they took great interest in our research project. They assured us they would help locate lots of snakes and led us on a nocturnal walk that yielded a *Simoselaps anomalus* (Northern Desert Banded Snake). The beautiful little elapid reminded me of the *Sonora semiannulata* (Ground Snakes) I grew up with.



Tommy



Tommy's snake group





***Simoselaps anomalus* by Bruce Budrey**



***Sonora semiannulata* by James Bailey**



Erik

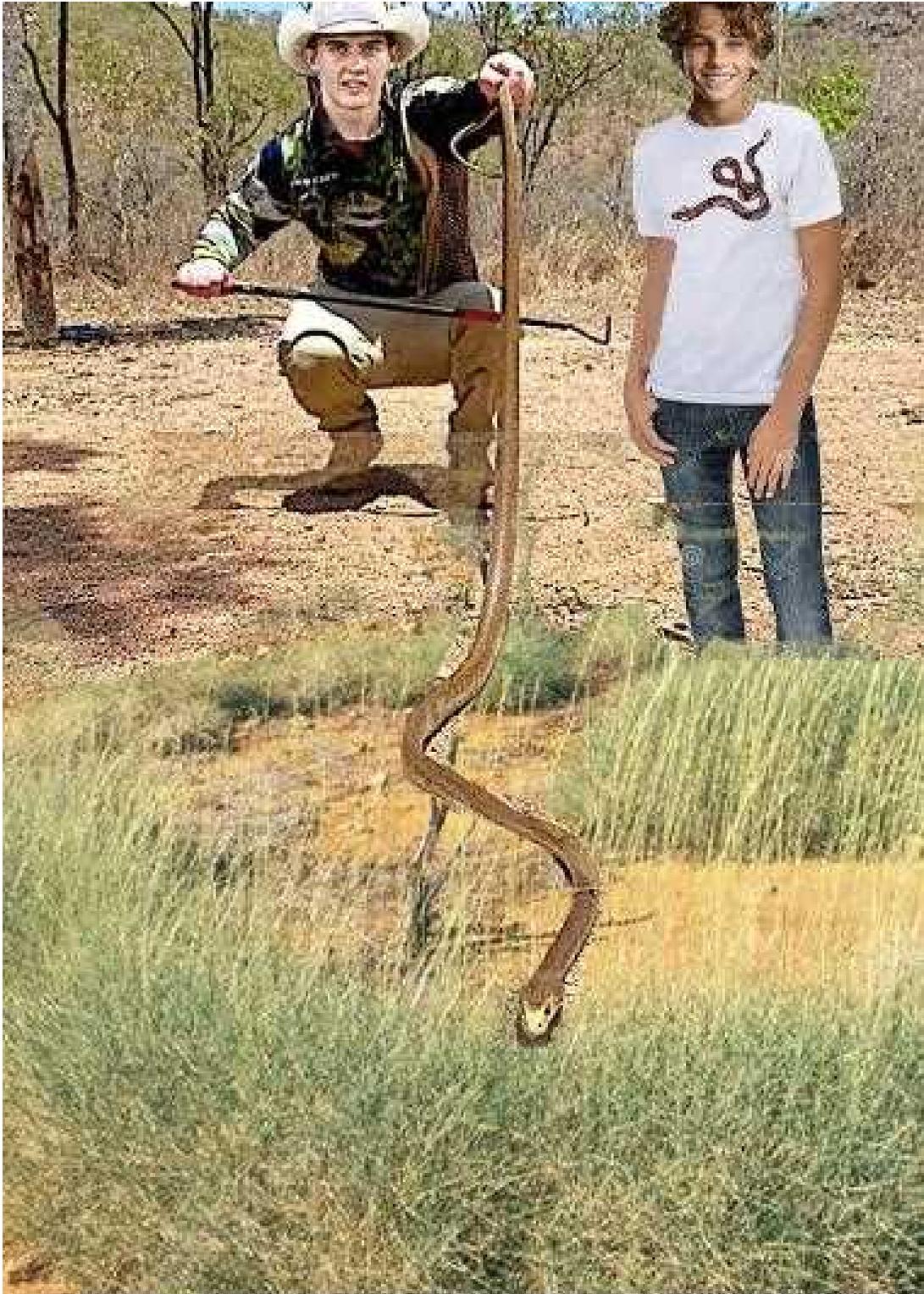
13. Ignacio and I really liked living in the bunkhouse on Erik's station. It took David and Jimba a while to adjust, but they had both lived on cattle stations before and soon got used to it again. Tommy introduced us to his older brother, Jason, who was a stockman and we went out horse riding with him to different places to look for snakes.

It had been a long hot day when Jason yelled "Taipan" and bolted from his horse and chased down the long snake. It was really one impressive *Oxyuranus scutullatus* (Coastal Taipan). He grabbed it by the tail and we got closeup photos. Eventually he grabbed it behind the head and I was terrified he would get bitten. But boys will be boys.



***Oxyuranus scutellatus* by Chris Jolly**





Jason and Tommy with *Oxyuranus scutellatus*

14. When we got back to the bunk house David announced he had developed the lizard team. He and Jimba had befriended two Aboriginal boys who were very interested in lizards, particularly Geckos, which are important in their culture. They were ready to lead a lizard walk as soon as it got dark.

The Gecko Bros were absolutely charming and we followed them round for hours. They could spot the geckos without a light. They showed us many species, but I was most enchanted by the *Nephrurus stellatus* (Southern Knob-tailed Geckos).



The Gecko Bros



***Nephruus stellatus* by Belinda Copland**

15. Tommy had alerted all the boys at the nearby stations to be on the lookout for snakes for us to photograph. I was worried that one of the kids would get bitten bringing the serpent to us so we visited them. There were many calls and we were getting worn thin.

A call came in from a kid named Brumby who had a Death Adder. Tommy said to hang on to our hats because Brumby was as wild as his name and had been bitten several times playing with elapids. When we arrived Brumby went into his risky show off stunts big time and was bitten by the *Acanthophis pyrrhus* (Desert Death Adder).. His bro, Xander, put on a compression bandage and they raced off to the hospital where the emergency doctor was quite familiar with them.



***Acanthophis pyrrhus* by Brian Bush**



Brumby with *Acanthophis pyrrhus*



16. The Gecko Bros that David and Jimba had befriended turned out to be ace lizard finders. They were most interested in Geckos, but they liked all sorts of lizards. Their most exciting find was the pygopidid *Delma australis* (Marble-faced Delma). I was very interested to discover that they recognized it as a legless lizard, not a snake. When I pressed them about that, they said it has ear holes like lizards. And I was totally shocked that they also noted it had vertical pupils like Geckos, which we consider their nearest relatives.



***Delma australis* by Owen Lishmund**



***Delma australis* by Jono Dashpe**



***Delma australis* by Sam Gordon**

17. Ozzy, one of Tommy's snake friends came galloping on his horse.

“My bro Slinger found a Mulga Snake for you. But he has been was influenced by that wild boy Brumby and he is hand-holding the dangerous snake.”

“Where is he I asked” I asked.

“He is out in the bush about an hour horse ride from here.”

“We will hop on our horses and ride out there with you to get photos and talk him into stopping his dangerous behavior.”

Fortunately our horses were already saddled and we jumped on them and galloped out into the desert with Ozzie.



Aussie



Slanger with *Pseudechis australis*



***Pseudechis australis* by jbilby**



***Pseudechis australis* by Adam Brice**



***Pseudechis australis* by John Fowler & Rachael Barnes**

18. We had become a little disenchanted with the phone calls that came in from boys at nearby stations because they seemed to be mostly elapid snake handlers who wanted to show off their dangerous feats. Steve Irwin and many other daredevil snake catchers on television had a huge following in Oz. But fortunately Tommy and his snake friends were out of an entirely different mode and they, like the Gecko bros, who had an eye for small reptiles.

Two of Tommy's snake friends, Mate and Klie, said they knew a place where we were likely to find small "worm snakes" under the rocks. They said they could lead us to the spot, but it was far out in the desert and we would need to spend the night.

We were excited when we set at dawn for the worm snake adventure with Mate and Klie. We wondered if the snakes would turn out to be the legless pygopodid lizards like the Gecko bros had found for us. We were really enamored with both of these boys. I loved Mate's sweet smile and shyness. Ignacio liked Klie who was

attracted by his Hispanic background. That was one of the very aspects of Ignacio that has always attracted me.

It was a long hot walk and we stopped for the night at a billabong and had a dip. Afterwards we sat and bro talked late into the night. Mate opened up about his relationship with Klie and said he was was sad that they had to keep it under wraps because of the Oz's macho culture, particularly strong here in the far outback.

They wanted to move to the US because they felt it was more liberal about orientations. We encouraged them to be brave and begin changing their own culture for the better. They smiled and gave us both a hug for our candid advice.

At dawn we walked with Mate and Klie to their "worm snake" honey hole. There were lots of flat rocks and we flipped for hours. We came to a very large rock and we all combined our strength to lift it. And there it was, an *Anilius bituberculatus* (Prong-snouted Blind Snake), and we shared a four-bro hug.



***Anilius bituberculatus* by Nick Volpe**



***Anilios bituberculatus* Scott Eipper**



Aiden

Ignacio



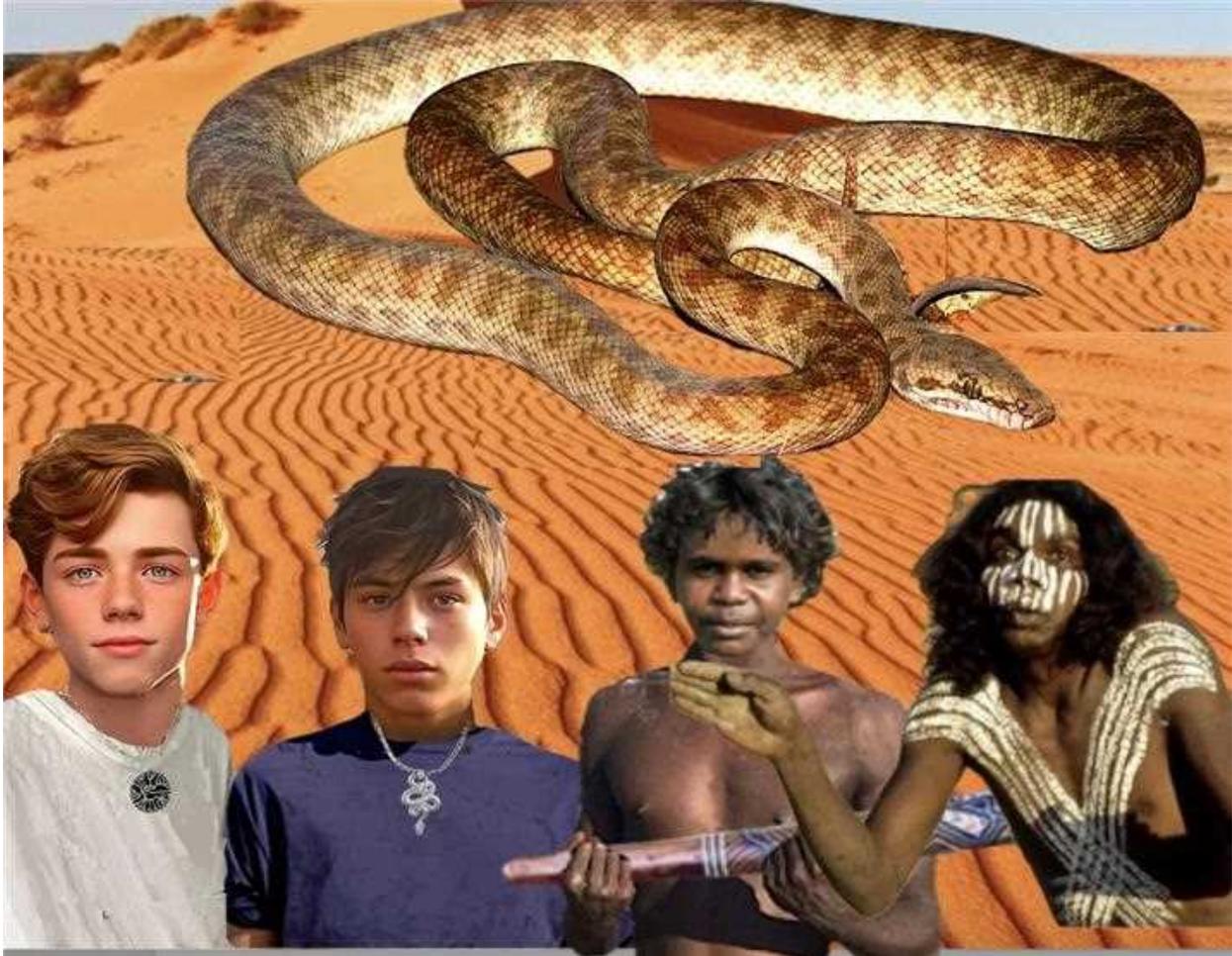
Mate and Klie



***Anilius bituberculatus* by Nero Moon**

19. We decided it was time to leave the cattle station and move on. Jimba proposed we have a grand corroboree and invite all Tommy's reptile friends. Jimba, David, and Ignacio went on a long hunt and got 20 rabbits for the feast and

put them on the fire to roast. Jimba and Ignacio played their yidakis and David put on a dance around an *Antaresia childreni* (Children's Python) and soon everyone joined in.







20. It was a long walk back to the Rover and we stopped at the billabong to dip in the cool water and enjoy the sitting in the shade. It had been a very productive stay at Tommy's station and we now had accumulated a large collection of reptile images for our ethnoherpetology study. But in the process we had lost ourselves somewhere. Ignaciobro helped me recover. Being close to him made me realize what I really loved the most.

It was hot and we decided to stick with the shade and cool water of the billabong for the afternoon. David was totally fluent in Aussie English, yet he did not indulge in idle "white fella talk." but he was good at connecting with us with just a few words.

I stayed at the billabong while the three of them went on a lagomorph hunt. I was coming to really relish the rabbits on a skewer and also the time the yidaki time afterwards.

We donned our headlights and went looking for geckos in the boulders. Jimba had exceptionally keen eyes and spotted a *Diplodactylus furcosus* (Ranges Stone Gecko) and I came to appreciate that we had been completely missing the saxicolous herpetofauna.

David and Jimba decided to sleep among the boulders and Ignacio and I returned to the billabong for some much appreciated bro time.



***Diplodactylus furcosus* by Belinda Copland**



***Diplodactylus furcosus* by owenlishmund**



***Diplodactylus furcosus* by John Fowler & Rachael Barnes**

21. David wanted to have a serious discussion with Ignacio and me, but it was still quite difficult for us to communicate at anything other than a superficial level. By concentrating on David's sparse, but very meaningful, words I was able to grasp what he was saying. He felt that Ignacio and I were not prepared to understand his people in this ethnographic research project. To prepare we needed to go on a long walkabout wandering without a destination or time constraints and learning to live on whatever food the land offered.

I found this proposal frightening. I have always charted a course with a known destination and a clear objective. Wandering "aimlessly" would be totally foreign to my make-up. And would we die of hunger and thirst wandering the deserts of Oz?

Ignacio, on the other hand, was excited by the prospect. He was much more of a "free spirit" than I and he had become very comfortable with the Aboriginal mindset, and we agreed to go on this walkabout. David consented to my taking a camera; Ignacio, a canteen; Jimba, a yidaki, and he, a spear and a boomerang.

I had trouble sleeping that night because it seemed just plain crazy to abandon the security of the Rover and our research project and go off on a walkabout to who knows where and for who knows how long.

Ignacio put his arms around me and encouraged, “Just close your eyes and take a leap like a Red Kangaroo. You can do it Aidenbro.”



22. It was with great trepidation that I set off on the walkabout, abandoning the Rover and my clothes. I wondered if we would ever return, but Ignacio gave me the courage to do it.

“What does it matter, Aiden, if we die out there? We would die happy together in this magnificent desert full of reptiles”

“Gee, Nachobro, where did you ever get such an adventurous spirit?”

“I was born loving the great adventure of life. If I come to a fork in the road, I just take it, hoping to choose the road less traveled.”

I gradually came to embrace the adventure. I had my camera and my bro, what else did I need? I enjoyed the leisurely pace, and we stopped in a little long while at a billabong and dove in. Afterwards I rested while the others went on a rabbit hunt. I was delighted to see a magnificent *Varanus tristis* (Black-headed Monitor) on a tree branch and I got lots of photos for our ethnographic study.



***Varanus tristis* by Kit Bezy**



***Varanus tristis* by Levi Brown**



***Varanus tristis* by aleckarcz**

23. The most difficult thing about the walkabout was something I had never even imagined. As we wandered along silently we each began sinking deeper and deeper into our individual worlds. Ignacio and I have been intimate bros ever since we first met when we were 10. But now he was drifting off more and more into his own space. I tried to bridge the gap in various ways, putting my arm around him, asking what he was feeling, making idle chat, but he no longer fully reciprocated. He was becoming more of an Aboriginal and abandoning the “white fella way.”

Fortunately there remained a strong bond between Ignacio and me and that was herping. He still liked going on lizard walks with me. And it was really not goal-oriented activity as we were not looking for a particular species, just enjoying whatever reptiles we encountered. After it warmed up we were dighted to find a *Ctenophorus clayi* (Black-shouldered Ground-dragon). We no longer had a pole for noosing and we stalked it with the camera eventually getting some great in-situ photos. Afterward we shared a hug that did much to restore our bro love.



***Ctenophorus clayi* by David Nelson**



***Ctenophorus clayi* by Richard Reams**

24. Things were starting to fall into place for me on the walkabout. I was learning more and more to stop clinging to objectives and plans. And I was also able to relinquish clinging to Ignacio. He was still there for me and I enjoyed looking at him and drinking in his beautiful smile, but I was becoming more aware of myself as a separate entity. This is of course the natural evolution from passionate romantic love to something more sustainable. Its underpinnings involve the ebbing of the testosterone flood of the early teens.

Ignacio seemed largely immune to such changes. I was probably not being realistic when I ascribed so much of his personality to his Hispanic background. While he was fluent in Spanish, he was after all a native English-speaker, born and raised in Arizona. But I guess the reason I emphasize his Hispanic aspects is that they are a large part of what I find so attractive about him both physically and emotionally. And even though we were now learning to give each other more space, all I had to do was look at his beautiful smile and my brolove surged stronger than ever,

Ignacio and I were also converging on David and Jimba. As we ceased having objectives began to understand why they felt the walkabout was necessary before we embarked on the study of their people. For Aboriginals the walkabout was an important part of their of coming of age and they sometimes laughed and kidded us that if we succeeded in this we could undergo subincision. This of course made my blood curdle, but from observing them it appeared that they had not actually been subjected to that traditional painful mutilation ritual.

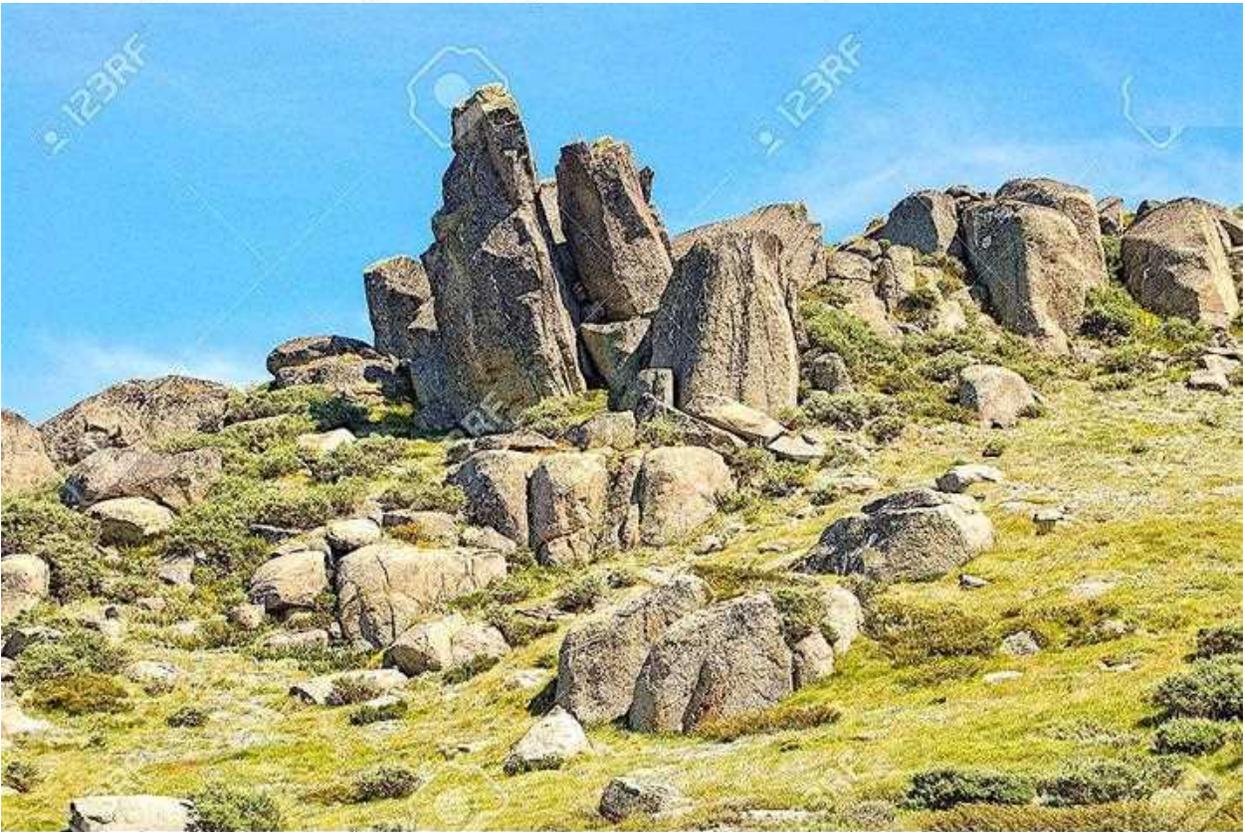
We had no headlamps for nocturnal searches, but David and Jimba had incredible sight and did not need them to see at night. They led us on a gecko walk up into the boulders and found a beautiful *Diplodactylus galeatus* (Helmeted Gecko).



***Diplodactylus galeatus* by Lachlan Copeland**



***Diplodactylus galeatus* by Daniel Meier**





***Diplodactylus galeatus* by Daniel Meier**

25. On our walkabout we reached the sand dunes and discovered that Jimba was a very talented tracker. He was quite good at distinguishing among the many tracks on the dunes and was able to follow them to the animal. Most of the snake tracks were narrow and had been made by various species of elapids. There was one that was from a snake with a heavy body and Jimba tracked it for a long way on the dune top and then down into a swale where he located it under a bush. We were really excited to see our first *Aspidites ramsayi* (Woma Python).

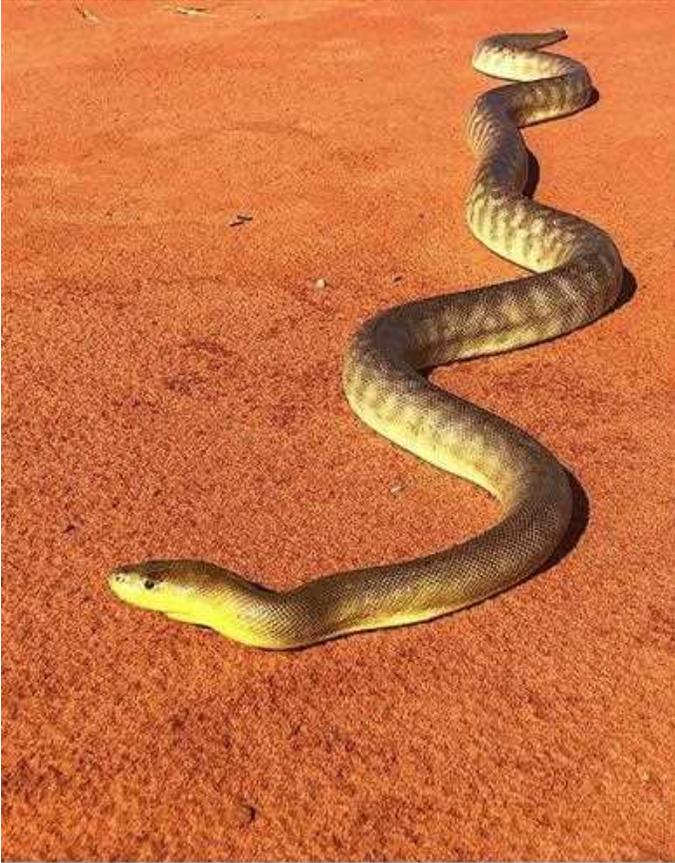
We all decided to sleep in the dunes.



***Aspiderter ramsayi* by Bruce Edley**



***Aspiderter ramsayi* by Tom Hunt**



***Aspidites ramsayi* by Louis O'Neill**



***Aspidites ramsayi* by Melissa Bruton**



Jimba with *Aspides ramsayi*

26. It was delightful sleeping atop the sand dunes with the moon and stars blazing above. And Ignacio surprised us all with a song, “Eres Tu.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naAC37W42ro>

Ignacio’s singing deeply affected David who had a great appreciation of music and he made brave to give Ignacio a hug, a very rare show of affection by him.

The sunrise was glorious and the fireball soon warmed the red sand and Jimba continued his tracking. He spotted a track that really got his attention, but he had some difficulty following it on the dune as there had been a bit of wind overnight. Just when he was about to give up, he picked up the track again, and there it was snapping up ants, *Moloch horridus* (Thomy Devil), the jewel of Australia.



***Moloch horridus* by Andrew Humpage**



***Moloch horridus* by Owen Lishmund**



***Moloch horridus* by periwinkle4444**



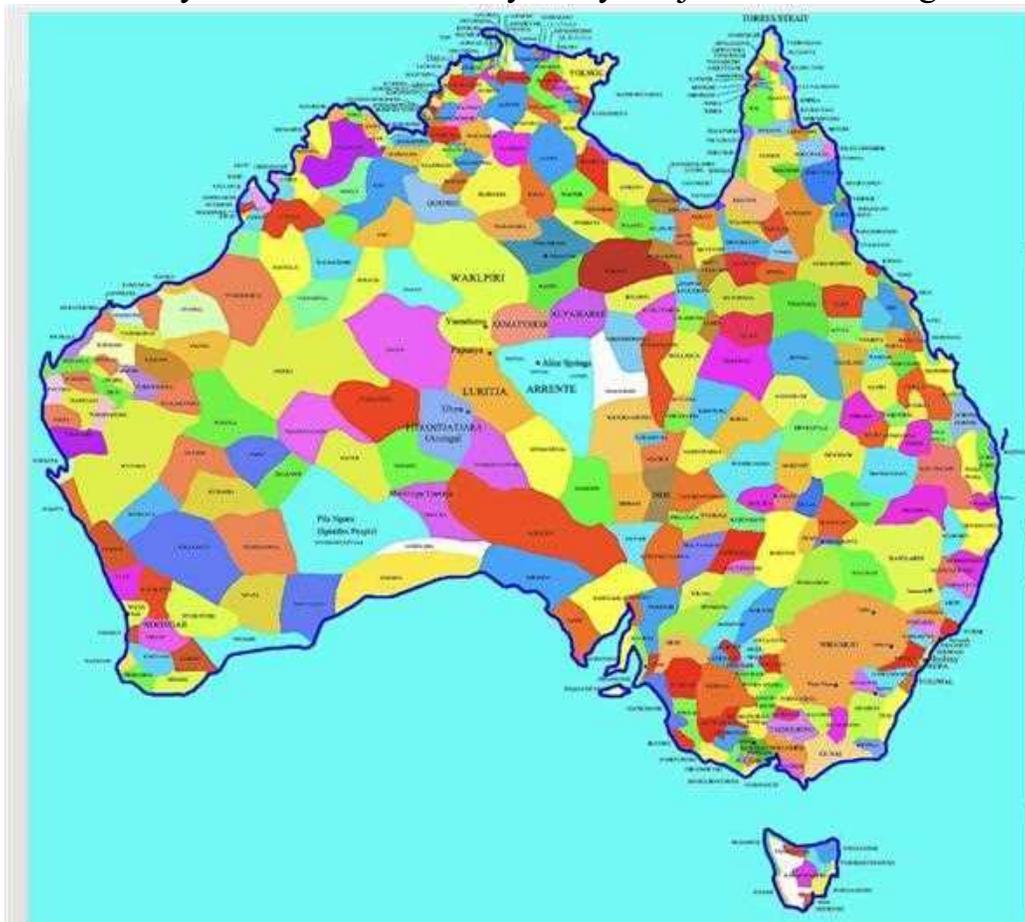
***Moloch horridus* making tracks by Naturetime**

27. After we left the dune and the *Moloch horridus* our walkabout continued for many days. Eventually I was able to make out the Rover far ahead and my heart leaped with joy. I guessed we must have walked in a huge circle. Maybe that is how the walkabout got its name.

David felt we now were prepared to understand his people and we had experienced the walkabout and we had images of enough species of reptiles for our ethnographic study. It was time to visit his Tanami Desert people who speak Warlpiri, one of the over 400 Aboriginal languages in Australia.

When we arrived at at camp they mobbed the Rover welcoming David and Jimba home. It was deeply touching to see how much joy and enthusiasm they showed for the return from the University of Adelaide of their two bros.

The next day the people held a small s corroboree to celebrate their return. It began with a solo dance by David and eventually everyone joined in dancing to the

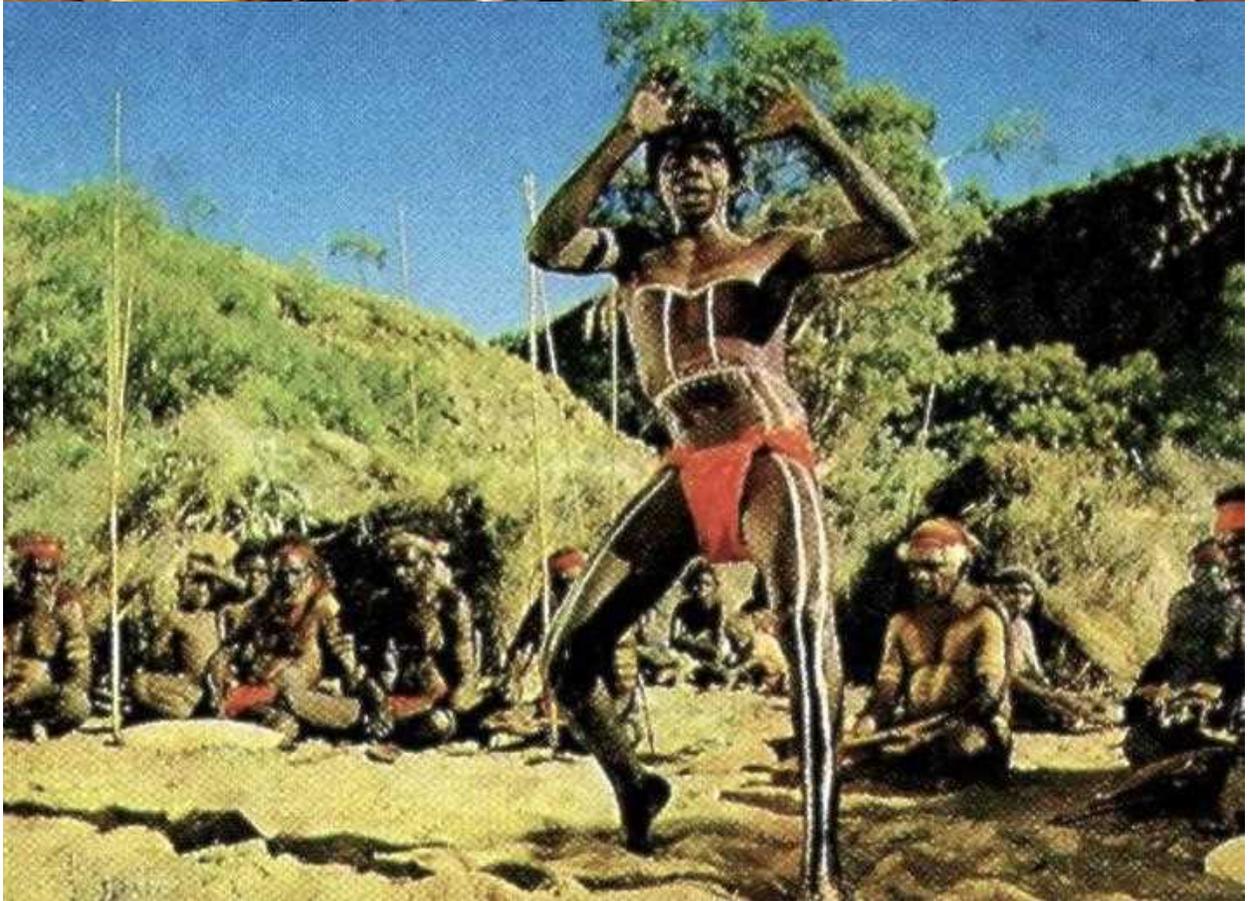


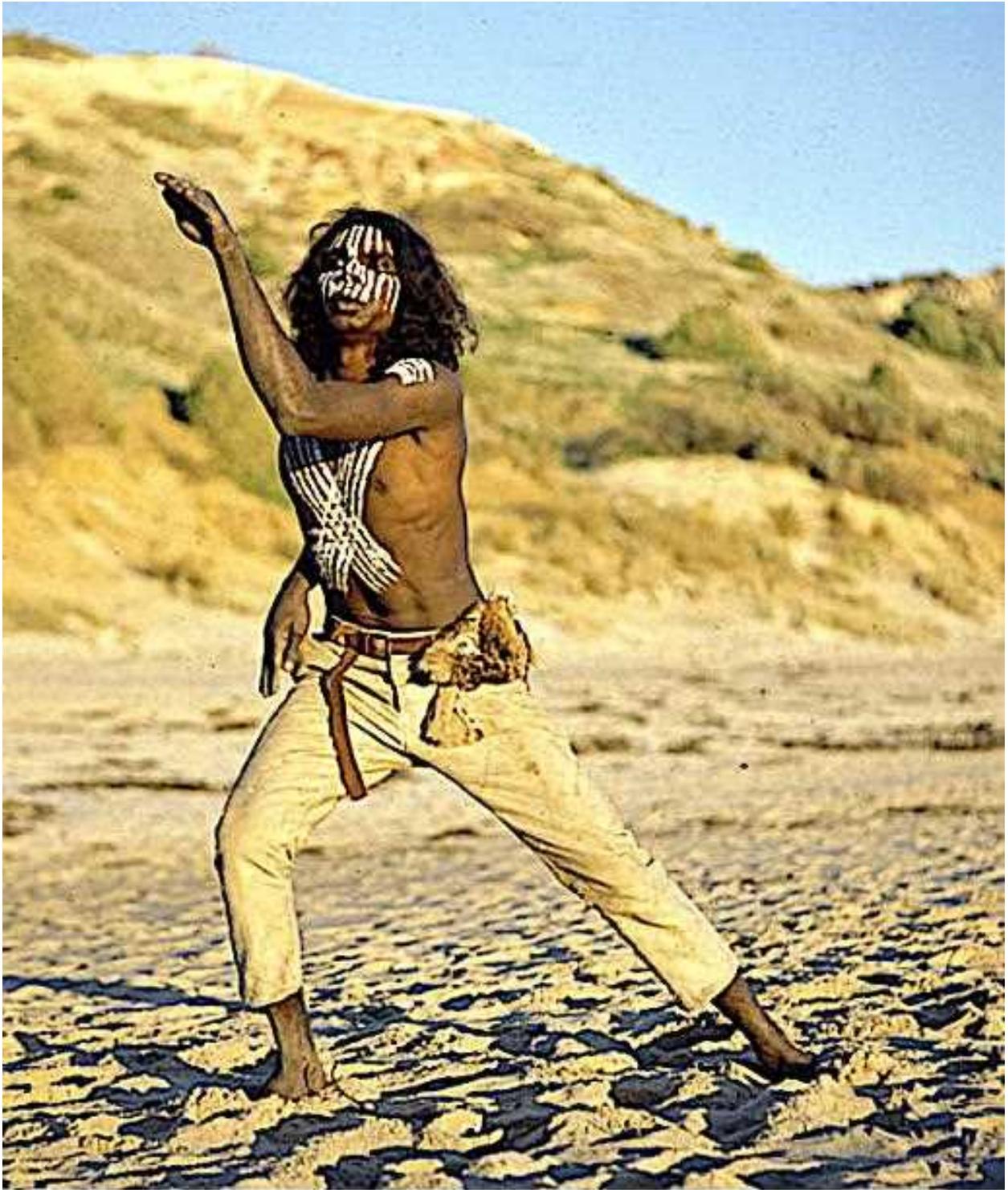
Aboriginal languages of Australia

zythum
yidaki players.

of the







David Gulpilil

28. David's ethnographic initial interviews with his Warlpiri people just did not go well. The images on the lap top screen did not elicit much of a response. They were accustomed to live reptiles, and the flat screen images lacked the animal's behavior, charisma and spirit which were crucial components in the people's species recognition. And they did not like this whole computer-based "white fella way" of looking at the world. Jimba had warned us from the beginning that this would likely be the outcome of the project I had proposed.

David was totally fluent in Warlpiri decided use that as a vehicle to take the study it an entirely different direction of his design. He planned to conduct in depth interviews with individuals and record the Warlpiri stories and beliefs about various species of reptiles.

Ignacio and I felt this was a great idea, but we could not be of much help to David and Jimba in this new endeavor, and wondered just what we could do.

That afternoon a VW Van arrived with two youths. It turned out that they, like us, had just graduated from high school, and were exploring the reptiles of Australia. Alexander was an Aussie and his bro Luis was from Mexico and Ignacio immediately began speaking Spanish with him. Xander was shy and had a sweet smile that appealed to me.

We had a talk with David and Jimba and we agreed it was time for Ignacio and I to separate from them and head off with Luis and Zander. We were sad to part with our Aboriginal bros who had taught us so much, but excited to strike out with our new bros in their four wheel drive VW bus.



Alexander

Luis



Aiden

Ignacio



David

Jimba



Van

29. We were sad to say good bye to David and Jimba, but that is where the twists and turns of the road of life had taken us. Jimba gave Ignacio a yidaki and a boomerang as a parting gesture.

We were excited to be off with Luis and Zander in their VW bus to explore the reptile fauna of Australia. Luis got behind the wheel and drove for hours, eventually stopping at a great billabong for our first camp. After our dip we sat on the bank with the afternoon sun on our backs and planed the trip. Western Australia appealed strongly to us all.

“Let’s start in the Kimberly and circle around the Northwest and then south down the West coast. That is far away from the tourists,” I proposed.

“You’re on bro,” Zander assured me.

Ignacio went off with Luis on a rabbit hunt with the boomerang and spear that Jimba had given them. The two were well-coordinated hunting bros and returned with four lagomorphs. Zander and I skinned the rabbits and roasted them on

skewers over a fire. After we woofed down the meal Luis played the yidaki and Ignacio sang. We missed David's expressive dances.

That night we donned the headlights for a gecko walk and discovered Luis had incredible vision. He found three *Lucasium stenodactylus* (Box-patterned Geckos) and two *Nephrurus amya*e (Centralian Rough Knob-tailed Geckos).



***Nephrurus amya*e by Daniel Meier**



Luis



***Lucasium stenodactylus* by Brendan Casey**



***Nephrurus amyaee* by Richard D Reams**



***Nephruirus amyae* by Daniel Saliba**

30. Our new bros, Luis and Zander, were a real challenge to the relationship between Ignacio and me. Ignacio and Luis had drifted off into a tight Hispanic bond gringos are incapable of. They spoke Spanish together and there was a deep emotional current between them. The increasing distance between Nachobro and me was frightening and I felt it was time for a deep four bro talk.

That was the right decision. While laying emotions on the table was not necessary for Luis and Ignacio, it was helpful for Zander and me. We gringos needed their help in steering through these turbulent waters. And Luis saw the solution right off.

“Well, I think we all would benefit by trading bros every day. I scarcely know you, Aiden, but we will be best buds today. And tomorrow I will go back to Ignacio for a day.”

That was indeed a very simple solution and it worked like a charm. Luis quickly charmed me as I had long been attached to Ignacio and was attuned to his Hispanic mind and his charmingsmile. Luis and I developed a unique lingo all our own. Basically I spoke my rudimentary Spanish with him and he answered in English, which was easy for him as he knew both languages well, and he was very talented at expressing his feelings. This worked like a charm and I soon began exploring his mind, and I enjoyed the adventure.

The next day Zander and I played best buds. We were very much alike, both emotionally dependent bros. But he cast me in a role I had never played before, his macho, stable big bro. Nothing could be further from my basic dependent nature, but I decided to try it on, just for fun. And I learned to like playing the strong bro role with him. As I thoroughly knew my way around Ignacio’s mind I just pretended to be him. It was fun, and I discovered rooms in my mind I never knew existed before.





Luis and Zander



Aiden and Ignacio

31. Thanks to Luis' program of "bros for a day," he, Zander, Ignacio and I were now tight knit exploring buds. We certainly missed Jimba and David and their people in the Simpson Desert, but Zander filled in the best he could. He was born and raised in the Oz desert and was totally comfortable with both the "white fella way" and the "black fella way." That helped us immensely in interactions with people on the road, something a Gringo, a Chicno, and a Mexicano were totally clueless about.

And boy, oh boy, what a road it was, as we headed deep into the into the sands of Tanami. Luis was a very skilled driver and shifted in and out of four wheel drive smoothly. But we got stuck in the dunes often. We had the drill down pat and each of us played a role in getting out the shovel, jack, and boards, jacking Van up, filling in the holes, placing the boards under the each wheel, letting Van back down, gunning the engine, and pushing like hell. Once we were rolling again, someone would inevitably declare, "we are the jacking bros of the Tanami!" and we all had a good laugh.

The billabongs became increasingly scarce out across the sands. But we were not on any sort of schedule, and when anyone spotted any green trees on the Nullarbor horizon, Luis headed across country to it. I no longer bothered to declare, "last one in is a rotten egg," as the instant Van rolled to a stop, we ripped off our clothes and dove into the cool water.

While we were sitting in the sun after our dip, the cutest *Varanus brevicauda* (Shor-tailed Pygmy Monitor) joined us soaking up the rays.



***Varanus brevicauda* by Stephen Mohony**



***Varanus brevicauda* by Eric Pianka**



***Varanus brevicauda* by Anders Zimmy**

32. After our afternoon at the billabong in the Tanami Desert, Luis and Ignacio decided to go on a rabbit hunt. Zander and I did not want to tag along as that would disturb the rabbits and make their hunt more difficult, so we sat on a dune top and watched them from afar. They were totally attuned to one another's body language and did not use any words to communicate, moving as a single organism. Luis would slowly approach the rabbit from the front to distract it, while Naacho inched forward from behind the animal until he had a good spear shot. He seldom missed.

Zander and I had our routine down pat, skinning the rabbits, threading them on the skewer sticks, building the fire and roasting them. After the feast Luis' yidaki playing and Ignacio's beautiful singing were the best dessert imaginable.

We donned the headlamps and headed out on our gecko walk. In a matter of mere minutes, I kid you not, Luis had caught three tiny *Crenadactylus horni* (Central Uplands Clawless Geckos).

"Luisbro, how the hell do you do it?" I wanted to know.

"Come with me Aiden and I'll show you."

He found many more but I simply could not see them at a distance like he did, by picking out the flashes of their eye shines in the grass. Afterwards I enjoyed holding my head near near his when we got the tissue samples.



***Crenadactylus horni* by Brendan Schembri**



***Crenadactylus horni* by Jordan mulder**





***Crenadactylus horni* by velocitams**

33. We were stumbling back from our gecko walk. As we crested the last dune, Zander sang out, “Hot dog” and grabbed into the sand, coming up with a little snake. He said it as a *Brachyuropis fasciolatus* (Narrow-banded Shovel-nosed Snake). We grew alarmed when he said it was elapid, and we worried all Aussies were Steve Irwin types, and we relayed how we had our fill of these danger-addicted kids back on Tommy’s station. He reassured us that this little snake was not dangerous and that he was not a thrill-seeking snake handler.



***Brachyuropis fasciolatus* by Stephan Mahoney**



***Brachyurophis fasciolatus* by Bruce Edley**



***Brachyurophis fasciolatus* by Stephen Mahoney**

34. As dawn broke I lay in my sleeping bag pondering yesterday. We had each played our roles, hunting and cooking rabbits, playing the yidaki and singing, and finding herps on our night walkabout. But Zander's finding the shovel-nosed snake got me to thinking. Here we have a native Australian herper with us and we are not encouraging him to participate more.

I am always an advocate of solving problems by bro-talking and while we were sitting in the morning sun sipping our potions of half-dissolved Nescafe and sugar crystals I spoke up.

“Zanderbro, that was a wonderful *Brachyuophis fasciolatus* you showed us last night. How can you help us find more species we are missing?”

I was shocked out of my mind when shy Zander broke out into tears,

“Luis and I have herped all over Oz and together we have found lots of pygopodids. But now he is too busy jabbering away in Spanish with Ignacio to pay any attention to me.”

Wow, that said it all. Ignoring our emotions was getting in the way of herping, and I needed to take action. I suggested that Zander should return to the front seat next to driver Luis, his long-time herp bro, and help guide us to special honey holes of pygopodids. Ignacio and I sit would return to sitting together in the back seat, which delighted me.

And it worked like a charm. We had not been rolling long when Zander started enthusiastically talking with Luis and pointing to a sandy hill in the distance with lots of flat rocks. Luis bumped Van across country to the hill and Zander shot out the door and started flipping like a maniac. In no time flat he had a beautiful *Delma desmosa* (Desert Delma) in hand and Luis gave him a big hug and we dubbed Alexander, Pygobro.



***Delma desmosa* by Jari Cornelis**



Alexander



Zander Pygobro



© Brendan Schembri

***Delma desmosa* by Brendan Schembri**



***Delma desmosa* by Jules Farquhar**

35. I was quite happy how things were starting to come together for us four herpbros. I had no idea before that Alexander was so strongly interested in pygopodid lizards. And I now had a greater appreciation for Luis' interests in Geckos after he demonstrated to me his amazing talents with eye shines

So Nachobro and I decided to literally take a “back seat” approach and let Luis and Zander lead our adventures in Western Australia. Luis took the track out across the Tanami Desert and he was determined to get to Lake Lewis. Even though it is spelled differently he wanted to see his name-sake playa.

It was one difficult track to follow out into the dry lake bed. We got stuck a few times but the jacking bros were pros. Ignacio and I had explored playas in the Sonoran Desert, but this one was absolutely enormous. It was certainly the middle of nowhere and there was no billabong to dip in, no trees to sit under, and no rabbits to hunt.

After dark we donned on our headlamps and headed into the dunes along the edge of the playa. It looked like the night was gunnabe a skunking, but just as we were about to give up, Louis sung out, “Hijole!” and there in his hand was a *Suta manachus* (Inland Hooded Snake), a small elapid that looked for all the world like the *Tantilla wilcoxi* (Chihuahuan Black-headed Snake) Ignacio and I had once found in the Huachuca Mountains of Arizona.



***Suta monachus* by Jordan Mulder**



***Tantilla wilcoxi* by Erik Enderson**



***Delma desmosa* by Tom Brennan**



***Suta monachus* by Jules Farquhar**

36. Luis decided we should sleep at Lake Lewis and spend another day and night exploring the area. It was an incredible star studded night as we lay in our sleeping bags brotalking and gazing at the moonrise. Zander described how he planned to do DNA comparisons of all forty species of pygopodid lizards. Luis wanted to study the evolution of Knob-tailed Geckos of the genus *Nephrurus*.

The sun rose like a fire ball out of hell and Zander was raring to go. He had been up since dawn and had studied all the dune tops with his binoculars and spotted one with flipable rocks he intuited would be good for pygopodids.

I had just enough time to gulp down my Nescafe and sugar potion and we were off on the long walk to Pygobro's dune. Half way there I spotted a dragon lizard and Ignacio helped me noose it. I was delighted to discover it was *Tympanocryptis centralis* (Centralian Earless Dragon), a species that has always interested me.

I had forgotton to bring my canteen and was becoming severely dehydrated. Ignacio came to my rescue and gave me a few sips from his canteen.

"I see a little tree over in the arroyo. Let's go sit together in the shade and rest."

"You're always on, Nachobro."





***Tympanocryptis centralis* by Owen Lishmund**



***Tympanocryptis centralis* by James Bennett**

37. With Ignacio's help I stumbled back onto my feet and we continued the long march to Zander's dune. When we was going ape-shit flipping rocks like a maniac.

"How's it goin, Zanderbro?" I inquired.

"This is absolutely incredible! I have been doing pygopods for a year now and this is the first time I have ever scored two species on one dune. I found this *Lialis burtonis* (Burton's Snake-lizard) out foraging. It's a wide ranging active foraging species and I am interested in seeing if there are any geographic differences at all in its DNA. I bet there are none. Then under this last rock I just got a *Delma butleri* (Unbanded Delama) and I want to compare it with the other *Delma* species I have

samples from. They are sedentary and secretive and I bet I am gunna find lots of DNA differences.”

“Wow, Zander, you are one hell of a Pygobro!”





***Delma butleri* by Nick Volpe**



***Lialis burtonis* by Andrea Ruggeri**



***Delma butleri* by jari_cornelis**



***Lialis burtonis* by Jake Orthman**

38. We all joined Pygobro flipping the rocks on the dune top and found five *Delma butleri* (Unbanded Delma) in all. Afterwards we helped him get a voucher photo and a tissue sample from each one.

“Well, bros, here we are in the middle of nowhere with no shade and no billabong to cool off in. We’re gunna get our asses fried out here,” Ignacio lamented.

“I have scanned this whole area with the binocs, and there is an old windmill in that direction and it just might be functional enough to pump a bit of water,” Zander declared.

“Lesgoferit, Luis encouraged.”

And off we trudged. But distance can be difficult to judge through binocs, and it was much farther than we thought. Ignacio passed his canteen around and we each had one last small sip. It sank in to me that we were in deep trouble.

“If that old windmill no longer pumps and the cement tank is dry, we are dead meat. Without additional water there is no way we could ever get back to Van,” I declared.

We arrived at a lone tree and collapsed in its little patch of shade. Luis seemed to have a little more strength than Ignacio, Zander, or I. He suggested he would take the empty canteens and stagger on to the windmill. If there was water, he would fill them and return to us. If it was dry, we were all goners for sure.

“Buena suerte, Bro,” Ignacio called out as Luis trudged off. Hours passed and I drifted off into my own delirious goner-land. Then I felt the cold metal of the canteen on my lips and took a sip and looked up at Luis’ beautiful smile. He got us rehydrated and we made it to the cement tank. No one needed to declare, “Last one in is a rotten egg.”

As we were lounging in the cool water we were shocked when two Aboriginal youths walked up Theyspoke little English, but Luis had lots of experience communicating with Aboriginals. He was able to determine that the youth was on a walkabout as part of his coming of age rituals. He said his people lived along the road a little long way.

“But, Birani kept talking about ‘Werni’ and ants. I don’t get that part at all,” Luis declared.

Luis was able to relay to Birrani that we were interested in lizards.

“Birrani describes what I think are two species of *Nephrurus* here, and says he can show them to us after dark.”

Luis was excited out of his mind as we we donned our head lamps and went off following Birrani. After a little long while he found a *Nephrurus levis* (Common Knob-tailed Gecko). He said the other one was less common, and we kept looking. When we were about to give up, Birrani pointed to something far ahead at the base of the dune. We sprinted after him, and Luis screamed, “ihijole” *Nephrurus laevissimus!*” It was the fairly rare Smooth Knob-tailed Gecko. Luis was in ecstasy as he never before had found two species of *Nephrurus* at one locality.



***Nephrurus laevissimus* by John Sullivan**



***Nephrorus laevissimus* by birdmark 96**





***Nephrurus levis* by Fernando Mateos-González**



Nephurus levis by Owen Lishmund



Luis



Birani

Waru

39. We were delighted we made it back to Van alive, and Luis and Zander were all smiles as both had found two species of their favorite reptiles. Luis was able to start Van right up, and we were on our way deeper into the Tanami Desert.

We came to a large Aboriginal town. Xander got out and chatted with people, but came back rather quickly.

“It’s called Yuendumus and the people seemed to be all stirred up about a murder. I think we should get the hell out of here. But I was able to get directions to the Werni camp, whatever in the heck that is.”

The camp was located at a billabong at the end of a very faint track. It seemed quite posh and there was a very dignified gentleman sitting in a canvass “director’s chair.” He introduced himself as Werner. He offered us brandy and was disappointed we declined the use of alcohol.

“I am filming “Where the Green Ants Dream,” about the conflict between large mining operations and the Aboriginal people. But it is not going well, partly because I am German and the people associate me with those fanatic Lutherans who came to South Australia in the 19th century. But I always produce my work of art at the authentic location and this will be no exception.

Werner was very knowledgeable about these mining fester pockets that defile the landscape of Western Australia and filled us in how to avoid them. He was very excited to learn we were looking for lizards and snakes, and politely asked if he could film us.

“It would be an honor,” I quickly accepted.

We strapped on our headlights and set out on a night walkabout with Werner’s camera rolling. We soon chanced onto a very feisty *Pseudechis australis* (Mulga Snake) and he got lots of good footage, but he was severely disappointed we were not into “Steve Irwin” behavior.



Pseudechis australis by aleckarcz



***Pseudechis australis* by Aidan Jackson-Kightly**





Werner Herzog



Steve Irwin

40. One of the weird things about herp adventures is that sometimes a person just plain gets stuck in some gear. These playas were not particularly appealing to Ignacio, Zander, and me, as they lacked trees and billabongs and much of the area was barren salt flats. But, Luis loved them, and it was a great challenge to drive to the very sandy. He loved driving challenges, and he enjoyed the “jacking bros” sessions in the sand that were an integral part of getting Van to the playa.

Luis became fixated on “Lake Mackay,” another god-forsaken playa in the middle of nowhere. It is the largest such playa in Western Australia and is totally uninhabited. Luis found a track off the Tanami Road and headed for Mackay but eventually he had to drive cross county. We had to dig Van out of the sand four times, but Luis eventually got us there.

There was not one tree anywhere to be seen. But Zander had climbed up on the Van’s roof and scanned in all directions with his binoculars. I am clueless how and why he identified a particular dune as good habitat but he was convinced it would yield pay dirt.

Luis drove towards the dune as far as possible, then we got out for long walk. But even herp bros can learn from their mistakes, so this time we planned our dune expedition more cautiously. We each carried two canteens full of water and two trail bars when we abandoned Van and trudged out across the playa.

The dune was indeed much like the one Zander led us to at Lake Lewis. It had scattered volcanic rocks that were tunable. We flipped like maniacs for two hours when Zander sang out, “*Pygopus nigriceps*. This is about as far inland as the Western Hooded Scaly-foot gets.”

We helped Zander get photos and a tissue sample of the pygopodid and then rested in the shade of a high dune. Ignacio spotted a lizard on a rock in the swale and he inched our way towards and he succeeded in noosing it a *Ctenophorus nuchalis* (Central Netted Dragon).

‘I think I am gunna start a study of dragons with this catch. Let’s get a tissue sample,’ Ignacio declared.

“You’re on bro,” I encouraged, and this was the start of our Oz agamid research project.



***Pygopus nigriceps* by Josh Martin**



***Ctenophorus nuchalis* by Lachlan Copeland**





Alexander at Lake Mackay

41. After we finished taking photos and tissue samples of the *Pygopus nigriceps* (Western Hooded Scaly-foot) and the *Ctenophorus nuchalis* (Central Netted Dragon) we were very tired from a long strenuous day of walking and flipping and we hunkered down in the shade cast by a very high dune and brotalked until dark.

Luis was very anxious to find some species of *Neprurus* (Knob-tailed Gecko) at Lake Mackay and he gave us a pep talk as we put on our headlights. About midnight we decided to give up and as I was stumbling back to our sleeping swale,

and there it was. Luis declared it a *Nephrurus vertebralis* (Midline Knob-tailed Gecko) and he gave me a wonderful hug.



Aiden with *Nephrurus vertebralis*



***Nephrurus vertebralis* by Frank Doschandol**



***Nephrurus vertebralis* by Frank Doschandol**



***Nephurus vertebralis* by r_o_b27**

42. I for one was glad to see Lake Mackay in the rear view mirror.

“Luis, why the hell are you so enchanted by these playas?”

“I dunno, Aiden, I think it is because they are so barren and no one likes them, yet they have hidden jewels like that absolutely exquisite *Nephurus vertebralis* you found.”

“Well, I never would have found it if it was not for Zander leading us to the honey hole. Zander, how did you know that dune would have a gem like that?”

“I was born and raised here in the red center and have herped non stop since I could walk. My many years of experience have trained by habitat compass. It is all subconscious. It’s sort of like Pavlov and his dogs. If I get a reward by finding a thrilling species, my subconscious logs in the habitat and files it with the other rewards I have received. Then my subconscious analyses all the data and comes up

with a composite of “good and bad” places. If you asked me what parameters define a “good” habitat for a species, I would be clueless to answer. But my subconscious mind knows it when it sees it.”

I dunno, Zander, all this sounds like some kinda mysticism. Are you a mystic guy?”

“Well, yes and no. The Aboriginals have wandered this desert for maybe sixty thousand years and know it like the back of their hand. They had to know how to find water and edible plants and animals to survive. The human species evolved as hunters and all those eons of natural selection has fixed “habitat-recognition” genes in our DNA. But for most people it lies deeply buried by all the noise of today’s world. When I was a kid, my best bud was an Aboriginal boy, Daklu. He taught me to just sit and meditate to let the spirit of the desert reach my core being. You Yanks are clueless really. Your culture is totally driven by lust for money and power, and you do not know how to commune with the natural world.”

Just then Luis took a side track to a billabong and we had a long overdue dip. As we sat on the bank in the shade I continued to try to understand Zander.

“O.K., Zanderbro, I once read the “Art of Happiness, and the Dali Lama said the power of meditation can be tested by scientific methods. How can you demonstrate that it works?”

“That is easy. You see those clumps of spinifex out there? If you will just be quiet for a while, I will meditate on “skink” and point out which clump it lives in.”

“Cheese n crackers got all muddy, Zander, that sounds like pure BS to me.”

“Well, Aiden, you are either a scientist or you are not. I will demonstrate this power to you. Just sit quietly, if you can, and I will meditate on skinks and then we will go out and see if the clump that speaks to me has one or does not.”

“You’re on, Zanderbro.”

It was hard for me to sit quietly for a little long while, but I managed to do it. Afterwards Zander led me to the clump that called out “skink” to him, there it was, a *Morethia ruficauda* (Lined Firetail Skink) . We searched all the other spinifex clumps and found no lizards.



***Morethia ruficauda* by Jérôme Bosset**



***Morethia ruficauda* by Hanna Michel**



***Morethia ruficauda* by Isaac Clarey**



Alexander

43. We were finally beginning to fully appreciate Alexander. Here we had a herp bro, born and raised not just in the outback, but the red center of this desert continent. .And he has been chasing desert reptiles his whole life. He was fully

familiar with both the white fella Station culture in which he was raised and with Aboriginal people, beginning with his childhood best bud, Daklu. I was not sure what to make of his uncanny ability to identify good reptile habitats and wanted to learn more about that.

“So, Zander, is this ability of yours to identify good reptile habitat something you were born with, or something you developed from experience.?”

“Well, Aiden, like all human traits it is both genetic and environmental. It takes a certain genetic personality structure to be able to sit quietly and commune with other species. But I have had a life-long practice of doing just that. When the other boys were busy competing against one another in sports, I just walked out into the desert and sat a spell with Daklu and he gradually taught me how to be open to perceiving the spirit of our wild bros. All life is descended from a common ancestor and thus my bloodline is continuous back through time with every other living organism. It’s a matter of learning to listen to your kin, really.

“One of the many deficiencies you yanks have is confusing spirituality with religion. There is a big difference between the unknown and the unknowable. The unknown world excites the spirit and beckons the exploration of new places, new ideas, and new bros among the living organisms. Religion is the exact opposite. It destroys that excitement and encourages people to cling to imagined permanent “truths” based on untestable hypothesis. Religion is opposed to the spirit of adventure.

“Regarding exploring the unknown, there is something I want to do in this area. Luis got to explore his namesake, Lake Lewis. I have a namesake here in Western Australia, Alexander Island. It is situated between two arms of the Fitzroy River and I have dreamed my whole life of herping there. It is located in the upper Fitzroy far above Fitzroy Crossing, so we should be able to avoid other humans, and it is far enough away from the coast that there are no Salties, so we can enjoy the water without worry.”

“You’re on bro.”



***Varanus gilleni* by Stu Nielsen**

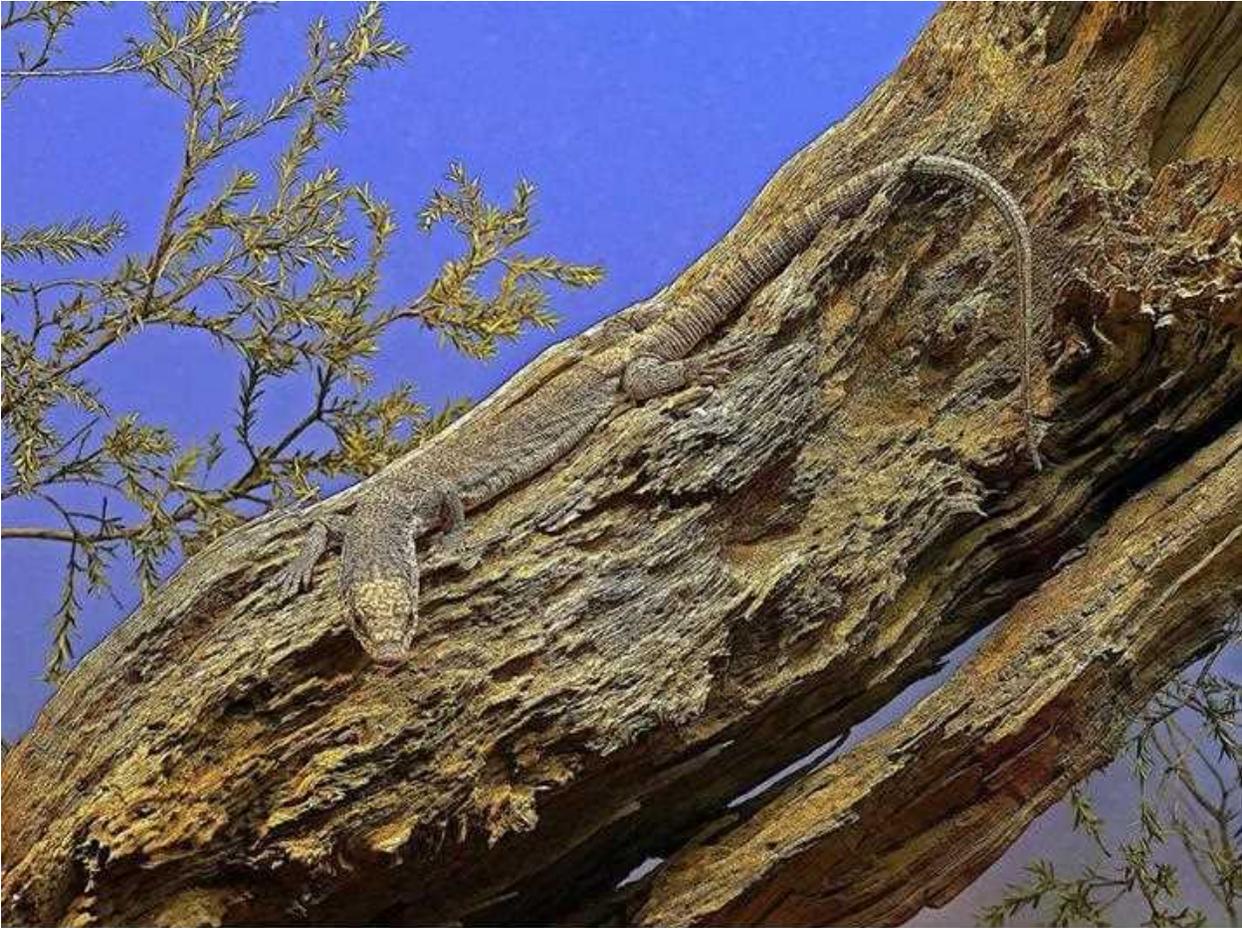


Alexander

Aiden



***Varanus gilleni* by Stephen Mahony**



***Varanus gilleni* by Simon Grove**

44. We were glad to finally emerge from the dunes of the Tanami Desert. Anywhere except North America the defining characteristic of a desert is sand with no vegetations, I mean to tell you absolutely none. Back in Arizona Ignacio and I grew up in the Sonoran Desert, but much of it is more like a Thornscrub with Saguaros and Paloverdes and other trees. That would never pass for a desert here in Oz.

And the billabongs made a delightful reappearance. We were addicted to our dips during the hot afternoons and Luis was a whiz at finding water and trees for our “camps.” They were not really camps as we did not use any tents, just slept under the stars. And now that we were out of the pure sand Luis and Igncaio could go on their late afternoon rabbit hunts and Zander and I built the fire and cooked lagamorphs on stick skewers. Afterwards Luis played his yidaki and Ignacio sang. He had a heavenly soprano voice that touched me deeply.

After sundown we donned our headlamps and went gecko walking. Luis was hoping for a Kimberly species, but was content to get another *Nephrurus levis* (Common Knob-tailed Geckos).

“This is a wide-ranging desert species and I am interested in getting sequences to look at its phylogeography,” Luis declared as he was getting a tissue sample and voucher photos.



***Nephrurus levis* by koppoe93herping**



***Nephruroides levis* by Daniel Meier**



Alexander

Luis



45. We slept under the stars at the billabong and arose at dawn to greet the day, but soon enough the sun came up like a fireball out of hell. Zander scanned the horizon with his binoculars and identified a distant hill that looked good for pygopodids (Scaly-foot Lizards) and we headed out before the scorcher really set in.

On the long walk Ignacio spotted a dragon basking on the rocks and he and I worked together and we managed to noose the *Ctenophorus isolepis* (Military Dragon), adding a species to our tissue collection for studying the evolution of Australian agamids.

The crest of Zander's hill was adorned with an abundance of flat rocks and we flipped like maniacs for three hours. Eventually Zander uncovered a *Pygopus steelescottii* (Northern Hooded Scale-foot), a species new to his collection of pygopodid tissues.



***Ctenophorus isolepis* by tanyahattingh**



Pygopus steelescotti by **Brandon Sideleau**



***Pygopus steelescotti* by Paul Freed**



***Ctenophorus isolepis* by enekoazkue**

**Luis****Alexander**

46. We were starting to wear ourselves thin walking every day to Zander's pygopodid honey holes and flipping like maniacs. And we had traveled far enough north that the climate was quite tropical and the heat and humidity also were zapping our strength.

"I think we should have a rest day relaxing here at the billabong," Ignacio proposed.

"I'm with you," Luis chimed in, and Zander and I both gave our thumbs up.

We spent most of the day floating in the water and brotalking. Late afternoon Ignacio and Luis went on their rabbit hunt and Zander and I gathered sticks for the fire and to serve as skewers.

As they were returning with the lagomorphs, two youths came up on horses. We immediately recognized them as herp bros; reptiles exuded from their every pore. Billy and Bobby said they often herped at this billabong and then slept here.

We invited them to join us in the rabbit feast and the yidaki playing and singing afterwards. Later Bobby said he was very interested in Geckos and asked what species we had seen and Luis rattled off the scientific species names.

“Well we can easily help you double that list, starting with that *Strophurus ciliaris* right over there,” Bobby announced pointing to the gecko on a nearby ree trunk.

We enjoyed showing our new bros our techniques for getting a tissue sample and a voucher photo with Bobby gently holding the beautiful Northern Spiny-tailed Gecko..



***Strophurus ciliaris* by Tom Hunt**



***Strophurus ciliaris* by Owen Lishmund**



***Strophurus ciliaris* by sam_banks**



***Strophurus ciliaris* by rubynats**



Billy Snakes Bobby the Lizard Wizard of Oz

47. We sat in the morning sun at the billabong chatting with our new herp bros, Billy and Bobby. They loved reptiles, and enjoyed just catching and releasing them and were not into photography or DNA studies. I was not sure what I thought about that. For many years I had been infected with the “collect the entire set” mania, first with photos, and now also with tissue samples for DNA. But did those addictions detract, or add to my enjoyment of reptiles? I wasn’t sure, really.

Billy was into elapid snakes. Not the deadly ones, but the other hundred or so Australian species. He proposed we go on a “whipsnake” hunt this morning. He loved chasing them down, and he knew the best areas for them in the desert near the billabong. He said they were lizard feeders and we should head out as soon as it started warming up.

We spread out in a wide line and began walking out across the desert. It was starting to get hot and Billy yelled, “whip”, and sprinted and dove after it, grabbing the long snake by the tail and slinging it between his legs protected by Levis. He began slowly pulling it out by the tail until he could grasp it just behind the head without getting bitten.. He grinned from ear to ear and declared, “They don’t call me Billy Snakes fur nittin.”

“Wow, Billy that is the exact same technique I use on our *Nastycophis* whipsnakes in North America. Where did you learn it?”

“I devised it myself after getting bitten. I am surprised it is used elsewhere. Once the Whipsnake is in the hand it settles down and I do not need to hold it behind the head. It’s a magnificent *Demansia reticulata* (Reticulated Whipsnake). Would you like to hold it?”

“Thanks, I will pass. But it is interesting that like *Masticophis flagellum* (Coachwhips) in North America they have large eyes for binocular vision to facilitate capturing their lizard prey.”



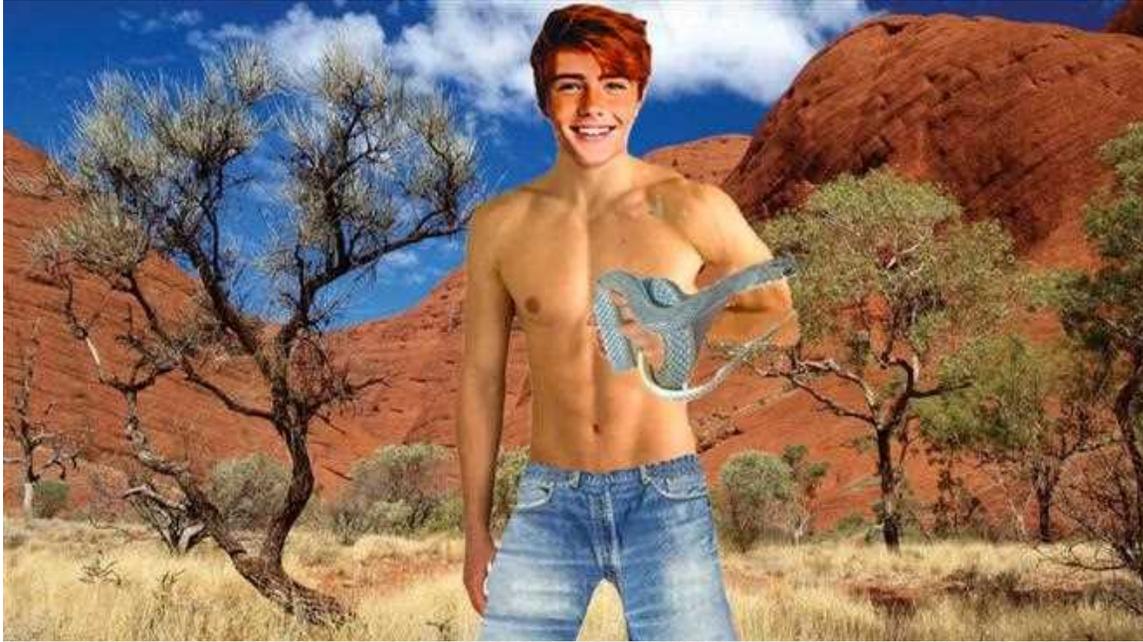
***Demansia reticulata* by Adam Brice**



***Demansia reticulata* by Ivan T**



***Demansia reticulata* by Adam Brice**



***Demansia reticulata* by Adam Brice**



***Masticophis flagellum* by Daniel Heuclin**

48. We thoroughly enjoyed catching the whipsnake, but we were hot and sweaty and decided to return to the shade of the billabong and float in the cool water brotalking. Billy and Bobby had never been outside Australia and were eager to chat with us about other places. They were not fond of Oz's "macho" culture, and narrow-minded attitudes about orientaiomns Luis described the diverse cultures of Mexico, and Ignacio and I did the same for the USA. After a long discussion we concluded that it was difficult to find rural settings anywhere that are liberal. Ranchers need to be self-reliant and that selects for conservative mindsets. We recommended they join others in Australia who are working to promote a more accepting attitude about orientations.

Bobby and I got way into Gecko talking. He had thus far enjoyed just catching and releasing lizards and he had eschewed doing research projects, but I detected his personality structure had the makings of a scientist drawn to addressing questions, a herpetologist, as well as a herper.

I discussed my plans to examine the phylogeny of *Nephrurus* and he seemed very interested

“Well, Aiden, your planed trip around Western Australia will not give you an opportunity to sample the Eastern species. Maybe I could get tissues from them for you, and we could collaborate on the project.”

“You’re on Bobby.” And that was the start of a long term Gecko bros collaboration.

Billy wanted to learn hunting techniques and went off with Ignacio and Luis on their rabbit hunt, while Bobby helped Zander and me with the preparations.

After our yidaki time we donned headlamps and headed out on a Gecko walk. In no time Bobby spotted the eye shines of a *Strophurus elderi* (Jewelled Gecko) in a Spifex clump.



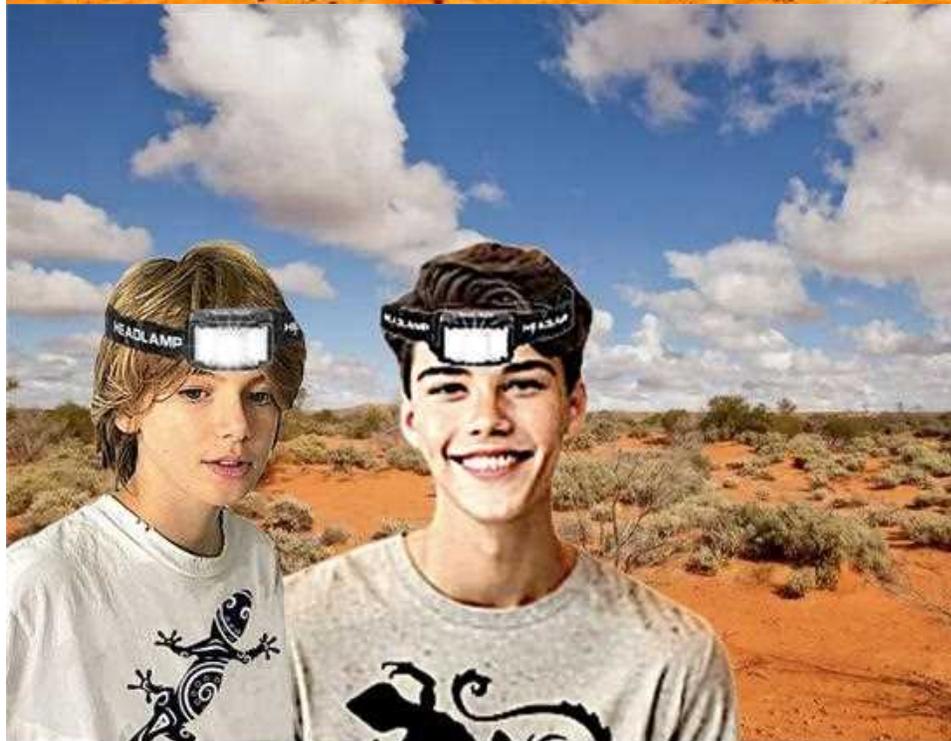
***Strophurus elderi* by Nick Volpe**



***Strophurus elderi* by dhfischer**



***Strophurus elderi* by Connor Margetts**



Aiden

Bobby

49. When a herper group gets as large as we six, it is important to make sure that everyone has an opportunity. Zander was starting to get bent out of shape as Bobby's Geckos and Billy's snakes were taking center stage.

"O.k. bros, its pygopodid time," Zander timidly proposed. "I have been studying the landscape with my binocs and I see a hill with good habitat. It's quite a walk, but I am hoping I can add a pygo species there. So, bros, a flippin we goes."

"You're on Zanderbro," I reassured him.

We had learned our lesson from having almost died of dehydration on one of these "Zander walks," and we each carried two canteens.

On the long hot walk Luis spotted a dragon perched on a ledge. I got out my rod and helped him noose the lizard. It turned out to be a *Ctenophorus slateri* (Slater's Ring-tailed Dragon), new to us.

"Wow this lizard reminds me a lot of *Gambelia wislizenii* (Long-nosed Leopard Lizard). I wonder if it also preys on other lizards," I remarked.



***Gambelia wislizenii* by Pete Zani**



***Ctenophorus slateri* by pglauto**



***Ctenophorus slateri* by Daniel Meier**



***Ctenophorus slateri* by Jérôme Bosset**



Aiden noosing *Ctenophorus slateri*

50. When we got Zander's pygo hill we discovered that the rocks were quite large and it took two bros to lift them. I saw this as an opportunity and suggested that Zander and Bobby work together as tension was developing between the two even though Geckos and Pygopodids are nearest relatives. We flipped the large rocks for several hours and eventually Zander got a *Delma tincta* (Excitable Delma), new to his collection.

"Wow, this looks a lot like *Delma dumosa*. I can't wait to compare their DNA, Zander proclaimed, and he gave his flippin-bro Bobby a big hug.



***Delama tincta* by Dylan Goldspink**



***Delma tinctoria* by Richard D Reams**



***Delma tinctoria* by aleckarcz**



Bobby and Zander

51. Sadly, the time had come for us to say good bye to our new herp bros Bobby and Billy. It had been a fun and productive few days, but they needed to head back to their cattle station, and we decided it was time for us to head for the Fitzroy River, We found a great remote place to camp and we dove right it.

Luis yelled “turtle,” grabbed his snorkel and mask and dove in, He managed to catch the pelomedusid, a *Chelodina walloyarrina* (Kimberly Side-necked Turtle).

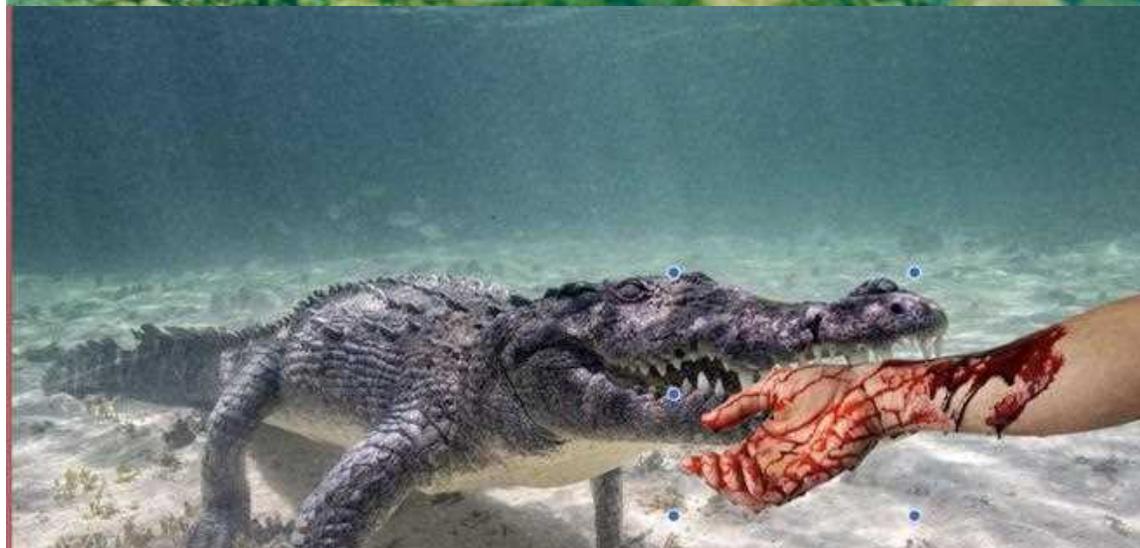
That is when tragedy struck. .Luis was so excited following the turtle he did not see the *Crocodylus porosus* (Saltwater Crocodile) until it was too late. The crocodile latched onto his arm and pulled him under. He managed to pull his arm free but it was shredded. Luis and I were helicoptered to the Darwin hospital. “Down under” took on a more ominous meaning and Ignacio and I decided to fly back to the US, for additional reconstruction of his arm.



***Chelodina walloyarrina* by National Aquarium**



Alexander with *Chelodina*





Jimba



David



The Gecko Bros



Billy Snakes Bobby the Lizard Wizard of Oz



Alexander

Luis



Aiden

Ignacio