

Up close and personal with snakes

May 3 2011



Melissa Bruton with a woma python (*Aspidites ramsayi*) out in the southern Brigalow Belt of Queensland and New South Wales.

A death adder has a face only a mother could love, but that hasn't stopped PhD student Melissa Bruton, from the University of Queensland's School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Management from getting up close and personal.

Ms Bruton was recently awarded a grant by the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland to support her research into [reptiles](#) in the southern Brigalow Belt region of Queensland and New South Wales.

“The Brigalow Belt is a well-known reptile diversity hotspot and there are a large number of species present, including some that are endemic to the region,” Ms Bruton said.

“The main goal of my project is to work out how different habitats affect reptile diversity and abundance out here and why some species have declined while others have increased in altered habitats.”

Like much of Australia, The Brigalow Belt has been subject to widespread agricultural clearing.

“It is important to understand how different ecosystem types at different stages of recovery (i.e. cleared, regrowth, uncleared) influence the reptile communities, so recovery efforts and future clearing legislation can be guided by accurate information,” she said.

So far Ms Bruton has observed not only death adders, but also pale-headed snakes, Brigalow Scaley-foots, the shy freckled monitor, and several other species in the area.

Melissa has a particular interest in the elusive woma python.

“The second aim of my project is to work out how often and how far woma pythons move and the habitats they use. To do this, I will be implanting radio-transmitters into the body cavity of several larger pythons and radio-tracking them for one year each.”

After finishing just one summer of trapping Ms Bruton already has 8 woma pythons to study. They range from Big Bobby, over 2m and James weighing in at 3.5 kilos to a petit 1kg python yet to be named.

So far, she has learned that woma pythons like to travel, but there's no place like home, even right on her own doorstep.

“I have 2 womas in the same burrow - Katie and James - about 300m from my quarters,” she said.

“The tracked womas are quite mobile but early indications are that they return to preferred burrow sites”.

“Each woma will be tracked every second day for a minimum of 12 months so we will know a lot more about these elusive [pythons](#) in 12 months' time.”

Provided by University of Queensland

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