

FEATURES

THE SIN OF ANECDOTAL WRITING

An anecdote is defined as a short account of an interesting or humorous incident. The word is derived from Greek, *anekdota*, "things unpublished." Nevertheless, published writings about animals have often consisted of anecdotes. Increasing pressures on modern-day authors, reviewers and editors to avoid unnecessarily lengthy, rambling or unfocused accounts, and to achieve maximum economy in publishing results of research have caused anecdotal writing to fall into ill repute. A statement by a reviewer that a manuscript offered for publication is anecdotal has become a severe condemnation. It makes no difference (to some reviewers, at least) whether the "anecdote" is a humorous account relating how the author missed sleep on his last field trip, or instead describes previously unobserved aspects of a species' life history. Any sort of narrative is equated with an anecdote, and a single sentence mentioning time and place of a specific incident can be cause for the entire paper to be branded as anecdotal, with the implication that it is, therefore, unsuited for publication.

Admittedly, there are anecdotes that add nothing to the scientific merit of a paper; some may inject a touch of humor, and some may only amount to "padding." Nevertheless, I contend that narrative accounts of rarely observed events in species' life histories sometimes have much merit and value. On the University of Kansas Natural History Reservation where 37 species of amphibians and reptiles are known to occur, I have spent 37 consecutive years of field work, yet I have observed the complete sequence of courtship and copulation in only 14% of the resident species. Likewise, I have observed the sequence of stalking, capture and eating of prey in just 14% of the species, not all the same as those of the first group. I cite these figures to make the point that even routine occurrences in the lives of amphibians and reptiles easily escape attention because of secretive habits. When an observer is fortunate enough to see and record behavior significant in the natural history of a species, his observations should be published. The advocates of biometrical methods need to recognize that some types of behavior are not readily quantified because they are so rarely observed. Even a single observation may constitute a valuable contribution, and may be a break-through in understanding the species' ecology. There are many kinds of anecdotes, and the fact that some are trivial is a poor excuse for condemning all narrative statements or accounts in scientific writing.

HENRY S. FITCH  
Division of Biological Sciences  
University of Kansas  
Lawrence, Kansas 66045, USA

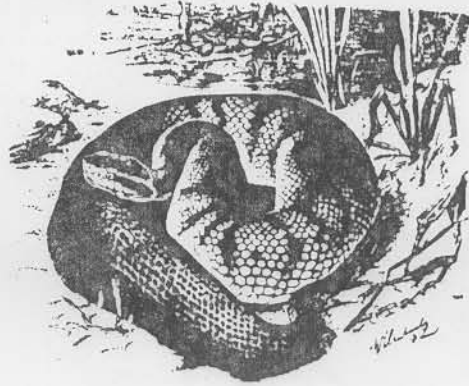


- David Carter: "Ecology of the Lace Monitor: Pre-PhD ideas."
- Murray Littlejohn and G. Watson: "Litoria ewingi in New Zealand: A preliminary analysis of the structure of advertisement calls."
- David Choquenot and Allen Greer: "Intrapopulation and interspecific variation in limb and presacral vertebrae configuration in the genus *Hemijeris*."
- Glen Shea: "Ontogenetic changes and species differences in the dentition of Bluetongue lizards (*Tiliqua*)."
- Richard Shine and Robert Lambeck: "Why does the frillneck lizard have a frill?"
- Terry Annable: "Sloughing behaviour of *Underwoodisaurus milii* in captivity."
- Harry Ehmann: "Post-oviposition egg care by skinks."
- Gregory Mengden: "Phylogeny of pythons."
- Elizabeth Yeatman: "Ecology of *Tiliqua*."
- John Gee: "Subsurface buoyancy control by the sea snake *Pelamis platurus*."
- Harold Heatwole and William Dunson: "Blood and plasma volumes and hematocrits of some marine snakes."
- Arthur Georges: "Nesting ecology of the pig-nosed turtle *Carettochelys insculpta*."
- Michael Thompson: "Nesting ecology and egg physiology of Tuatara, *Sphenodon punctatus*, on Stephens Island, New Zealand."
- Linda Schwarzkopf and R. Brooks: "Nest site selection and offspring sex ratio in painted turtles (*Chrysemys picta*)."
- America Cuff: "Environmental sex determination of the saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*)."
- Richard Longmore: "Atlas of Elapid snakes of Australia. A concept - a product."
- Garry Webb: "The impact of various logging treatments on lizards of a montane eucalypt forest."
- Daniel Lunney, Peggy Eby and Michael O'Connell: "Changes in reptile populations in Mumbulla State Forest, near Bega, NSW, following logging, fire and drought."

RICHARD SHINE  
University of Sydney

ANNUAL ASC MEETING

The Association of Systematics Collections (ASC) will hold its Annual Meeting at the Field Museum, Chicago, Illinois, 11-13 May 1988. An all-day workshop on *Living Collections*, on 13 May, will include representatives from museums, zoos, aquaria, gardens, culture collections, NSF, and NIH. On 12 May there will be a workshop on *Endangered Collections*. For further information contact: The Association of Systematics Collections, 730 11th Street NW, 2nd Floor, Washington, D.C. 20001. (202) 347-2850.



area. The exact location will be announced shortly.  
Abstracts and titles for papers to be presented at this meeting must be submitted by 28 February 1988. A copy of *Guidelines for Abstracts and Papers* may be obtained from: Brian P. Backner, 17 Margaret Road, Sharon, Massachusetts 02067, USA (617-784-7264) or Brett C. Stearns, 2442 Sharon Oaks Drive, Menlo Park, California 94025, USA (415-854-2099). For general information contact Michael J. Uricheck, Department of Chemistry, Western Connecticut State University, Danbury, Connecticut 06810, USA (203-797-4232 or 203-754-6839).

AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY OF HERPETOLOGISTS ANNUAL MEETING 1987

The Australian Society of Herpetologists held its 17th annual meeting on February 13 to 15, 1987, at Edrom Lodge near Eden, New South Wales. The venue was idyllic - an old mansion set in delightful gardens and bushland, 100 metres from a superb beach on Twofold Bay. The warm weather encouraged aquatic activities by the conference participants between formal sessions, and there were probably as many herpetological conversations in the blue Pacific as in the seminar rooms.

Twenty-four papers were presented at the meeting, and about 50 people attended. There was a far greater concentration on ecology (rather than taxonomy, morphology or physiology) and on reptiles (rather than frogs) than has been evident at most previous meetings. David Slip (University of Sydney) won the major student prize for his presentation on ecology of diamond pythons; other student awards went to America Cuff (Macquarie University) for work on environmental sex determination in crocodiles, and to Darryl Houston (University of Sydney) for ecological studies on acrochordid snakes.

The business meeting considered several issues. The society's policy statement on conservation was formally ratified, and new office-bearers elected (President - Dick Barwick; Vice-president - John Coventry; Secretary-treasurer - John Wombey; Public Officer - Ric Longmore; Councilor - Rick Shine). The next A.S.H. meeting has been tentatively scheduled for the third week of August 1988, at the Queensland Museum in Brisbane. Overseas herpetologists are welcome to attend.

A full list of authors and titles at the 1987 meeting is given below:

- Stephen Morton and Craig James: "Diversity of Australia's arid zone lizards: A reappraisal."
- Richard Shine: "Ecological causes for sexual dimorphism in snakes."
- David Slip: "Ecology of diamond pythons: a brief overview."
- Rodney Kennett and Arthur Georges: "Growth and reproduction of *Chelodina longicollis*."
- Darryl Houston: "Where have all my filesnakes gone?"
- David Slip, Richard Shine and Richard Braithwaite: "A radiotelemetric and population ecology study of water pythons, *Liasis fuscus*."