

Stomach Content Note for a Road-killed *Varanus spenceri*

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Abstract - There is a significant lack of dietary records available in literature for wild *Varanus spenceri*. When a wild specimen had been killed by a motor vehicle, the opportunity to examine the specimens stomach contents was taken. The single item found in the stomach contents of the adult *V. spenceri* was the tail of a *Pogona henrylawsoni*; a previously unrecorded prey item.

Introduction

Varanus spenceri is one of Australia's larger monitor species, measuring up to 1.35 m in total length (Lemm and Bedford, 2004). A stocky, ground-dwelling monitor, *V. spenceri* occurs in Black Soil Plains and Mitchell Grass Plains habitats. These habitats are often treeless and in many places offer little vegetation other than Mitchell grass (*Astrebla sp.*). The black clay soil on which these monitors occur develops large cracks and crevices in the ground which can be up to 1.5 m deep (Lemm and Bedford, 2004). These cracks can be patchy in distribution throughout the lizard's range and while cracks may remain in some areas annually, seasonal wet and dry weather conditions, which often include floods, can alter the cracks. *Varanus spenceri* utilizes these cracks for refuge and thermoregulation. Despite the fact that this large species of monitor occurs along at least two major routes through Queensland and the Northern Territory (Cogger, 1994), there are limited published field observations, most of which are based on natural history. Few records of documented prey items exist for *V. spenceri*. Documented dietary items include mammals (primarily *Rattus villosissimus*), elapid snakes, agamids

and insects (primarily beetles and locusts) (Stammer, 1970; Pengilley, 1981; Valentic, 1997). Although agamid lizards have been documented in the diet of *V. spenceri*, a positive identification of one agamid species consumed by *V. spenceri* is documented here.

Observation

On 13 October 2008 at 0930 h along the Landsborough Hwy., 110 km south of Winton, Queensland, a road-killed *V. spenceri* was found on the paved highway. It is estimated to have been deceased for approximately one to two hours. This monitor lizard had been struck on the head by a motor vehicle and there was no apparent external damage to the trunk of the specimen. The specimen measured 460 mm SVL and 890 mm in total length; however, a fresh portion of the tail tip was missing, presumably due to the collision with the motor vehicle. Internal examination revealed the specimen to be male by the presence of testes and lack of a female reproductive tract. Inside the stomach was a tail belonging to a *Pogona henrylawsoni* (Figs. 2 and 3).



Fig. 1. Road-killed adult male *Varanus spenceri* photographed after being moved off the bitumen road. Pattern is typical for the locality and this form seems to be predominately in the eastern part of their range as opposed to specimens with the broad bands on the neck and back from further west.



Fig. 2. *Pogona henrylawsoni* tail removed from stomach.



Fig. 3. Closer view of removed *P. henrylawsoni* tail.

The tail is distinguished as that of a *P. henrylawsoni* as opposed to *P. viticeps* by the presence of enlarged spines at the base of the tail. The tail of *P. henrylawsoni* tapers off close to the base of the tail whereas in *P. viticeps*, the tail narrows consistently to the tip. *Pogona henrylawsoni* is the more common species at this locality; we have yet to establish whether *P. viticeps* occurs in the vicinity of this observation.

Discussion

It was difficult to ascertain whether the entire *P. henrylawsoni* had been consumed and not completely digested, or whether only the tail had been consumed of either a live or road-killed *P. henrylawsoni*. It is likely that *V. spenceri* would prey upon live adult *P. henrylawsoni*. The relationship in size would further suggest that *P. henrylawsoni* would be a manageable meal for a large *V. spenceri*. *Varanus spenceri* occurs throughout most of the range of *P. henrylawsoni* and on the morning of this record, three live specimens of *P. henrylawsoni* were seen within 1 km of the dead monitor and approximately ten other live *P. henrylawsoni* were seen that morning, suggesting that they are common in this part of *V. spenceri* range. This record is evidence that if nothing else *V. spenceri* will scavenge on dead *P. henrylawsoni*, but it is likely that this is a case of

predation.

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