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NOTES ON THE BIOLOGY OF *VARANUS TRISTIS*

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Varanus tristis, commonly called the "Mournful" or "Racehorse" Goanna, is a medium-sized arboreal monitor lizard (Fig. 1). Although the species is widespread, occurring virtually throughout Australia, rather little has been reported about its biology. Two races are currently recognized, a nearly pure black form, *tristis*, and a paler and more colourful inland race, *orientalis* (described by Fry, 1913). It has been thought that *V. tristis tristis* is confined to south-western W.A., while *V. t. orientalis* ranges across



Fig. 1.—An adult male *Varanus tristis* from 24 miles east of Laverton, W.A. The head, forelegs, and distal parts of the tail are nearly pitch black. The dorsum and anterior parts of the tail are a speckled mixture of grey, beige, yellow and pink. When held, the lizards maintain a very stiff posture.

Queensland, the Northern Territory, northern Western Australia, and inland New South Wales (Mertens, 1958). This race probably extends well into north-western South Australia.

Zietz (1914) quotes field notes of Captain S. A. White on the species: "Met with on several occasions in the MacDonnell Ranges, and although at times found amongst rocks and boulders, it seems to have a liking for tree-climbing, for it was seen on more than one occasion basking at the top of a dead tree trunk in the beds of the creeks. Their food seems to consist of other small lizards, birds, and small mammals. On one occasion a specimen when pursued took to a large dead gum on the bank of Ellery Creek and scampered up to the very top, where it lay hidden behind a branch out of gunshot."

The present report is based primarily upon 23 specimens collected in the Wiluna, Lake Carnegie, Agnew, Laverton, and Great Victoria Desert districts of Western Australia, and now deposited in the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. As these specimens appear to be closer to the subspecies *tristis* than to *orientalis*, it may be that the race *tristis* is more widespread than formerly thought. Perhaps these subspecies grade into each other along the Northern Territory-Western Australian border.

In central Western Australia, *V. tristis* has a strongly seasonal annual pattern of activity, similar to that of *Varanus gouldi* (Pianka, 1970). Table 1 summarizes data showing that these lizards are usually active only from August to January. They are most conspicuous during September and October, which is probably the breeding season (below).

TABLE 1. DATA DEMONSTRATING PRONOUNCED SEASONALITY OF ACTIVITY IN *V. tristis*.

| MONTH | NUMBER OF DAYS SPENT IN FIELD | NUMBER OF <i>tristis</i> COLLECTED | NUMBER PER DAY |
|-----------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|
| JANUARY | 26 | 2 | .077 |
| FEBRUARY | 20 | 0 | .00 |
| MARCH | 15 | 0 | .00 |
| APRIL | 2 | 0 | .00 |
| MAY | 17 | 0 | .00 |
| JUNE | 14 | 0 | .00 |
| JULY | 0 | 0 | — |
| AUGUST | 17 | 2 | .118 |
| SEPTEMBER | 16 | 11 | .687 |
| OCTOBER | 26 | 6 | .231 |
| NOVEMBER | 30 | 2 | .067 |
| DECEMBER | 24 | 0 | .00 |
| TOTALS | 207 | 23 | |

Due to the fact that *V. tristis* drag the base of their tails when walking on the ground, their tracks on sand are highly distinctive and easily followed (Figure 2). The incidence of tracks closely reflects Table 1; no tracks were observed during the period from February through June, 1967. Most of the specimens collected were tracked down (many more were tracked long distances but never collected); a good deal of information

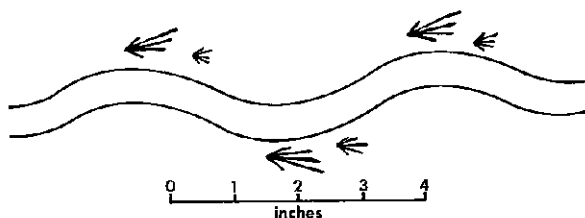


Fig. 2.—Diagrammatic representation of the track of *V. tristis*. The delicate front footprints frequently are not visible. Old tracks may not even show the prominent hind footprints.

concerning their activities can be deduced from these tracks. The lizards usually take a fairly direct route from tree to tree, apparently climbing many trees along the way. Daily forays frequently cover distances of nearly a mile. The animals are exceedingly wary, usually taking refuge in gum tree hollows before the tracker realizes that he is near the end of the trail. Most of my specimens were collected by waiting quietly below the tree with a .410 shotgun and/or .22 calibre rat-shot until the lizards appeared. They emerge from the shadows quietly, very cautiously and slowly, head first, and instantly freeze upon seeing a human. The nearly pitch black head, which looks much like a burnt snag, is easily overlooked.

V. tristis are fairly common well into the Great Victoria desert at Neale junction, and their tracks indicate that they occur throughout the desert almost wherever there are moderately large eucalypt trees.

In Table 2, the diet of 19 lizards with food in their stomachs is tabulated. Prey size ranges from 0.1 cc. (large ants) to about 25 cc. (a half-grown *Amphibolurus barbatus minor*). The mean prey size is quite large, 1.89 cc. One specimen contained a partially digested baby parrot, unidentifiable to species (identified as a parrot by its feet). It seems probable that nestling birds constitute an important item in the diet of *Varanus tristis*.

TABLE 2. STOMACH CONTENTS OF 23 *Varanus tristis*. VOLUMES MEASURED IN CUBIC CENTIMETRES. FOUR STOMACHS WERE EMPTY. FREQUENCIES BASED ON 19.

| FOOD ITEM | NUMBER | VOLUME | FREQUENCY |
|----------------------|--------|--------|-----------|
| ANTS | 5 | 0.5 | .053 |
| GRASSHOPPERS | 26 | 17.8 | .421 |
| ROACHES | 1 | 2.9 | .053 |
| STICK INSECTS | 1 | 1.0 | .053 |
| BEEFLIES | 1 | 3.0 | .053 |
| UNIDENTIFIED INSECTS | 4 | 2.4 | .210 |
| BIRDS | 1 | 5.7 | .053 |
| LIZARDS | 4 | 56.3 | .210 |
| UNIDENTIFIED BONE? | 1 | 0.8 | .053 |
| REPTILE EGGS | 6 | 4.0 | .105 |
| TOTALS | 50 | 94.4 | |

My wife and I were fortunate to observe a direct confrontation between a breeding galah cockatoo (*Cacatua roseicapilla*) and one of these lizards. On 22nd October, 1967, we were driving off the track slowly across the desert, about 10 miles north west of Agnew, W.A. at 4.30 in the afternoon. A galah was screeching loudly somewhere nearby, but not at us. Soon we saw the bird, with crest high and wings outstretched, screaming loudly as if in great distress. The galah, on the ground when first sighted, flew up on to a fallen log under a *Eucalyptus* tree and then into the tree (which later proved to be its nesting tree). As we approached, a large adult male (288 mm. snout-vent, 307 grams) *V. tristis* clambered over the same log towards the tree. While the galah continued to screech and began harassing the lizard, I approached the tree to try to collect the reptile. In an instant, the lizard was up the tree and out of sight around the other side. At this point the galah actually attacked the goanna (about 10 feet off the ground), and drove it back down and towards me, whereupon I shot the lizard. The incident suggests that these large climbing lizards are a potent threat to hole-nesting parrots.

The idea that baby birds, especially parrots, might constitute a major food of *V. tristis* correlates well with the lizard's seasonality of activity and foraging technique (above). During the spring when many birds are nesting, the lizards are very active, presumably building up fat reserves which get them through the next 6-8 months of relative inactivity. In this context, it is of interest that, after a prolonged drought in the Lorna Glen area when the nesting of parrots had doubtless been severely restricted, I collected two exceptionally emaciated *V. tristis* (fat bodies were large in all other *tristis* collected). In contrast, specimens of the terrestrial species *Varanus gouldi* and *V. eremius* collected during this period on the same area were fat and healthy.

Testes volumes do not vary appreciably in my sample of 17 males. Only one of the six females contained enlarged ovarian eggs. This female, collected on 29 September 1967, contained ten yolked follicles 8 mm in diameter, suggesting a large clutch size in this species.

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