

Introducing the pink-tailed worm-lizard



Small and secretive, not many people have heard of the unique and fascinating pink-tailed-worm lizard. One of the only places it lives in the world is right here in Googong.

The pink-tailed worm-lizard (scientific name *Aprasia parapulchella* and sometimes also called the granite worm lizard) is a species of legless lizard unique to a few small areas of South-eastern Australia in NSW, ACT and Victoria.

With a slender, worm-like body, it is named for its pinkish tail, but has a dark grey or black head and lighter grey-brown body. Pink-tailed worm-lizards are small enough to fit in the palm of your hand (but if you see one don't pick it up) and grow no longer than 24 cm! They mostly spend their time burrowed underground in ants nests or under rocks.

They are classified as Vulnerable in both ACT and NSW, which means we need to conserve and care for their populations to ensure they survive into the future. It is likely their habitat has been destroyed by land clearing for agriculture and urban development.

Five fascinating facts: A unique creature



1 Pink-tailed worm-lizards really do have pink tails. It is thought to be a strategy to attract the attention of predators away from the lizard's head and body. Like other lizards, they are able to shed their tails to escape being eaten.

2 The entire genus of burrowing legless lizards known as *Aprasia*, to which the pink-tailed worm-lizard belongs, are unique to Australia and found nowhere else in the world. The pink-tailed worm-lizard is the only legless lizard found in the ACT region.

A lizard-ant mystery ???



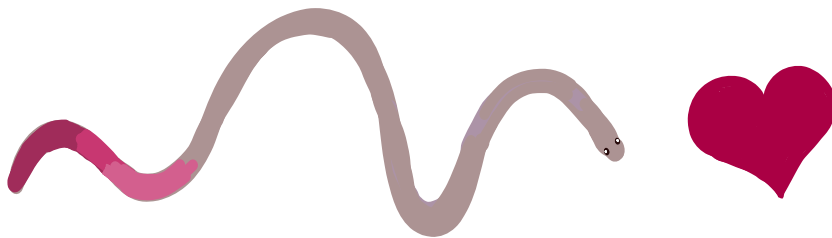
Pink-tailed worm-lizards spend much of their time in the burrows of ants whose eggs and larvae they eat.

They are known to live happily with 15 different species of ants and one species of termite.

They often live with, and have shown a preference for a small species of ant called the tyrant ant or *Iridomyrmex rufoniger*. Tyrant ants are known to vigorously defend their territory from intruders, but for some reason pink-tailed worm-lizards avoid being attacked while also living off the eggs and larvae of those same ants. Scientists have speculated that they may be able to trick the ants with chemical signals, but no one really knows why this is.

Looking after ants

Everything is connected, so to look after the pink-tailed worm-lizards, we need to look after the ants that they depend on for food. Using insecticides or other poisons can leach into the nearby environment and harm ants, so make sure you know the impacts of the chemicals you are using in your home, and that they stay well contained.



3 Females only lay two eggs a year, making these lizards relatively slow breeders. Another reason to look after them.

4 Pink-tailed worm-lizards use their flat tongues to wipe their eyes, just like the geckos they are closely related to.

5 They regulate their body temperature by spending time under rocks that have been warmed by the sun.



What to do if you see a pink-tailed worm-lizard



If you see a pink-tailed worm-lizard please do not touch it as they are vulnerable to disturbance and stress. If you can do so without disturbing it please get a photo and log details of your sighting with a citizen science website like the Canberra Nature Map (canberra.naturemapr.org). The more information we have about such a mysterious creature, the better chance we have of looking after them. If you think you have encountered one, you can also contact the Googong Rangers.



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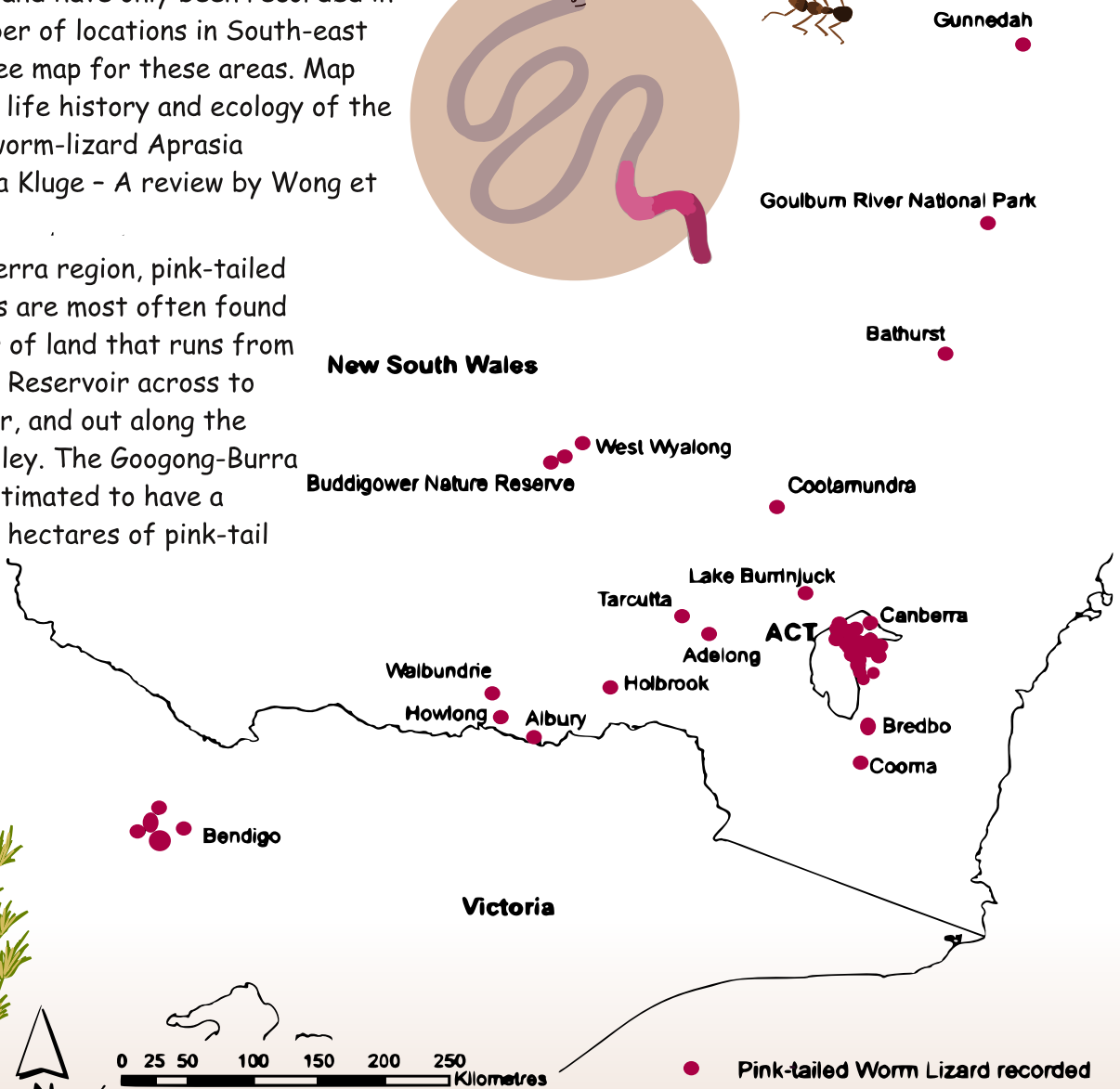
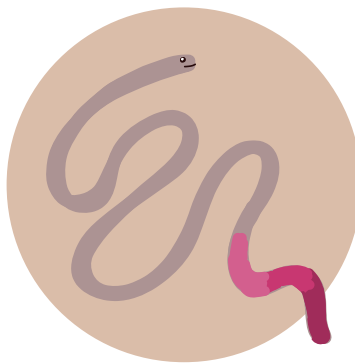
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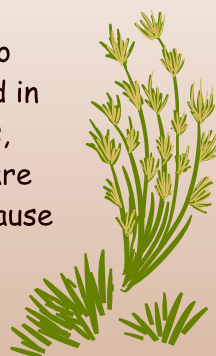
Where are pink-tailed worm-lizards found?

Pink-tailed worm-lizards have a very limited distribution and have only been recorded in a small number of locations in South-east Australia. See map for these areas. Map Source: The life history and ecology of the pink-tailed worm-lizard *Aprasia parapulchella* Kluge - A review by Wong et al.

In the Canberra region, pink-tailed worm-lizards are most often found in a corridor of land that runs from the Googong Reservoir across to Mount Taylor, and out along the Molonglo Valley. The Googong-Burra locality is estimated to have a total of 500 hectares of pink-tail worm-lizard habitat.



As far as we know, pink-tailed worm-lizards tend to occur where their habitat is intact. They are found in a variety of habitats from grasslands to woodlands, but more likely to be found in places where rocks are embedded above ground. They are rarely seen because they burrow underground, under rocks or in the burrows of ants nests.



The entire genus of burrowing legless lizards known as *Aprasia*, the family to which the pink-tailed worm-lizard belongs, are unique to Australia and found nowhere else in the world.



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Not a snake!!

The difference between pink-tailed worm-lizards and snakes



Photo caption: Canberra Nature Map

A bit like a worm, a bit like a snake, pink-tailed worm-lizards are actually very different from both.

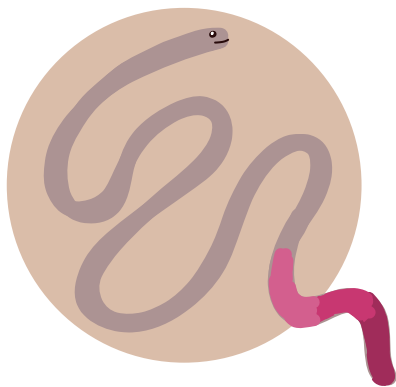
It's pretty easy to see how they are different from worms (they have eyes, scales and jaws, all of which worms lack!).

But how are they different from snakes?

The pink-tail worm-lizard vs snakes

Harmless!! (to everyone except for ants!!)

Most importantly, unlike many species of snake, pink-tailed worm-lizards are completely harmless to us. While many snakes use venom or strangulation to kill their prey, pink-tailed worm-lizards are only a threat to the ants they eat, their eggs and larvae.



Unlike snakes pink-tailed worm-lizards have a little flaps, where their hind legs would be if they still had them.

They have a flat tongue, rather than the forked tongue that flickers in and out of a snakes mouth as it 'smells' its surroundings.

Both the head and tail of the pink-tailed worm-lizard are rounded which is different to the tapering tail of most snakes.*

Like other lizards they can drop their tail to escape predators and then re-grow it. Snakes cannot do this.

*An exception to this rule is the blind snake (also harmless to everyone but ants). However the eyes of blind snakes are tiny dots, very different from the prominent eyes of the pink-tailed worm-lizard.

What can you do???

To look after our unique pink-tailed worm-lizard?

If we look after these unique lizards we have a good chance of ensuring their survival into the future. There are a few simple rules to ensure these unique animals continue to call Googong home:



Do

Leave reserve areas intact.



Do

Grow plant species in your garden that belong in your local area. Grasses like kangaroo (Themeda triandra) and wallaby grasses (Rytidosperma spp.) are known to occur alongside the pink-tailed worm-lizard.



Do

Be a responsible pet owner. Keep your dog on a leash when in areas which might be lizard habitat. Installing cat enclosures or runs can ensure your cat has a healthy and active life, while also protecting local wildlife from harm.



Do

Look after your local environment. Pick up rubbish and your dog's poo when you are out walking in the local environment and waterways. A clean and healthy environment is better for the animals that live there.



Don't

Don't dig up plants, disturb the ground or pick up rocks. Do not disturb ant burrows. If you see a pink-tailed worm-lizard please do not touch it as they are vulnerable to disturbance and stress.

Don't

Allow weeds to grow wild in your garden and on your verge from where they can spread to neighbouring bushland. You can find out more about weeds and how to identify them at <https://www.molonglo.org.au/post/weeds-information-pack>



Don't

Don't allow your cat to roam freely outside where it might hunt for native birds and reptiles.



When is a rock more than a rock? (when it's a home)

A rock might not look very inviting to you, but to many animals it provides protection, shelter from the elements and even warmth. The best thing you can do is leave bush rocks alone. If you want to add rocks to your property only use rock salvaged from approved sources such as quarried rock. Artificial rock is also readily available and railway sleepers, treated pine, or concrete products may provide alternatives for retaining walls or garden edging. Nurseries should provide information on where the rock they are selling has been sourced. If they don't know, don't buy it.



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