

Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park Notes

Reptiles and amphibians

Reptiles and amphibians play an important role in Anangu Tjukurpa. The stories of Kuniya (woma python) and Liru (poisonous snake) are two of the main Tjukurpa stories here at Uluru.

Tjukurpa

The Cultural Centre building was designed around the Tjukurpa story of Kuniya and Liru and from an aerial view the shape of the buildings represent these two reptiles. Tjukurpa stories also teach us about Wati Lungkata (blue-tongued lizard man) and the moral of this story is do not steal or lie and do not climb Uluru as it is dangerous and you may fall off and die as Lungkata did.

Species found in the park

The park is very rich in reptile fauna of high conservation significance and there is no other comparable sized area in the Australian semi-arid zone known to have this richness.

There are 77 recorded species of reptiles and amphibians in the park; 60 lizards, 13 species of snakes, and 4 frog species. The lizards range from tiny geckos and skinks, legless lizards, and dragons up to the large goannas, including the second largest in the world, the *ngintaka* (perentie, *Varanus giganteus*), which grow in excess of 2.5 metres in length.

Most reptiles are opportunistic feeders and hunt and forage in a number of different habitats including open space, sand dunes, and rocky outcrops. Differences in body size mean that large lizards concentrate on larger prey, and small lizards on smaller items. Species with higher body temperatures tend to be more active during the day, compared to those with lower body temperatures, which are most active at night and in winter.



Left to right - *Ngyari* is a small spiky dragon with a unique ability for accessing water and *ngintaka* is the second largest goanna in the world

Reptiles

A unique lizard to Central Australia is the *ngyari* (thorny devil, *Moloch horridus*), a small spiny dragon that has a strange rocking motion when it walks to confuse birds of prey. It has an unusual way of absorbing water. Narrow grooves separate the scales of the skin and form a continuous network to the mouth. If the animal is in a puddle or on wet sand, water runs up the legs and spreads over the surface of the body by capillary action, eventually reaching the mouth.

Of the 13 species of snakes, two are non-venomous pythons, the *kuniya* (woma python, *Aspidites ramsayi*), and *warungkalpa* (Stimson's python, *Liasis stimsoni*), and three are blind snakes. The remaining eight are venomous, three of which are considered very dangerous. The *walajara* (western brown) grows up to 1-1.5 metres and can have a large range of colourings from rusty brown to black with orange bands. *Panakuṛa* (desert death adder, *Acanthopis pyrrhus*), is an ambush predator rarely seen as it buries itself under leaf litter or loose sand and uses its worm like tail to attract prey. The most commonly found species is *liru* (mulga or king brown, *Pseudonaja australis*), a highly defensive snake that is common in many populated areas and widely distributed across many parts of Australia. The mulga snake has the largest recorded venom output of any snake in the world. Although looking like and being named a brown snake it is technically a member of the black snake family.

Geckos and other reptiles have the ability to co-exist and in some areas records show as many as nine different species found living closely together. Some geckos are arboreal, or tree climbers, others are found within spinifex clumps, and others forage only in open spaces.

Bush foods

Several species of reptiles are used traditionally as bush food. The two most common are *tinka* (sand goanna) and *ngintaka* (perentie). *Tinka* are often hunted and dug out of burrows for their meat and eggs, both of which are a common food source. *Ngintaka* is a highly sought after bush food and considered a delicacy.

Frogs

Surprisingly, we have 4 species of frogs and toads in the park which are well adapted to desert life. They bury themselves deep in the sand at a depth where the temperature is constant. When the rain is heavy enough to soak down to where they have burrowed, they know that the waterholes and creeks are full. They will then emerge, often in vast numbers, to breed. After breeding they bloat themselves full of water and bury below the sand again. In very dry and desperate times, *Anangu* would dig up and squeeze the water out of frogs for a drink.

Frogs that inhabit the desert are known as 'water-holding' frogs and generally have a broad head, bulbous body and short limbs, with structures called metatarsal tubercles, which are like little spades, on the under surface of the feet to aid digging.

Frogs require water to survive so are often seen with their bodies flattened out against any moist surface. Spaces between the cells of their ventral skin develop an increasingly negative pressure as water is lost and this pressure then pulls water from the skin into the body. Frogs are opportunistic feeders and will eat what resources are available at the time. Their diets include mainly ants and termites but also beetles, flies, spiders, grasshoppers, and moths.

Threatened species

Threatened species listed under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* include *tjakura* (great desert skink, *Egernia kintorei*) listed as vulnerable and this species is mostly restricted to the transitional sand plain system.



Liru are common in the park and highly venomous. Visitors should show this creature respect and not approach or disturb them

Tinka is a popular food source for *Anangu*. Both the meat and eggs are eaten and it is the specialist knowledge held by *Anangu* that allows them to locate these creatures (below)



Tinka shelter in burrows, are mainly ground dwellers and feed on a variety of foods including insects, reptiles, birds, mammals and carrion



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