REPTILE

Morelia spilota ssp. *variegata* — Carpet Python

AUS	SA	AMLR	Endemism	Residency
-	R	E	-	Resident

Photo: © Tony Robinson

Conservation Significance

The AMLR distribution is part of a limited extant distribution in adjacent regions within SA. Within the AMLR the species' relative area of occupancy is classified as 'Extremely Restricted'. Relative to all AMLR extant species, the species' taxonomic uniqueness is classified as 'High'.[4]

Description

Very distinctive patterning but displays enormous variation in colour and pattern ranging from pale to dark brown, with blackish (sometimes paler-centred) blotches or variegations, which may form obscure cross-bands or even longitudinal markings enclosing blotches of the ground colour. Ventral surface cream or yellow variegated with dark grey. Average length is about 2 m, maximum about 4 m.[2]

Distribution and Population

Occurs across northern, eastern and south-western Australia. Not found in southern VIC, the arid centre and west. Also found in New Guinea.[2] Populations in the extreme southern part of the range (at Mallacoota, VIC) are the most southerly ranging pythons in the world (Rawlinson 1969).[5]

The subspecies *spilota* occurs along coastal NSW; *imbricata* occurs in southern WA and *variegata* occurs across the remainder of the range.[2]

Official records (SA Museum) of this species in the AMLR region were collected at Kanmantoo and Highland Valley in the Mount Barker area in the 1980s.

Anecdotal information, from the Strathalbyn Naturalists Club, indicates scattered occurrences in the south-eastern hills up to this time (Eckert 2000). Probably extended into the hills from the River Murray valley, where they still occur, along the better-vegetated watercourses but have gradually disappeared from the area due to land clearance and other factors associated with European settlement.[1]

Re-introductions or releases have occurred, not necessarily authorised. A trial reintroduction to Highland Valley Sanctuary and other properties near Strathalbyn has been proposed (J. Van Weenen *pers. comm.*).

Post-1983 AMLR filtered records near Kanmantoo and Highland Valley.[4]

No pre-1983 AMLR filtered records.[4]

Habitat

Found from rainforest on the east and north-east coasts to a variety of semi-arid coastal and inland habitats.[2]

In SA occurs in dry sclerophyll forest (Slip and Shine 1988a-b).[5] Prefers sites with ground cover and logs (M. Hutchinson *pers. comm.*).

In the SA Murray-Darling Basin lives in the hollows of large River Red Gums and north-facing cliffs along the Murray River. May be found nestled in quiet sheltered corners like pump sheds and roof spaces where they feed on vermin (rats and mice).[3,6]

During the day the species can be found both on the ground and in vegetation (Slip and Shine 1988e). May climb trees as high as 5 m (Schulz and Eyre 1997).[5]

Both males and females live within home areas. There is no correlation between the size of the home area and the size of the python (Slip and Shine 1988e).[5]

Within the AMLR the preferred broad vegetation group is Riparian.[4]

Biology and Ecology

Often arboreal, but in many areas lives in burrows made by other animals. Mostly nocturnal and crepuscular.[2]

In areas where there are rocky cliffs and outcrops

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adjacent to flatter areas, shows seasonal movement, i.e in winter tends to remain in small rocky habitats with sunny aspects, but during spring will move into flatter areas and remain there until autumn (Slip and Shine 1988e). Rocky habitat provides deep crevices for sheltering in winter, whereas the flatter areas provide more food and cover to hunt prey.[5]

During spring, males tend to move more often and further than females, presumably in their search for females. When males find receptive females they usually stay with them for some time. In contrast, the longest movements by females tend to be to nesting sites (Slip and Shine 1988e).[5]

Females probably reproduce, on average, once every two or three years (Harlow and Grigg 1984; Slip and Shine 1988d).[5] Eggs (range 9-54) are laid between mid-spring and early summer (Boos 1979; Slip and Shine 1988c,d).[5]

Diet includes a wide variety of vertebrates including frogs, lizards, birds and mammals.[5] Like most pythons, is an ambush predator.[5]

Aboriginal Significance

Post-1983 records indicate the AMLR distribution occurs in Ngarrindjeri Nation.[4]

Threats

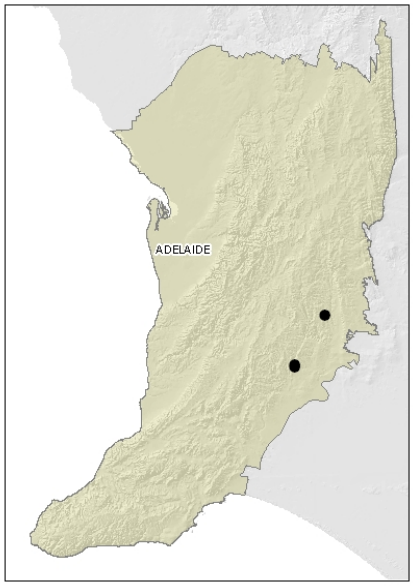
Threats include: habitat loss or degradation, including the removal of hollow logs and old hollow trees; predation by foxes, dogs and cats; and deliberate or inadvertent killing.[7]

In SA, other threats may include lack of recruitment, illegal hunting or collection, predation by problematic native species (e.g. Eastern Brown Snake), poisoning, fire and fire management activities (M. Hutchinson *pers. comm.*).

Firewood and rock removal may also be a significant threat in the region (D. Armstrong *pers. comm.*).

Additional current direct threats have been identified and rated for this species. Refer to the main plan accompanying these profiles.

Regional Distribution



Map based on filtered post-1983 records.[4] Note, this map does not necessarily represent the actual species' distribution within the AMLR.

References

Note: In some cases original reference sources are not included in this list, however they can be obtained from the reference from which the information has been sourced (the reference cited in superscript).

1 Armstrong, D. M., Croft, S. N. and Foulkes, J. N. (2003). *A Biological Survey of the Southern Mount Lofty Ranges, South Australia, 2000-2001*. Department for Environment and Heritage, South Australia.

2 Cogger, H. G. (2000). *Reptiles and Amphibians of Australia (Sixth Edition)*. Reed New Holland.

3 Department for Environment and Heritage (2006). *Threatened Species of the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin Fact Sheet: Carpet Python Morelia spilota*.

4 Department for Environment and Heritage (2007). *Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Regional Recovery Pilot Project Database*. Unpublished data extracted and edited from BDBSA, SA Herbarium (July 2007) and other sources.

5 Greer, A. E. (2006). *Encyclopedia of Australian Reptiles*. Australian Museum Online, Version date: 7 August 2006. Available from http://www.amonline.net.au/herpetology/research/#encyclopedia.

6 Kahrimanis, M. J., Carruthers, S., Oppermann, A. and Inns, R. (2001). *Biodiversity Plan for the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin*. Department for Environment and Heritage, SA.

7 Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment (2003). *Vulnerable Victorians. DSE's Threatened Species Recovery Projects Fact Sheet: Carpet Python (Morelia spilota metcalfei)*.

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