



FACT SHEET

BRONZEBACK LEGLESS LIZARD *Ophidiocephalus taeniatus*

Text by Harald Ehmann and Michelle Watson.

The Bronzeback Legless Lizard's inoffensive appearance belies its ferocious appetite and its capacity to successfully capture and consume prey of quite considerable size. After gripping its oversize prey with its jaws, the Bronzeback employs a crocodile-like death roll to sever the prey apart. These highly coordinated manoeuvres barely shift the leaf litter in which the Bronzeback lives.

The extremely secretive Bronzeback was originally discovered in the 1890s but was not recorded again until 1977, when it was found at Abminga in far northern South Australia. More recent surveys have detected the species in the Arckaringa Hills and at a few other sites in the Lake Eyre Basin.

IDENTIFICATION

Bronzebacks are very secretive and spend almost all of their time in deep leaf litter, usually emerging only if disturbed by raking, trampling, flooding or if making a rare change of abode.

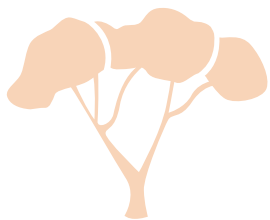
The Bronzeback has a slender snake-like body with a long blunt-ended tail and a rounded snout that is distinctly wedge-shaped in profile. The bodies of adults are slightly thinner than a normal drinking straw and they can grow to 27 cm in length and weigh about 5.5 grams.

The back is uniformly coloured (see photo) while the top of the head is greyish white. The belly is a slightly mottled whitish grey and the sides are brownish grey. Although three other species of legless lizard might occur with the Bronzeback, none of them possess this combination of body markings. When handled all legless lizards can make a high-pitched squeak and shed their tails.

HABITAT AND DISTRIBUTION

Bronzebacks have a patchy distribution and are associated with temporary watercourses flowing out of stony tablelands and breakaways on the western and northern sides of the Lake Eyre Basin. These watercourses are usually lined with trees, especially Mulga (*Acacia aneura*) and Gidgee (*Acacia cambagei*), and have an understorey of saltbush species. Occasionally individual Bronzebacks have been found under leaf litter some distance from a watercourse, presumably attempting to disperse to a new area.

Bronzebacks prefer undisturbed, deep leaf litter that is underlain with a layer of loose sandy loam laced with decomposed litter. The deeper, underlying soil is usually cracking clay or deep, coarse water-deposited sand.



Bronzeback Legless Lizard. Photograph by Harald Ehmann.

Bronzeback Legless Lizards appear to prefer Gidgee lined watercourses. Photograph by Harald Ehmann.



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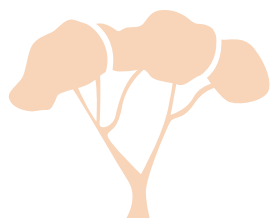


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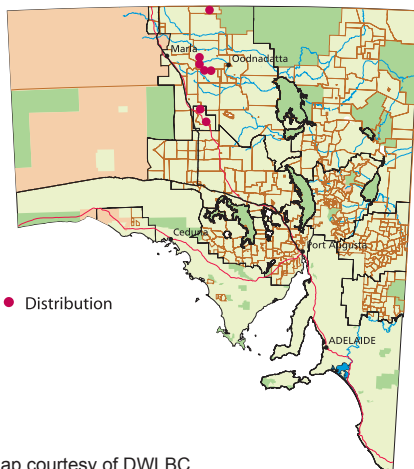


BRONZEBACK LEGLESS LIZARD DISTRIBUTION ACROSS AUSTRALIA



■ Distribution

KNOWN DISTRIBUTION IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA



● Distribution

Map courtesy of DWLBC

CURRENT RESEARCH

A more comprehensive assessment of the distribution of the Bronzeback is being made to ascertain the species status. Research into the drought and flood ecology of the species is needed. The Bronzeback may occur at many more sites than those currently known but specifically targeted and tailored survey techniques are required to obtain this information.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

If you have seen a Bronzeback within or beyond the locations shown on the distribution maps please let us know. Please note the location (a GPS or map reference would be most helpful) to assist the relocation of the site. A description of the habitat would also be helpful. We will follow up all possible sightings as part of this study.

To report observations or for further information about the Bronzeback or this study please contact the South Australian Arid Lands Natural Resources Management Board 8648 5977.

RESOURCES

Ehmann, H. (2006). South Australian Rangelands and Aboriginal Lands Wildlife Management Manual: a resource handbook. Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation, South Australia.

POTENTIAL THREATS TO BRONZEBACK

Bronzebacks persist in small local populations in narrow, linear pockets of ideal litter habitat along watercourses making them vulnerable to localised declines and extinctions. Heavy stocking along watercourses can result in the modification of these patches of habitat, rendering them unsuitable for Bronzebacks. Populations can also be locally decimated by infrequent but natural major flooding events that strip away the surface soil and the overlying litter.