Vale Jeanette Adelaide Covacevich, AM, PSM  
(1945–2015)

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Jeanette Covacevich, who died in Brisbane on 17 September 2015, was one of the Queensland Museum’s best known and longest-serving staff members. She will be remembered not only for her professional contribution as a herpetologist and curator but also for her personal qualities. A spirited and adventurous woman, she made a lasting impression on all who knew her, and had an extraordinary capacity for making friendships. Her memorial service, held at the State Library of Queensland a month after her death, was attended by some 350 people and live-streamed to another gathering in Cooktown where she lived in later years.


FIG. 3. The Western Taipan, *Oxyuranus microlepidotus*, the world’s most venomous land snake. Jeanette Covacevich played a major role in the rediscovery of this species. Image: Queensland Museum.
Jeanette was born in Innisfail, north Queensland on 26 March 1945, the elder of two children of Sir Thomas Covacevich and his wife, Gladys, née Bryant. Sir Thomas, a decorated RAF officer of World War II, was a well-known Cairns solicitor and philanthropist. Jeanette grew up in Cairns and from an early age acquired a taste for outdoor adventure and natural history, interests that persisted throughout her life. She attended Brisbane Girls Grammar School where she excelled at swimming, and went on to study at The University of Queensland as a resident of Women’s College. She graduated with a BA in 1967, majoring in Geography and Zoology, and later completed a higher degree in environmental studies at Griffith University (MSc, 1977).

In 1966, Jeanette joined the Queensland Museum in Brisbane as a cadet. She remained with this institution until her retirement in 2002, by which time she had risen through the curatorial ranks to the position of Senior Curator and co-head of the Vertebrate Zoology Section. After retirement, she continued as an Honorary Research Associate until her decline in 2015 due to an inoperable brain tumour. Jeanette’s museum career was highly productive with extensive out-reach. She oversaw the growth of the herpetology collections from 7,427 specimens in 1966 to 58,216 specimens in 2002, wrote two books, edited another five and produced 110 herpetological papers describing 30 new species of reptiles. She was interested in the taxonomy, zoogeography and the conservation of Australo-Papuan reptiles, particularly those from rainforests, deserts and heaths. Her other research interests were diverse and included publications on mammals, Aboriginal trails and medicinal plants, the palm trees of north Queensland, the importance of museum collections and the convict history of North Stradbroke Island.

Jeanette is best known for her work on Queensland snakes and her involvement in the rediscovery of the Western Taipan (*Oxyuranus microlepidotus*). This snake, first described by Frederick McCoy in 1879, was ‘lost’ to science for almost 100 years, until a specimen was collected in far western Queensland by grazier, Herb Rabig. Jeanette established the identity of this specimen and undertook fieldwork with her friend the late Charles Tanner to obtain additional specimens. This species was subsequently shown to have the most potent venom of any land snake. The snake, its venom and ecology feature significantly in her many publications. The interwoven Western Taipan / Plague Rat story was told in an exhibit, *Feast & Famine*, when the Queensland Museum relocated to its present South Brisbane site in 1986. The following year she co-edited a best-selling book, *Toxic Plants and Animals*, which was accompanied by a major, live exhibition featuring some of Australia’s most venomous creatures.

To many Queenslanders, Jeanette was known as the ‘snake lady’. She provided an identification service for government agencies, medical practitioners and members of the public and acted as a consultant to the Poisons Information Centre (based at the former Brisbane Children’s Hospital) from 1969, being on call to assist with snake identifications. This service had major implications for the clinical management of snakebite victims and led to improved patient outcomes and significant cost-savings in their treatment. She also served on the Scientific and Clinical Immersions Subcommittee of the Graduate Medical Course at The University of Queensland (1996–2002) and on the Scientific Advisory Committee of Queensland’s Environmental Protection Agency (1997–99).

Gregarious and generous, Jeanette gave her time to many organisations. She was president of the Australian Society of Herpetologists (1988–90), secretary of the Stradbroke Island Management Organisation (1975–84), an adviser to the Rainforest Conservation Society of Queensland (1982–98) and a long-time member of both the Queensland Naturalists’ Club and the Lyceum Club Brisbane. Her longest association, however, was with the Royal Society of Queensland of which she was secretary (1974–79), councillor (1984–87, 1994–98) and president (1995). Additionally, she co-convened various Royal Society conferences (North Stradbroke Island, 1974; Focus on Stradbroke, 1984; Queensland: the state of science, 1994; The history of natural history in Queensland, 1995 and Exploring our
genes and genetic heritage, 1996). Throughout her career, Jeanette championed many conservation causes. She was one of the first to document diminished reptile diversity in Queensland’s Brigalow lands and raised both government and public awareness of the plight of these assailed ecosystems. Her conference presentations carried hard-hitting titles such as ‘Is biodiversity maintenance in Queensland’s Brigalow Belt just another oxymoron?’ Always a polished public speaker, Jeanette once declared that the worst crime one could commit was to be boring; the next-worst was to be long-winded. She was in high demand, even in retirement, and continued to address various clubs and community groups.

Jeanette was honoured with awards which included the St John Priory Vote of Thanks (for voluntary teaching regarding snakes and snakebite over many years); Member in the General Division, Order of Australia, 1995 (for service to science, particularly in the field of herpetology, and to conservation); the Queensland Museum Medal, 2002; the Public Service Medal, 2003 (for outstanding service to the Queensland Museum and to the people of Queensland);
the Queensland Natural History Award, 2003; and the Australian Natural History Medallion, 2007. Her contributions to science are further recognised in the following eponymic species names: *Terriswalkerius covacevichae* Jameson, 1994 (an earthworm from the rainforests of north-eastern Queensland); *Zophorame covacevichae* Raven, 1994 (a mygalomorph spider from NEQ); *Pseudophryne covacevichae* Ingram & Corben, 1994 (a broodfrog from NEQ); *Kababina covacevichae* Todd Davies, 1995 (an amphinectid spider from NEQ) and *Oedura* [now *Amalosia*] *jacovae* Couper, Keim & Hoskin, 2007 (a velvet gecko from south-east Queensland). The etymology for the last of these reads: ‘jacovae; for Jeanette Adelaide Covacevich, a former senior curator at the Queensland Museum, for her many contributions to Australian Herpetology. The authors also recognise Jeanette as a prominent figure in Queensland conservation, particularly her efforts to preserve the unique character of North Stradbroke Island where *O. jacovae* sp. nov. occurs in open forest communities.’

In her sporting life Jeanette achieved recognition as an all-round athlete, competing in marathons and triathlons and maintaining her fitness with strenuous swimming and bushwalking. She was always modest about her sporting achievements but her 1987 World Champion title (female age category 40–44) in the Hugall and Hoile World Sprint Triathlon Championship speaks for itself. She was in the habit of celebrating each birthday by swimming the equivalent lengths of an Olympic pool, which ceased only when she was 70 and suffering from her illness.

Following her retirement from the Queensland Museum in 2002, Jeanette moved to Cooktown. There she identified with the local community, even joining the CWA, though drawing a line at dressing up for the town’s annual re-enactment of Captain Cook’s landing. She was a regular volunteer at Nature’s Powerhouse, a museum in Cooktown’s Botanic Gardens featuring a natural history exhibit she helped to develop and the botanical paintings of local artist Vera Scarth-Johnson. Jeanette’s picturesque property on the Endeavour River became open house for her wide circle of friends and colleagues. She remained active in the field by assisting her former museum colleagues to undertake fieldwork in the far north and by participating in Australia Zoo’s crocodile research trips to Steve Irwin Reserve on Cape York Peninsula. In her later years she also pursued an interest in island history and biogeography, visiting such places as Pitcairn Island, the Chatham Islands, St Helena (in the southern Atlantic) the Marquesas and Vanuatu (Malekula, Maskelynes, Ambrym). She shared her island adventures through eagerly awaited presentations to fellow members of the Queensland Naturalists’ Club and the Lyceum Club. As well, she maintained her association with the Queensland Museum, often appearing in the Vertebrate Zoology Lab with a bag full of frozen specimens; snakes, birds and mammals that had been carried down from north Queensland as hand luggage.

Jeanette was supportive of her friends and colleagues and extended a helping hand whenever needed. She was excellent company—cheerful and knowledgeable—and never afraid to speak her mind. Gifted with a wicked sense of humour, she was particularly taken by a transcription error that occurred when one of her hand-written manuscripts was passed to a museum typist, radically changing its meaning. In 1994, she and two male companions witnessed a fight between two male Black Whip Snakes in far north Queensland. She wrote: ‘We watched their ritual for close to 45 minutes. They moved, as a pair, about 20 m along the road – all the time twisting, coiling, raising their forebodies both together and separately, and then falling back to begin the sequence anew.’ Upon receiving a clean copy of the manuscript she discovered to her delight that an ‘m’ had been mistaken for a ‘w’ so that the text now read: ‘We matched their ritual for close to 45 minutes…’

Jeanette was a truly unique person who will be missed by many, not least by the writers of this tribute, former museum colleagues whom she so generously mentored.

The following is a summary of Jeanette’s research work.
NEW GENERA AND SPECIES OF REPTILES DESCRIBED

Phyllurus caudiannulatus Covacevich, 1975
A small leaf-tailed gecko, narrowly endemic to eastern Australian rainforest.

Phyllurus salebrosus Covacevich, 1975
(= Saltuarius salebrosus)
A large leaf-tailed gecko from rainforest, heaths and brisalow.

Carlia dogare Covacevich & Ingram, 1975
A skink confined to Quaternary sandstones near Cooktown, north-eastern Queensland.

Carlia jarnoldae Covacevich & Ingram, 1975
A skink from open forests of Cape York Peninsula, south to Charters Towers, north-eastern Queensland.

Cryptoblepharus fulhi
Covacevich & Ingram, 1978
A skink known from a single locality, the black boulders of the Melville Range, Cape York Peninsula, north-eastern Queensland.

Carlia rimula Ingram & Covacevich, 1980
A skink confined to vine forests of Cape York Peninsula, north-eastern Queensland.

Carlia scirtetis Ingram & Covacevich, 1980
(= Liburnascincus scirtetis)
A skink known from a single locality, the black boulders of the Trevethan Range, near Cooktown, north-eastern Queensland.

Eulamprus amplus
Covacevich & McDonald, 1980
(= Concinnia amplus)
A large skink endemic to rainforests in the Mackay-Proserpine area mid-eastern Queensland.

Eulamprus luteilateralis
Covacevich & McDonald, 1980
(= Magnellia luteilateralis)
A skink endemic to high altitude rainforests of the Mackay area, of mid-eastern Queensland.

Leioplosima jigurru Covacevich, 1984
A skink known from a single locality, the boulder ‘fields’ at the summit of Mt Bartle Frere, north-eastern Queensland.

Lygisaurus rococco Ingram & Covacevich, 1988
A skink confined to the limestones in the Chillagoe area, north-eastern Queensland.

Lygisaurus tanneri Ingram & Covacevich, 1988
A skink from the riverine rainforests between the Starcke and Endeavour Rivers, north-eastern Queensland.

Lygisaurus sesbrauna
Ingram & Covacevich, 1988
A skink from heaths, and monsoon and open forests of Cape York Peninsula, north-eastern Queensland.

Carlia rubrigularis
Ingram & Covacevich, 1989
A skink confined to the rainforests of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (between Cooktown and Townsville, north-eastern Queensland).

Carlia storri Ingram & Covacevich, 1989
A skink from Papua New Guinea and Cape York Peninsula, to Townsville, north-eastern Queensland.

Sulcatidens quadratus Covacevich, Couper, Molnar, Witten & Young, 1990
A fossil dragon from the Riversleigh deposit north of Mt Isa, north-western Queensland.
Phyllurus isis
Couper, Covacevich & Moritz, 1993
A leaf-tailed gecko from mid-eastern Queensland.

Phyllurus ossa
Couper, Covacevich & Moritz, 1993
A leaf-tailed gecko from mid-eastern Queensland.

Phyllurus nepthys Couper, Covacevich & Moritz, 1993
A small leaf-tailed gecko, endemic to the rainforests in the Mackay area, mid-eastern Queensland.

Saltuarius occultus Couper, Covacevich & Moritz, 1993
(= Orraya occultus)
A large leaf-tailed gecko endemic to rainforests of the McIlwraith Range, north-eastern Queensland.

Nangura spinosa
Covacevich, Couper & James, 1993
A very distinct (both by genus and species) skink confined to remnants of semi-evergreen vine thicket, near Murgon, south-eastern Queensland.

Ramphotyphlops silvia
Ingram & Covacevich, 1993
(= Orraya silvia)
A secretive blind snake from rainforests on Quaternary sands in south-eastern Queensland.

Ramphotyphlops chamodracaena
Ingram & Covacevich, 1993
(= Anilios chamodracaena)
A secretive blind snake from woodlands of western Cape York Peninsula, northern Queensland.

Carlia parrhasius
Couper, Covacevich & Lethbridge, 1994
(= Lygisaurus parrhasius)
A skink from a single locality, a sandstone plateau, near west of Iron Range, Cape York Peninsula, far north-eastern Queensland.

Coggeria naufragus
Couper, Covacevich, Masterson & Shea, 1996
A burrowing skink from Fraser Island, a World Heritage Site.

Saltuarius wyberba
Couper, Schneider & Covacevich, 1997
A gecko from the Granite Belt, south-eastern Queensland.

Ramphotyphlops aspina,
Couper, Covacevich & Wilson, 1998
(= Anilios aspina)
A poorly known blind snake collected in ‘sheep country’ of the Barcaldine area, mid-eastern Queensland.

Ramphotyphlops robertsi
Couper, Covacevich & Wilson, 1998
(= Anilios robertsi)
A poorly known blind snake from the Cooktown area, north-eastern Queensland.

Orraya Couper, Covacevich, Schneider & Hoskin, 2000
A genus to accommodate the leaf-tailed gecko initially described as Saltuarius occultus Couper, Covacevich & Moritz, 1993.

A leaf-tailed gecko known from only one locality, Mt Elliot, near Townsville, north-eastern Queensland.

A leaf-tailed gecko, confined to the ranges south-west of Mackay, mid-eastern Queensland.
BOOKS

HERPETOLOGICAL PAPERS LISTED
IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER


Vale Jeanette Adelaide Covacevich


Couper, P.J. & McKay, J.A.


OTHER PAPERS


Memos of the Queensland Museum | Nature • 2015 • 59


PAPERS PRESENTED TO NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES


Australia’s most dangerous snakes. Centenary International Paediatric Conference, Royal Children’s Hospital, Brisbane, 20–25 August 1978. (Covacevich, J.).


Snakebite paralysis. Australian College of Paediatrics Annual Scientific Meeting; Canberra, 2–4 May 1979. (Patten, B., De Buse, P., Pearn, J., Burke, J., Covacevich, J. & Sutherland, S.).


Rapt in Reptiles - if not, why not?: taxonomy and nomenclature are far from boring. Nature Search 2001 Conference, Maroon Dam, Ipswich, 24 October 1993. (Covacevich, J.).


‘Where have all the flowers gone?’... Declines in vertebrate diversity on the Darling Downs since 1827 Royal Queensland Historical Society Conference, Killarney, 22 October 1994. (Covacevich, J.).


The reptiles of Moreton Bay. Royal Queensland Historical Society Conference, Coochie Mudlo Is. 28 May, 1995 (Covacevich, J.).


Reptiles of the rainforests of Australia’s Wet Tropics: distributions and conservation, 4 September, 1996. World Heritage Tropical Forests Conference (hosted by the Wet Tropics Management Authority with the Co-operative Research Centre for Tropical Rainforest Ecology and Management) Cairns. (Covacevich, J., Couper, P. & McDonald, K.).


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CITATIONS FOR EPONYMIC SPECIES


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