

Bearded and Water Dragons - the City Slickers

Fact Sheet



Eastern water Dragon, *Physignathus lesueurii*. Image: Steve Wilson.

Introduction

Dragons are alert lizards with upright postures, rough scales, well-developed limbs and long tails. Their vision is acute, so by perching on elevated sites such as exposed rocks, fence posts and stumps they can keep a keen eye out for predators, prey, potential rivals or mates.

Dragons rely more on visual cues than most other lizards, and this is particularly evident in social communication. Males of many species develop seasonal breeding colours, and most can rapidly change colour to indicate their mood. They have also evolved a suite of stylised display sequences such as head bobs and dips, arm-waving and tail-lashing to relay important information relating to sexual status and territory to others of their own kind.

Australia is home to more than 70 species of dragons. They feed mainly on insects and other small invertebrates, though adults of the larger species of dragons include significant amounts of vegetation in their diets. Dragons are related to the chameleons of Africa and Madagascar, and share the unusual habit of seizing their food with their tongues. But unlike their googly-eyed cousins that shoot prey with long-distance, high velocity projectile tongues, dragons dab their food with short, thick tongues. All other Australian lizards use only their jaws to grasp food.

Dragons lay soft, parchment-shelled eggs. They are sometimes encountered digging their nest burrows in areas of open ground where the sun can penetrate to warm the eggs. Clutches are often deposited in freshly delivered loads of sand, beside walking trails and in windrows along the edges of bush tracks.

Two species of dragons are conspicuous and familiar residents of eastern Australian towns and cities, thanks to their large size and their ability to thrive in home gardens and suburban parks. The Eastern Water Dragon



An Eastern Water Dragon basking beside the Brisbane River. Image: Steve Wilson.

(*Physignathus lesueurii*) and the Eastern Bearded Dragon (*Pogona barbata*) are particularly prominent in Brisbane.

Eastern Water Dragon *Physignathus lesueurii*

This spectacular lizard would serve well as Brisbane's faunal emblem. Very few developed western cities can boast huge colonies of lizards, more than half a metre long, gracing the myriad of creeks, ornamental duck ponds and even thriving in the Central Business District.

Water dragons are abundant beside all of Brisbane's waterways including the banks of the Brisbane River. Outside of the city area they are shy and difficult to observe, but the urban populations have become habituated to humans. The large dragons pose for photos, can be easily approached and will even boldly loiter near outdoor dining areas in the hope a few morsels might fall their way. They will also accept offerings from the hand but beware; those jaws of serrated teeth can easily crack thumbnails.

Identification

Water dragons have long, powerful limbs, an impressive crest of spines down the back and a very long, laterally flattened tail. They are greenish grey with short dark bars across the back and a broad black stripe behind each eye. Males are much larger than females, reaching a head and body length of about 24 cm and a total length of nearly 75 cm. Males also have more massive heads, heavier jowls, a bigger crest on the nape, and a dull red flush on the chest.



Adult male Eastern Water Dragon. Image: Steve Wilson.

Biology

Water dragons are semi-aquatic. They live in a variety of habitats but are mainly concentrated near bodies of water. The lizards are skilled climbers that bask on rocks, logs and overhanging branches. They do not hesitate to leap into the water if pursued, to cool off, or cross creeks. Water dragons are powerful swimmers, propelling themselves forward with easy graceful strokes of the laterally compressed tail while the limbs are held to the sides. When diving they can slow their heart rate, appear to have limited capacity to give off CO₂ through the skin, and can remain submerged for up to two hours.

During spring and early summer, male water dragons engage in ritualised combat. Protagonists lie face to face about a metre apart with their heads flat to the ground before lunging forwards to grasp each other and interlock jaws. Such bouts may be repeated several times before the vanquished flees. Presumably the victors in these bouts claim the best stretch of river bank, and perhaps lay claim to a group of resident females.

During spring each female buries up to 18 eggs in soft soil not far from a water course but well above usual flood levels. By mid summer the juveniles, with their bulbous heads, skinny limbs and long thin tails, can be seen among water-side vegetation.

Eastern Bearded Dragon *Pogona barbata*

Away from the waterways and into Brisbane's parks and gardens, water dragons are largely replaced by bearded dragons. These lizards survey the world from elevated perches on fence posts, letter boxes, stumps and even the headstones in Brisbane's cemeteries. The Eastern Bearded Dragon is the largest of 6 Australian species, famous for their threat displays featuring 'beards' comprised of expanded throats edged with spiny scales.

Identificaiton

Bearded dragons have shorter limbs and tails than water dragons. They are well adorned with spiny scales scattered over their backs, limbs and tails. There is a dense row of longer spines along the flanks, and in a row forming a 'beard'. They are grey with little pattern; just two obscure rows of pale blotches down the back. Males are largest, and often develop black beards and chests. They grow to a head and body length of 25 cm and a total length of about 60 cm.



An Eastern Bearded Dragon performs an impressive threat display. Image: Steve Wilson.

Biology

When harassed, Eastern Bearded Dragons enact an impressive display of bluff: gaping their bright yellow mouths; expanding their throats to display their spiny beards; flattening their bodies pancake thin; and tilting to

present the broadest aspect towards the aggressor. Their goal, achieved with spectacular success, is to look as fierce as possible and increase their apparent size. Bearded dragons are often known locally as 'frillies' because of this distinctive threat display. The true Frilled Lizard (*Chlamydosaurus kingii*), now extremely scarce in south-east Queensland, lacks the spines. Rather than expanding its throat, it has an erectable ruff of scaly skin. When at rest, this lies folded over its neck.

Bearded dragons are both terrestrial and arboreal. They forage on the ground for insects and herbage such as dandelion flowers and clover leaves, climbing trees and stumps to survey their domains and roost at night.

During spring combating males interlock their jaws in bouts that can leave protagonists with permanent tooth damage, scars and even broken jaw bones. Females lay clutches of 7-20 eggs, hatching after 45-55 days.



Brisbane's cemeteries provide excellent habitats for bearded dragons. Image: Steve Wilson.

Further Information

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Author: Steve Wilson

Queensland Museum

PO Box 3300, SOUTH BRISBANE QLD 4101

Phone: (07) 3840 7555

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