

FRIENDS OF HODDLES CREEK NEWSLETTER

Fruiting fungi

The end of daylight saving and gradual decrease in daylight hours can indicate doom and gloom for some, but autumn is wonderful time of year to get outdoors.

Following a good soaking rain and warming of the soil with sunny days, one of nature's most fascinating seasonal events takes place – the overnight appearance of fungus fruiting bodies – mushrooms, toadstools and a host of other fungi.

Fungi are amongst the most numerous organisms on earth, but because of the short life-span of their fruiting bodies they tend to be little known or understood, especially here in Australia.

What we do know, however, is that fungi play an important role in the continuous recycling of forest leaf litter into soil nutrients for uptake by plants, they can be beneficial partners or parasites to plants and, for the human species, they can be a source of food and medicine.

Fungi come in a diverse range of shapes, sizes and colours. Next time you take a walk in the bush, cast your eyes down to the forest floor and discover a wealth of fruiting fungi in their spectacular splendour.

FAR LEFT (in banner): Earth Star, *Geastrum triplex*, these are a puffball with a double tissue layer, where the outer layer splits to expose a central puffball containing the spores. Found in most forest habitats.

BELOW: Two examples of Coral fungi, *Ramaria*, these range in form and colour from simple or branched clubs to form large, complex, coral-like structures. Grow in the leaf litter of eucalypt forest.

BOTTOM LEFT: Gilled fungi, *Cortinarius archeri*, purple caps emerging, which expand and flatten with time and fade to purplish-brown then brown. Widespread and common in eucalypt forest.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Orange-peel fungus, *Aleuria aurantia*, this brightly coloured cup fungus is easily mistaken for discarded orange peel when seen along the roadside.

Meryl Knoll



Leeches: slippery little suckers

Leech. The word doesn't conjure good images for most of us. We describe a person who clings to another for personal gain, especially without giving anything in return as a leech. But are leeches all bad? Let's take a closer look.

Leeches are annelids or segmented worms, closely related to earthworms, but far more specialised both physically and in their behaviour. There are about 700 species worldwide. Their thick, muscular bodies are bilaterally symmetrical. They are generally flattened from front to back and segmented, although the segments are not often visible. Some leeches are long and worm-like, others pear-shaped and broad. Most vary in shape, both between the elongated and contracted state and between the starved and full condition. A leech can lurk in wait for a meal for days, weeks, even months!

The body of the land leech tapers towards the head with a small oral sucker surrounding the mouth and a larger sucker at the rear end. The anus is on the top surface just in front of the rear sucker. Leeches are hermaphrodites – they have both male and female sex organs, reproducing once or twice a year and having a lifespan of around two reproductive cycles.

Designed to hunt

Sensory organs on the head and body surface allow the leech to detect changes in light intensity, temperature and vibration. Chemical receptors on the head provide a sense of smell and the leech may have one or more pairs of eyes.

A hungry leech is very responsive to light and mechanical stimuli. It tends to change position frequently and explore by head movement and body waving. It can also assume an alert posture, extending to full length and remaining motionless. This is thought to maximise the function of the sensory structures in the skin. When it senses an approaching host, the leech will begin looping, using front and back suckers to crawl, continuing with trial and error until the front sucker touches the host and it attaches with its jaws. Leeches usually have three jaws that make a Y-shaped incision but the Australian land leech has only two jaws and makes a V-shaped incision.

Land leeches are common on the ground or in low foliage in damp forests, where they hang about waiting for their next meal to pass by (maybe us!).

Most leeches are **sanguivorous**, meaning that they feed as blood sucking parasites on their hosts, including humans and other mammals, fish, frogs, turtles and birds. Some leeches will even take a meal from other leeches, which may die after the attack. Sanguivorous leeches can ingest several times their own weight in blood at one meal!

After feeding the leech retires to a dark corner to digest its meal. Digestion is slow which allows the leech to survive during very long fasting periods for up to several months until the next meal passes by.

Medical use of leeches

Medicinal use of leech dates back around 2000 years when they were used to treat ailments through bloodletting. A variation on this treatment is still used today by plastic surgeons following reconstructive surgery. Leech saliva contains hirudin, an anticoagulant and anti-platelet agent that works to prevent blood clots and reduce the amount of congested blood in the tissues. Other chemicals in leech saliva keep the blood flowing in the damaged area, even after the leech is detached, allowing time for new veins to grow and the existing ones to widen and accommodate more blood flow. As a bonus, the treatment is painless – when the leech bites, it releases a naturally occurring anaesthetic that numbs the area.

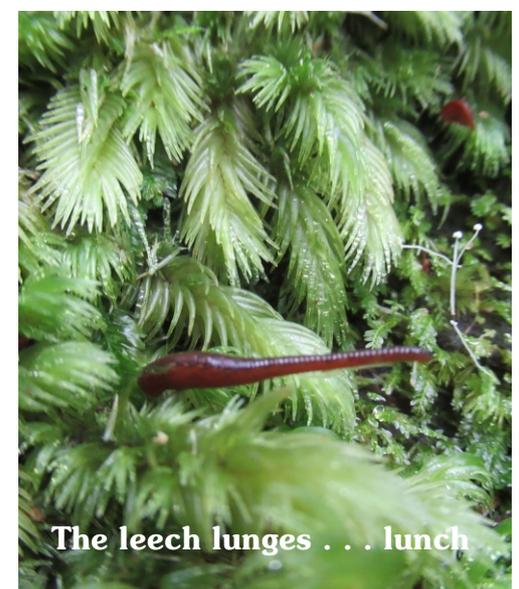
Reference: <https://australian.museum/learn/animals/worms/leeches/>



The leech lurks . . .



The leech looks . . .



The leech lunges . . . lunch

Lace monitors look as old as time

Lace Monitors, or goannas, are common in the Hoddles Creek area, so many of us have regular sightings of them in the warmer months. They often come out of bushland to raid bird and possum nests in our gardens. Many of us encourage a variety of bird-life in our gardens, so it can be upsetting to witness the destruction of nests and fledglings by these prehistoric-looking creatures, especially when there are countless rabbits around. So perhaps knowing more about them will assist us to live amicably with them.

The Lace Monitor (*Varanus varius*) can grow up to 1.5 - 2 metres in length. It is usually dark grey to black and has creamy-yellow coloured bands along its body, with black bars across its face and neck. Lace Monitors spend most of their time in trees, coming down to hunt for food and to breed. Monitors are the only lizards that have a forked tongue.

If the female Lace Monitor can't find a termite nest to lay her eggs in, she will nest in a hole in the ground, such as a wombat or rabbit burrow, and fill it with grass or leaf litter. The heat from the decomposing vegetation keeps the eggs warm.

As we do not have a lot of termite mounds in our area, nesting places are likely to be holes or burrows. I have observed goannas clearing out a disused wombat burrow, which had been taken over by rabbits, devouring the rabbits in the process. Last year I had a pair nest in a burrow in a disused wombat pen.

Warm weather helps reptiles like the Lace Monitor to become more active, as they're solar powered. In order to move quickly, they need sunlight and warmth to heat them up. They can move with sudden speed when threatened.

Apart from nabbing a few leftovers, Lace Monitors eat insects, reptiles, small mammals, birds, birds' eggs and carrion. They can even smell out prey hiding underground, dig it up and eat it – all before the prey can get away. After a large meal they can go for weeks without feeding. They are also very good at finding ways into pens and devouring poultry.

From September to December, Lace Monitors will be looking for a mate . . . and termite nests.

During spring or summer, the female Lace Monitor lays 4 to 14 eggs inside a termite nest, or a burrow of some sort. The termites seal up the entry hole and the heat of the nest incubates the eggs. This also has another benefit, because inside the nest, the eggs are safe from predators.

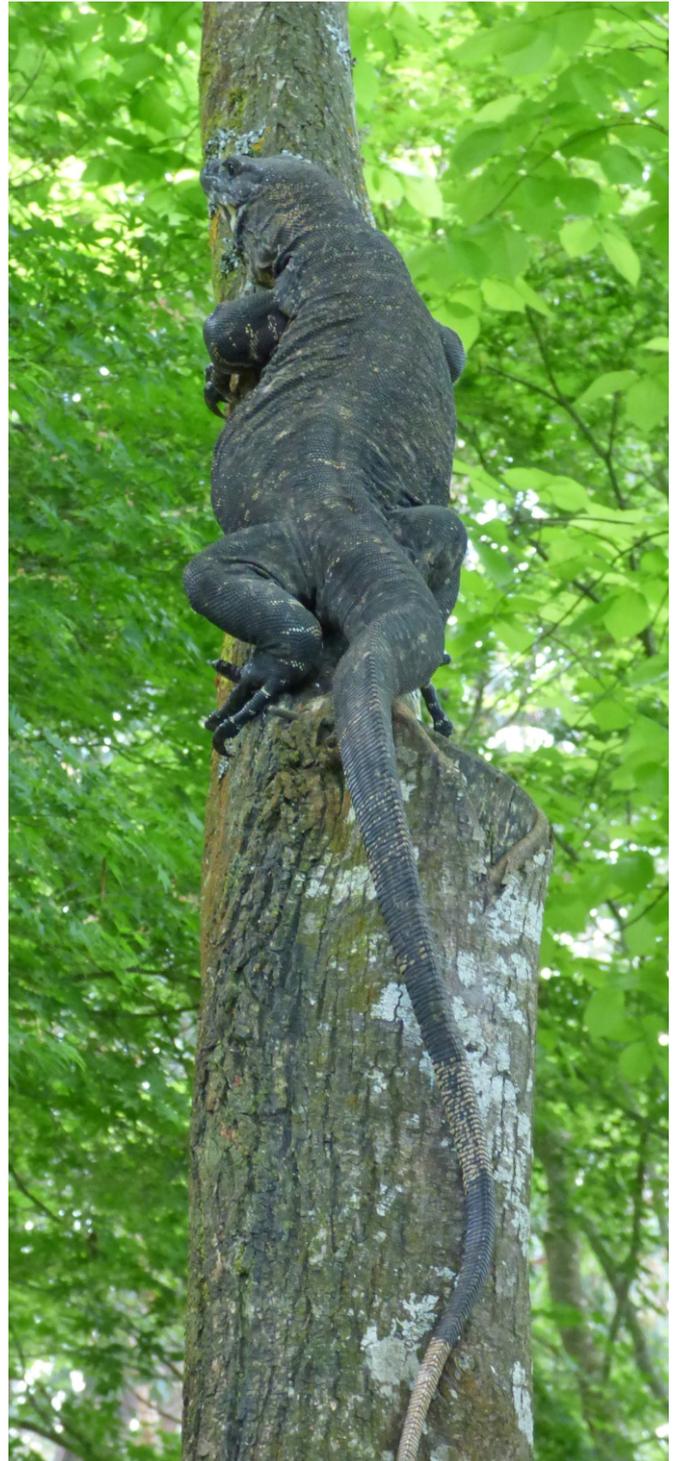
As soon as the eggs hatch, baby Lace Monitors need to fend for themselves. With little or no parental care they must escape the nest on their own if they can. To protect themselves from predators, they will hide in a nearby tree and act highly aggressively.

After about four to five years, Lace Monitors are fully grown and will begin to mate.

Summary: Lace Monitors appear to be the top native predator in our area; however, in Victoria, they are classified as Endangered, with their numbers greatly affected by loss of habitat.

Pamela Wiencke

Reference: <https://backyardbuddies.org.au/backyard-buddies/lace-monitor/>



White Lipped snakes

Unobtrusive and benign neighbours

Last autumn, a Hoddles Creek household found an uninvited visitor at the door, subsequently professionally identified as a White Lipped snake (*Drysdalia coronoides*).

White lipped snakes are small and slender, typically 20-40 cm long. Their body colour varies – grey, grey-green, brown or black on the back and pink underneath. They can be identified by the white strip along their upper lip (see image).

White-lipped snakes shelter beneath ground debris, rocks and logs. These snakes are active hunters that stalk their prey, feeding mainly on small skinks. In turn, they are taken by predators such as kookaburras.

They are Australia's most cold-tolerant snake, even inhabiting areas on Mount Kosiuszko above the snow line. It is speculated that their small size allows them to heat up quickly on sunny days, even in winter.

Although the Atlas of Living Australia does not show any records of these snakes nearer than Macclesfield and Bunyip State park, it is likely that White Lipped snakes are more common than we realise in the Hoddles Creek area. They are a shy species, tending to hide at the approach of people and, if seen, are probably mistaken for juveniles of other species, such as the red-bellied black. A small snake sunning itself in late autumn or early spring could be a White Lipped snake – but still treat it with caution.

These snakes are venomous, although with their small fangs and small venom glands, they are unlikely to cause serious injury to healthy adults. There are only a couple of recorded cases of humans becoming sick from a bite and no deaths.

The snake expert also mentioned that White Lipped snakes, unlike most others, tend to live in groups. After the uninvited visitor was relocated, the rest of the snake family apparently decided it was time to move on – the human residents were interested to see several more White Lips heading away from the house.



Photo: Dawn Holland



Like to join FOHC? The Friends of Hoddles Creek are always on the lookout for new members to add new ideas, new helpers and new friends to our group. If you'd like to join, simply contact us with your name, address and phone or email details. You can mail these to FOHC, PO Box 298, Yarra Junction, Vic 3797, or email us at friendsofhoddlescreek@gmail.com.

See more at our website (www.friendsofhoddlescreek.com) or on Facebook – just search 'Friends of Hoddles Creek' or 'FOHC'.

