



"Thank God you're here!" Snake catcher David Farrimond.

Wendy Enchelmaier chats with an industry veteran who has chalked up more than 50 years' experience handling snakes.

It was hot, and the pillowcase was heavy. Upon his family's return from their bushwalk, thirteen-year-old David couldn't wait to take the bulging bag to his room and examine his treasure. The three or four big Red-bellied Black Snakes were impatient too, squirming in the confines of the pillowcase.

"They were hissing like steam kettles," his

mother Cicely recalls as she and her husband, Tom, sit down to enjoy a cuppa.

Time passed. The house was silent. The worry familiar to parents when things go quiet flickered across each face. They decided to investigate and tiptoed to David's room. He was sitting on his bed with a black snake rearing out of the open pillowcase in front of him. They

watched, not daring to make a sudden move, as he lovingly stroked its red throat, telling the serpent, "There, there. I won't hurt you."

Meet David Farrimond, snake expert extraordinaire. David was to turn his childhood fascination with snakes into a full-time profession as a snake catcher, and decades after that incident with the Red-bellied Black Snake he is still rescuing and relocating native fauna.

"I can't imagine doing anything else," he says.

Quiet and unassuming, David's passionate interest in Australia's native animals, especially reptiles, is evident as he enters the living room of his parents' bushland home and places a shoe box on the table. Almost as an aside, glancing at the box, he informs us, "Oh, by the way, there's an injured snake in the box. I'm hoping Dad will help me cut him out of some mesh."

His parents are nonchalant; a snake on the dining table seems to be no big deal. While I view the shoebox with some trepidation, David's only concern is for the creature inside, as it has been since catching his first snake at age 12. He remembers it as if it were yesterday.

"It was 1962, after school," he says. "I went down to the local bush and was just turning over loose rocks and I found a snake. So I took it home and identified it from a library book on reptiles. Ever since then I've been keeping them as pets."

"Over the years he kept dozens of them in a big glass display case in his bedroom," adds Cicely. "Black snakes, copperheads, death adders, Diamond Pythons, tree snakes, whipsnakes...the black snakes were too big for his room, so they had to go out to the shed."

It is apparent that David's most ardent supporters have been his parents, and they obviously enjoy entertaining their unusual 'visitors'.

"We don't open the downstairs en suite door when David's visiting," says his mother. "You never know what might be lurking there, waiting to be relocated on his way home."

The timely intervention of a snake catcher can prove beneficial to both snakes and humans. Often, encounters between people and reptiles are reminiscent of a sketch on the television show *Thank God You're Here*, with elements of danger, melodrama, action adventure and even ironic humour. The participants are trapped in a precarious situation, awaiting the arrival of the star of the show; the snake catcher. Unless you share Harry Potter's gift of 'parseltongue', the experts agree that the best advice is to call for someone who can understand the language of snakes, like David Farrimond.

"I had quite a few black snakes at different stages," he recalls. "I remember one Saturday morning, Mum came to wake me for breakfast, and she looked at me and I looked at her. She saw that certain look on my face and said, 'OK, what have you got in bed with you?' She gently pulled the blankets back, and there was a four-foot Red-bellied Black Snake curled up next to me in bed."

Left: An early passion - David circa 1962. All photographs supplied by Wendy Enchelmaier.

Cicely remembers rolling her eyes at this point, before carefully replacing the covers and advising her son that, "Your bacon is getting cold!"

"Snakes fascinated me," David explains. "They were just different, and I didn't like the general attitude people had towards them. Usually, the first reaction from ordinary people was to try to hurt them rather than just admiring them. The way they move, snakes can be described as beautiful - especially ones with pretty features like tree snakes. Unfortunately, there are still people out there who just refuse to re-evaluate their mind-set."

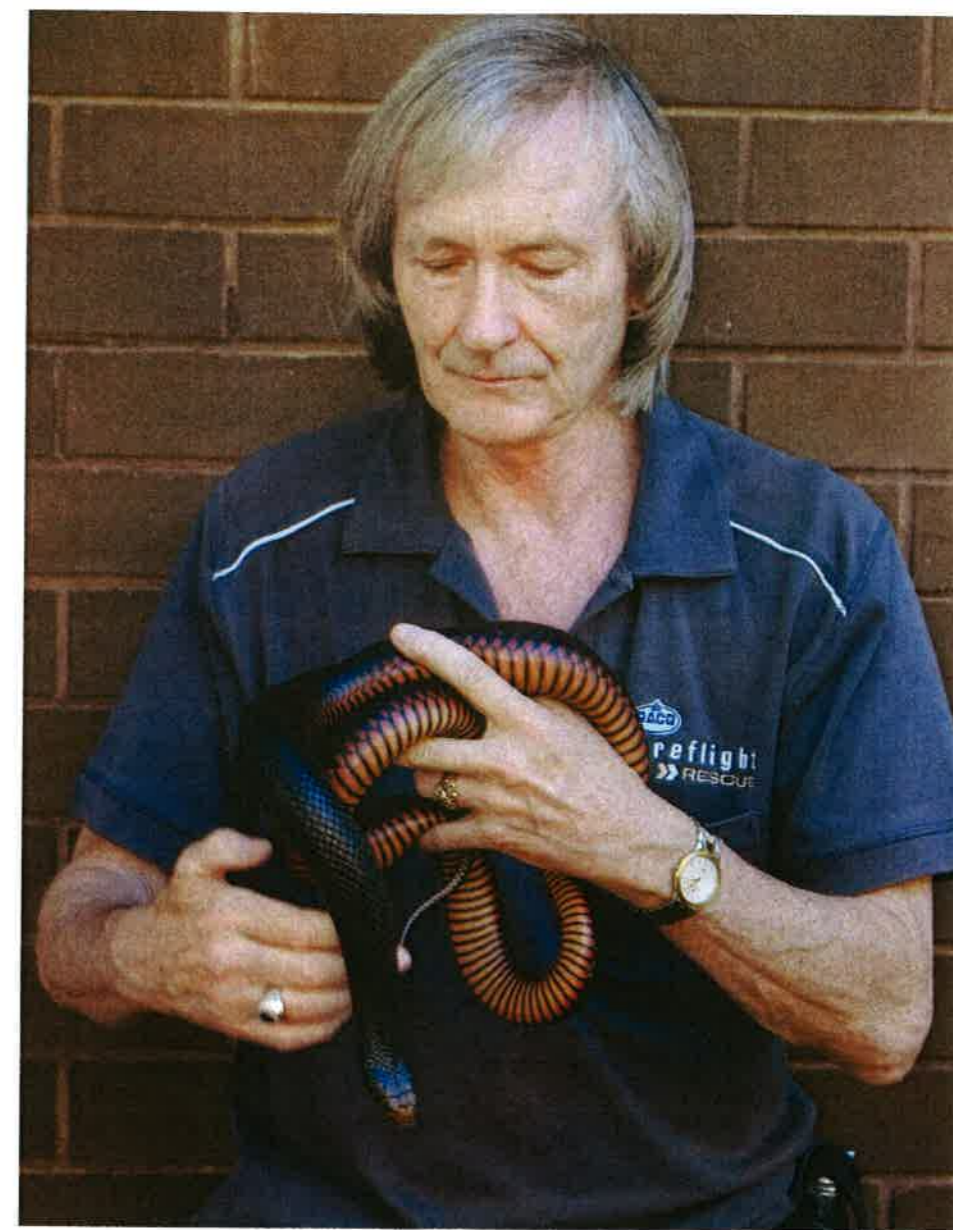
It seems that that's the nature of snakes; you either love 'em or you loathe 'em. A Queensland Museum fact sheet claims that 'Snakes inspire fascination and feelings in a way that no other type of animal can. Snakes are an important component of the natural environment and are commonly encountered in urban areas throughout Queensland. Many species have adapted extremely well to living with humans. We can also adapt to live safely with snakes.'

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"There are far more dangerous things in residential areas than a snake or two in the backyard," David continues. "And not all snakes are dangerous. They're also useful to get rid of vermin. A lot of snakes eat rodents and the Keelback can safely eat Cane Toads. Snakes have the same rights as every other native animal, like koalas or possums. They're protected fauna, whereas toads, cats, foxes, dogs and rabbits are introduced."

"People worry about anything they consider could be dangerous to their family, but their own backyard may contain an unsafe swimming pool, large dogs, or a four-wheel drive vehicle, all of which cause more deaths each year than snake bite. Snakes prefer to keep to themselves, but it's like finding explosives. If you leave them alone nothing will happen, but if you want them safely removed, call the experts."

Queensland is home to two of the most deadly snakes in the world - the Coastal Taipan and the Eastern Brown Snake - and the greater Brisbane region has more dangerously venomous species of snakes than any other Australian metropolitan area, including (in addition to the above-named) Common Death Adders, Tiger Snakes, Rough-scaled Snakes,



Above: David on the job with a rather vibrant Red-bellied Black Snake.

Mulga Snakes, Eastern Small-eyed Snakes, Spotted Black Snakes, Red-bellied Black Snakes and Stephens' Banded Snakes. The Eastern Brown Snake is common in some Brisbane suburbs and it takes an expert to distinguish them from every other 'brownish-looking' snake. In fact, the snake in the shoebox on the dining table turns out to be a small Eastern Brown Snake, trapped in some nylon mesh.

"That's the only way I'd have a brown snake in a shoebox - if it was already 'handcuffed'. You wouldn't have it loose in a shoebox otherwise," says David.

He and his father go out to the back porch to cut the snake free, and the wild birds that were feeding there suddenly fly off in fright. As I watch, David holds the snake's head while Tom snips away carefully with some sharp scissors. Cicely keeps away, as she says she doesn't want to distract them.

"There's only one snake that you really need to worry about in the inner suburbs of Brisbane, and that's the Eastern Brown Snake," David tells me later. "Most of the other snakes that we encounter don't give us too much trouble, but the brown snakes can be very aggressive when provoked and will actively defend themselves."

He was once called to a local convent to rescue three Eastern Brown Snakes trapped in garden mesh.

"It was summer, around mating season, and two of them were still alive because they were shaded, but the one that was exposed was already dead from overheating in the sun," David recounts. "I cut them out and put the two live ones in a bag, but the sisters were really distraught over the dead one, because they love all of God's creatures. Then I told them that these are the second deadliest snakes in the world, and that I'd better take them further away before releasing them."

"Oh no," said the nuns. "You don't have to take them anywhere! You can let them go here - this is where they came from."

"But you don't want to tread on one of these," David replied.

"Well, we'll watch where we're going," they told him. "We haven't trodden on one before."

Kieran Aland of the Queensland Museum offers the following advice: "Open your eyes and lift your feet when you are bushwalking. If you see a snake, walk around it - you are less likely to be bitten than if you try to disturb it or threaten it. Public ignorance about snake behaviour and



Left: "People with experience in catching snakes have the confidence to deal with them efficiently; a timid approach greatly increases the risk of being bitten."

habitat contributes to problematic encounters between humans and snakes."

One issue that worries David Farrimond is incorrect identification, which can potentially lead to the wrong antivenene being administered. He tells the tale of a man who picked up what he *thought* was a tree snake to remove it from his house and was bitten on the finger. An hour later, while watching television, he passed out. On arrival, the ambulance officer took one look at the snake, which was hiding under a pot plant, and said, "That doesn't look like a tree snake to me. It looks like a brown snake."

After confirming this identification, David rang the hospital to ensure that the patient was given specific brown snake antivenene, not the multi-purpose polyvalent antivenene. The man responded well and recovered in hospital; David says this illustrates the importance of seeking an expert opinion.

"Misidentification presents a major problem," he laments. "Inexperienced people could easily mistake a very dark Eastern Brown Snake for a Red-bellied Black Snake. Curiously, given its fearful reputation, the red-bellied black is only number 21 on the world ranking for venom (drop for drop) - nowhere near as dangerous as the Eastern Brown Snake, which sits at number two. Tiger Snake or black snake antivenene would

not have sufficient effect on someone with a serious bite from an eastern brown."

David once identified a snake from a photo depicting only two scales showing through a wall crevice.

"People could email me a picture of an unknown snake for identification, before handling it themselves," he suggests. "The picture doesn't have to be anything special, just as long as it's not blurry."

The strangest case of misidentification he has encountered involved a frantic man who reported a snake that would flatten out, hiss and strike whenever he passed it.

"When I got there, it was a rubber snake!" laughs David. "The bloke's kids had left it on the back steps."

When pressed about all of the hissing and striking, the man answered, "That wasn't it, it was much bigger. There must have been another one!"

Patrick Couper, Curator of Reptiles at the Queensland Museum, once witnessed David Farrimond in action in the car park of a suburban Brisbane shopping centre. A large Eastern Brown Snake had been accidentally transported there under a car, and Mr. Couper succeeded in confining the snake for twenty minutes or so until the snake catcher

arrived.

"David dealt with it in a very professional and competent manner," said Mr Couper. "He grabbed it by the tail and had it in the bag in one swift, fluid motion. People with experience in catching snakes have the confidence to deal with them efficiently; a timid approach greatly increases the risk of being bitten."

For David, rescuing and relocating native fauna, as well as fielding calls for advice, is no nine-to-five occupation. Some mornings start with a call-out as early as 7am, with maybe a dozen calls a day.

"I do the whole north side of Brisbane from the city through to about Caboolture, or even further," David informs me.

Sometimes he is called out late at night and once he found himself, at 1am, standing before two police officers with guns drawn, after being called to help an elderly gentleman with a carpet python as a bedroom guest. Paranoid when the snake began crawling out into the hallway, the man grabbed a shotgun and fired, blowing the head off the snake and a leg from a chair! David arrived to find him in shock, holding the re-loaded shotgun. On this occasion the snake catcher had to pacify the police officers instead of a snake.

"All the guy had to do was close the bedroom door and wait for me to arrive," says

David, shaking his head. "Snake catching is not for inexperienced people who have never even kept venomous snakes."

There have certainly been some weird incidents over the years.

"There was a carpet python that climbed through a third-floor window of the Royal Brisbane Hospital and curled up behind a toaster on the bench in the canteen. The nurses wouldn't go for lunch until I came to remove it," David remembers.

"Another time, I was called to remove a female carpet python curled around her clutch of eggs. Normally, I would place the eggs in an incubator and release the mother back into the wild. This time, however, I had a cardboard box with me so I put the adult and her eggs into the box. Then I found a small bridge over a creek crossing with overhanging greenery in a nice shady spot, so I prepared a bower for the python by smoothing out a hollow area under the vegetation, then carefully lifted mother and eggs together and placed them all in their special nest."

David then backed off, leaving the female coiled around her eggs. He watched for an hour through binoculars, but she didn't show any sign of deserting her clutch, so eventually he left her there, content in her new home.

On another occasion, David was called late at night to attend to two male carpet pythons engaged in territorial combat. They were tightly wrapped together, each trying to outdo the other in a battle for supremacy.

"A couple of people were standing watching, taking photographs of the duel," says David. "One of the snakes became aware of the attention they were attracting, so it disengaged and slowly crawled away. The other snake stayed poised, raised up ready for combat. So I laid on the ground beside the snake and raised my forearm to imitate the earlier opponent. I started playing arm games with the python."

The snake pushed back onto David's forearm for a few minutes, just as if he were a combatant snake, before seeming to realize that there was something odd about his new opponent and crawling off.

"In my fifty years of snake catching, I have never before experienced this unique opportunity," David concludes. "I don't think I would attempt this with Eastern Brown Snakes, but I will give it another try if I encounter Red-bellied Black Snakes in territorial combat."

At the time of writing, David keeps only a small collection of snakes - a two-metre Inland Taipan called 'Snuffy' and a one-metre albino carpet python. He cautions against inexperienced people keeping dangerously venomous snakes, due to the danger of 'feeding bites'.

"A defensive bite may not even inject venom," says David. "It's a leave-me-alone bite. But a captive snake is like a dog in its own backyard. It knows the procedure and when it bites that mouse it's going to inject venom. As soon as it has picked up the scent, the next thing that moves gets bitten. If it feels you trying to pull away, it just pumps in more venom."

David speaks from personal experience. "Back in 1969, a death adder bit me when I was cleaning its cage. I had to have antivenene for that. My only other hospitalisation was for a Rough-scaled Snake bite in 1993.

"I remember the first Coastal Taipan I ever caught. It was 1970, in Mareeba, and the snake was just a fraction under two metres long. The



whole purpose of that trip was to catch one and we weren't prepared when we found it, because the bag was still in the car! We saw the snake crossing the road, ran after it and I grabbed it by the tail. It struck at my face and I ducked and it went over my shoulder. Then it had a few more strikes at me. My mate, Neville Burns, had to run back and bring the car up, so for about 20 minutes I stood there holding this taipan. Later, I sent Mum a telegram telling her I had just caught a six-foot taipan with nothing but bare hands and a pillow case!"

"Can you imagine being at work and receiving a telegram from your son, saying that he'd just caught his first taipan?" Cicely recalls with a shudder.

David repeatedly stresses the need to 'call an expert' and has some additional advice for members of the public caught in potentially dangerous situations.

"If the snake is very close and alerted to them, the best thing to do is to stand very still. After a while it will lose interest and just crawl off of its own accord. If they're far enough away, people can just back away from the snake and make a phone call."

As if to press the point, as David pushes aside the teacup his phone rings again - the fifth time since I arrived.

Afterwards, David informs us that the call related to a carpet python and that the person on the phone had told him, "That snake must be listening to you; everything you're saying is

what he's doing. You must have a special magic touch over the phone."

About six or seven years ago David was called out to a factory to remove an impressive two-metre Red-bellied Black Snake that proved relatively docile to handle. The lady caller who witnessed the incident was so impressed by his expertise that she dubbed him the 'Snake Whisperer' - a title that has remained with him ever since.

As it rings yet again, David grabs his jangling phone and reaches for his car keys, the shoebox and a pillowcase. He rises to leave, and I realize that in this age of high-tech equipment, some things never change. He still uses a pillowcase to carry snakes.

"Only for non-venomous ones," he assures me. "It's cotton and allows the snake to breathe. I have a special bag for venomous snakes. The easier and faster you can get them into a bag, the less chance there is of being bitten."

Birds chirp incessantly outside. Rainbow and Scaly-breasted Lorikeets fight over seed and a cockatoo squawks at a koala in a nearby tree. Downstairs, I am told, a frog named Louis Green lives in the laundry. After two fascinating hours listening to snake sagas in this magical place, my rampant ophiophobia (fear of snakes) is almost cured - until I come face-to-face with one, in a close encounter of the wrong kind! At least now I know what to do - call a snake whisperer like David Farrimond.

INTERVIEW

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Once again we are very excited about the quality images being entered into our SHARP Competition for the coming year.

The competition is open to anyone, amateur and professional alike, so if you haven't already entered, we really encourage you to do so. The fact is, you've got to be in it to win it.

And what a prize you could win! The winner of the 2014 SHARP Competition will receive \$300 worth of products from our major sponsor, Reptile One.

Although the SHARP Competition is very simple and easy to enter, we must remind you that by entering a photograph you are acknowledging that the image was taken by yourself. Anyone found to have breached copyright will be disqualified.

Please send all 2014 entries to admin@scalesandtails.com.au Re: SHARP Competition. Please include your full name, telephone number, suitable caption identifying the subject, and a brief description of how you came to take your photograph(s). All entries must be at least 22cm wide and 300dpi (all images smaller than this will not be entered). By submitting your images, you agree that while you, the photographer, retain the copyright, you acknowledge that Scales & Tails Australia and Reptile One reserve the right to use your image(s) in any of their future publicity, publications or promotional activities.

The 2014 competition will close 5.00pm October 31st 2014, with the winner being announced in our November Issue. The 2015 SHARP Calendar featuring your images will be available from early in January.

Keep an eye out! We're sure you'll enjoy our selection of SHARP Competition entries in coming issues and on our Facebook group!

The first point of contact for snake identification in Queensland should be the Queensland Museum, on 3840 7555, or inquirycentre@qm.qld.gov.au

For internet information on your closest snake expert go to www.snakecatchers.com.au

For the north Brisbane area, phone David Farrimond on 0409 675 522.

If you require photo identification, email David at: srs@snakeremovalservices.com.au

Snakes are protected under the Nature Conservation Act 1992 and cannot be killed or taken from the wild. Snake keeping in Queensland requires a licence from the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. Only snakes bred in captivity by a licensed person can be purchased. The maximum fine for cruelty to animals is \$75,000 for actions that are unnecessary, unjustified and unreasonable.