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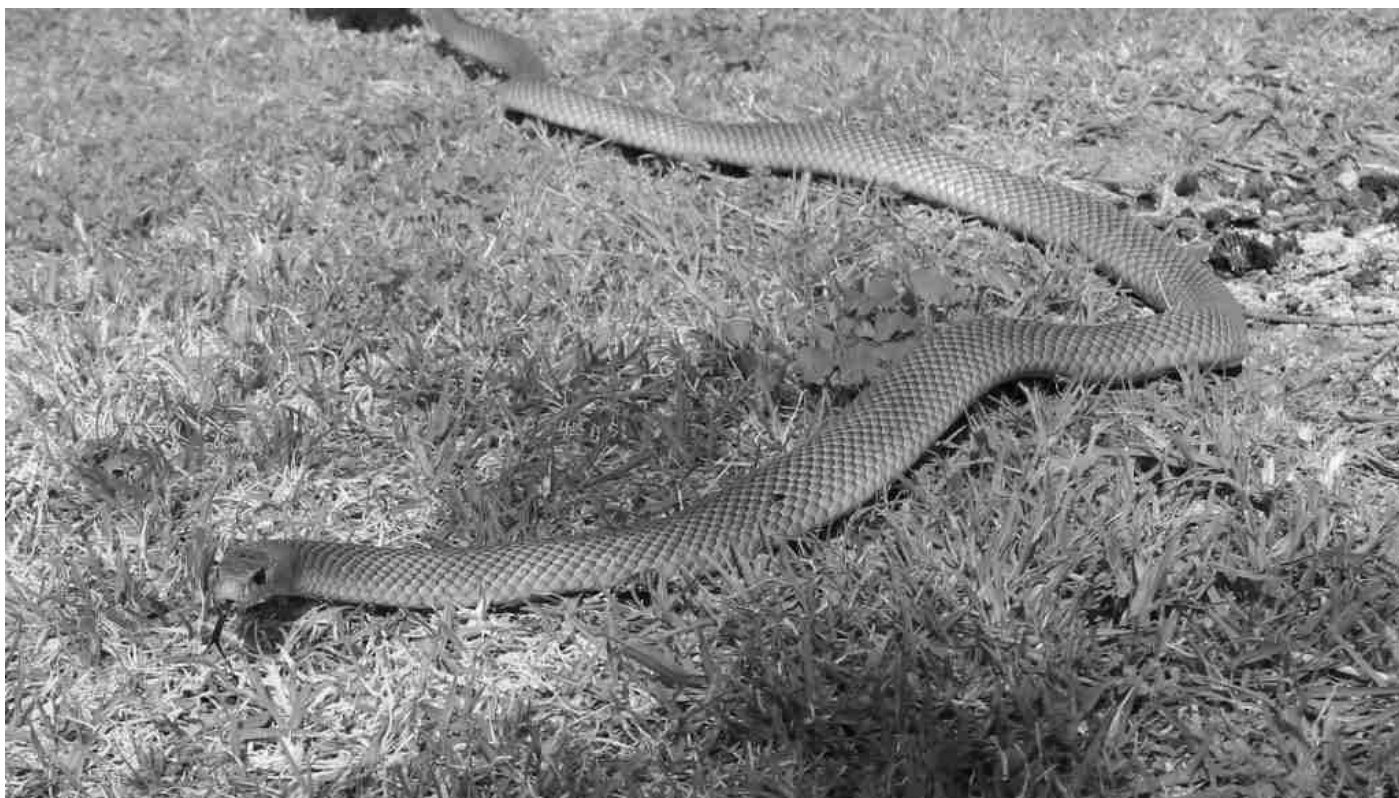


IS THIS THE MOST AWESOME JOB EVER? MEET HARLEY JONES, SNAKE CATCHER!

May 20, 2021

It would have to be one of the most fascinating jobs you could have in Australia. Snake catcher Harley Jones is well known to many on the lower North Shore due to his business Snakes in the City – and in Sydney business is good! Lucky for all of us he also loves a good yarn and has some amazing snake stories to tell...

"It all started one afternoon when I was about 2-3 years old, I was swimming in the shallows of a lake with my family and some family friends. I remember there being a lot of screaming and being ripped out of the water onto the grassy shores. Looking back to the water, I remember this brown snake swimming directly up toward where I had been sitting – then watched as it came onto the sand. Out of nowhere, one of my father's friends came running with this shovel and hit the snake. Even as a toddler, I was speechless. I just didn't feel like the snake posed any threat and couldn't understand why there was such an irrational fear of this animal to justify killing it.



At the age of 14, I was at Dreamworld with a friend and there was a snake show being run twice a day by this guy named Greame Gow. I had no idea who he was – but I spent the entire day hanging out at his show. Turns out, Greame Gow is reptile royalty. He was one of the most respected herpetologists in the world and I will forever be grateful for the time he gave me that day. For the next few months I was obsessed with getting a pet snake. Luckily, my mother was a high school science teacher and I managed to persuade her.



I always thought it would be interesting to be a snake catcher but it never occurred to me that it could be a business. My first job was in a recruitment company that I wasn't feeling very passionate about, and I was sitting there one morning when the random thought crossed my mind – "I wonder what it's like to be a snake catcher?" So I Googled a list of people who were licenced snake catchers in Sydney. I called the first name on the list and had a great chat to this guy named Rob Ambrose – a licenced snake catcher and the presenter of the snake shows at La Perouse every Sunday, who now works for me!

I started Snakes in the City around 2013 and we now have a really great team of licensed snake catchers who have literally hundreds of years of experience between us who are very well regarded in the snake world and industry. Despite the name Snakes in the City, we operate all over the Sydney region – from north to Newcastle, all the way out to Katoomba and all the way south to Woollongong. When it comes to snakes, the name of the game is being there as quickly as possible. We aim to have one of our staff on site within 30 minutes or less of ANY location in Sydney.



Personally, I do between 4-10 call outs each day, generally in the North Shore/Northern Beaches areas, but I also manage calls and jobs for the six other guys we have on call across Sydney, Central Coast and South Coast. Between us we probably do somewhere between 10-20 calls on average each day.

It's actually a surprisingly intensive process to become a licensed snake catcher in New South Wales. You are required to hold a "Catch and Release Permit" for which you must hold a current First Aid certificate, a valid public liability insurance certificate, have 5 years or more valid experience with venomous species, and have three written references from people with an equal or greater permit or related tertiary qualification and experience. Logs need to be kept of all call outs with location, species and release location.

I've been bitten only once by a venomous snake. About five years ago, but it was completely my fault and luckily it's what's called a "dry bite". One afternoon a colleague and I were photographing a bunch of juvenile Red Belly Black snakes on my front lawn. As would be expected when I put them on the ground – they all shot off in different directions! So in a great hurry, we start grabbing these cute little danger noodles one by one and throwing them back in the bag. Next thing you know, one of these little guys is hanging off the skin between my thumb and index finger!



I remember yelling "Oi! You little bugger!" as I pulled him off. Rob looked at me and said "Did he get you?" but I knew I was good. Red Belly Black snake venom is apparently very, very painful. You will definitely know if you've been envenomated, because it will hurt like hell. So I knew I was ok. But, lesson learnt, don't get too casual about this – it can end very badly. The bottom line is, no one needs a hero – snakes need to be professionally and safely removed and that is exactly what we strive to do.

One of the most memorable call outs I have done was a when a lady called and told me she had a 2m Brown Snake in her yard in Killara, adjacent to the golf course. I was wearing thongs, shorts and

a t-shirt at the time and was not expecting a snake call. I told her "If it's a 2m Brown Snake in Killara, I'll do it for free!". Brown Snakes rarely occur on the North Shore (they are often other species mistaken for brown snakes) and I was yet to see a genuine 2m Brown Snake, ANYWHERE in Sydney. Imagine my surprise when I rocked up to the front door, only to hear a rustle in the leaves in the garden down the side of the house as I press the doorbell – then I look to see a massive Brown Snake cruising up along the fence line. I managed to grab the tail as it disappeared into the gaps between some loose besa blocks. I remember thinking "What the hell do I do next?".



I realise at this point that I can pull the bricks out individually. Lucky for me, I had my Kevlar gloves with me, which are specially designed for handling snakes. Still holding the tail of this snake and I ask the lady to come over and help put a glove on my free hand. I pull the brick back and I can see the body of this snake – as thick as my wrist. I reach in with the gloved hand to grab the snake mid body and pull it slowly back out as planned – then BANG! The snake has spun around inside the gap and grabbed my wrist! Its head was almost as big as my hand. I've never seen anything like it. I could feel the pressure from its jaws clamping down on my hand and at that point was thinking "damn... I hope these gloves work as advertised!"

I let go at this point but while still holding the tail in my left hand, and I fall backwards on my butt! There is this moment of me looking up at this Brown Snake – which is now standing up like Brown Snakes do, pretty much at my head height and super unimpressed, while I look up at him thinking "damn, this is no good... do NOT let go of that tail!" The only thing stopping him from giving me a piece of his mind is the fact that I have his tail in my other hand and some besa blocks still holding him back.

Lucky for me Brown Snakes get so absorbed with standing their ground that they will often stay in place until the opportunity to escape presents itself. In this case, I was right in front of it and I had its tail, so it wasn't going anywhere fast. I reached behind me and grabbed my hoop bag and put it in front of the snake. The snake saw somewhere to hide and jumped in the bag. As soon as it did, I twisted the bag to secure the snake, then fell back and let out a few expletives, promptly followed by an apology to the lady. The lady was so nice... I apologized for doubting her and started packing

up to get in the car and she came over with the money and said "I know you said you would do it for free but I'm paying you for that!"



Another tricky job happened just the other day. I got a Diamond Python from 10m up a tree. That wasn't fun. Some jobs are really easy... walk in, pick up snake, walk out. Some are nightmares. But it's satisfying to succeed in them and whatever the case, we always offer a return-at-no-cost guarantee.

The snakes you're most likely to find in the Willoughby City area include Red Belly Black Snakes, Golden Crown Snakes, Common Tree Snakes and Marsh Snakes. We also get called a lot for Blue Tongues. Seriously! People see either part of the lizard, like just the tail, or just the body, or just the head.... And they freak out and think it's a snake. Some people are just as freaked out by Blue Tongues as they are by snakes and are happy to have them removed. But honestly, I feel bad removing a poor little harmless Blue Tongue from the backyard he is living in happily!



We also do contract invasive species removal for the Department of Primary Industry, and Police Raids and Crime Scenes – so we often get called to remove illegally kept reptiles such as crocodiles, exotic snakes, and exotic turtles.

We're on call 24 hours a day and I try to cover as much of the night call outs myself as possible, because I have the phone with me and I am a bit of a night owl. I started out this morning at 1am for a call out to Narrabeen – from there I got home for about 30mins, then just as I was getting back in bed at 2:30am, I got a call out to Blacktown. I already had a site inspection and risk assessment job booked in for Illawong at 8am, then Mosman after that, then Mt Coolah after that. It was 1pm by the time the calls started slowing down so I had a cat nap before the afternoon calls kicked off and I ended up out at jobs again until about 9pm.

The first thing people should do if they spot a snake on their property is to please take a photo! It really helps us identify the species and that can give us the opportunity to let you know if its venomous or non venomous, if its likely to hang around, where to look for it and generally give you more accurate information! Otherwise, try not to disturb it. Just watch from a distance and if you feel the need to have it removed, give us a call – we can be there within 15-20mins usually!

Is my job the most fascinating in the world? No! I would give anything to be flying fast jets for the Royal Australian Air Force. You'll have to forgive me if I'm ever at your place to catch a snake and my attention drifts away momentarily to the airplane flying overhead. That aside – I love what I do! I meet so many different fascinating people, go to some amazing houses and properties, go to some really unique and interesting jobs (such as crime scenes, snakes on trains, snakes in schools and yes... even snakes on planes!) and every day, every call out is an adventure. I spend my days outdoors and enjoying the world – travelling around Sydney and doing anything from filming with TV crews for news or documentaries through to having a face off with a large Eastern Brown Snake!"

Snakes in the City

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