

NOTES ON *EGERNIA CUNNINGHAMI KREFFTI*, AN AUSTRALIAN SKINK

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Of the basically continental Australian skink genus *Egernia*, few species were thought to be as completely understood as the ubiquitous form known commonly as Cunningham's skink. It was well known that it was among the most diverse in many external respects, but all things taken in sequence, the vast majority were able to be easily and conveniently relegated to a subspecific status, in which niche most still stand. But now, little by little, it is being realized that all may not be what it seems. With today's more sophisticated methods of determining classification, herpetologists are finding that rather than there being one very variable taxa, there is at least one, and probably several, undescribed species which have been considered as *cunninghami*, in addition to the "true form".

With all of this in mind, I will still utilize the currently recognized taxonomy here and call the animal that we are discussing *Egernia cunninghami krefftii*. Whether it will here remain when critically viewed by modern taxonomists will remain to be seen. *Krefftii* is one of the prettier of the Cunningham's races, being boldly patterned dorsally with light spots against a dark ground colour, the spots forming a series of broken bands. The head is considerably lighter than the remainder of the body, usually being a warm brown or russet. This colouration frequently continues down the neck and in some specimens may reach the shoulders. The creature is of robust build and reaches an adult length of slightly over 14 inches. With increasing age the temporal area of the males becomes greatly enlarged until some old specimens are positively "jowly" in appearance.

Krefftii is an active, aggressive, diurnal lizard, its aggressiveness not being restricted to others of the same kind. An adult male which is kept by me, while ignoring such companion species as blue-tongued skinks, would persistently do battle with any of a series of Timor monitors that were originally housed with him, eventually necessitating the removal of the latter from his enclosure.

Krefftii is of omnivorous feeding habit, those in my collection eagerly accepting many kinds of fruit and vegetables as well as most canned dog or cat foods and other forms of raw meat. They actively forage for insects and anoles as well, seldom missing their target. Particulars of their base diet would reveal that grated apples, bananas, tomatoes, pears and whatever brand of canned cat food is available are offered thrice weekly and grey crickets (*Acheta domesticus*) are always available to them. A powdered vitamin such as Vionate® is introduced into the food mixture and crickets are dusted with Osteoform®. Fresh water is available at all times.

The *krefftii*, as are most of my other lizards, permanently maintained in out-of-doors facilities. These are simple, open air structures formed by sinking a three foot high piece of sheet aluminium — which has been formed into a ring 10 feet in diameter — into the ground to a depth of 14 inches. The distance above the ground is sufficient to prevent the escape of the inhabitants and that below ground level prevents a similar possibility through burrowing.

Each ring is furnished with adequate cage materials in the form of rocks, logs and plantings to make the inhabitants feel at ease. In the case of *krefftii* such furnishings consist of substantial piles of boulders beneath and between which the lizards dart when frightened. Simply made, but effective, hibernacula are also designed. The actual effectiveness of these arrangements was tested during the past winter (1981), when southwestern Florida experienced several consecutive nights of sub-freezing weather. In spite of the adverse conditions all remained well in the pens. As a matter of fact, except for one overcast day that remained cruelly cold (for we Floridians, either native or transplanted, at least) the *krefftii* were seen basking for several hours daily. A test of the opposite extreme also proved successful this June when for more than a week the temperature

hovered at or above 38°C (100°F), and on two of those days reached a high of 40°C (104°F). During this the lizards basked and fed early in the morning and again late in the afternoon, retiring into the coolness of their hibernacula while the sun was at its zenith. Seclusion in the hibernacula or in the rock piles is also sought during heavy rains, there being an almost immediate cessation of whatever activity the lizards are indulged in. As may be surmised photoperiod is entirely natural, albeit reversed from that of the lizards' southern hemisphere homeland. However, all seem to have adapted nicely.

Such "natural" caging facilities appear nearly ideal to me, and to the *kreffti* they must be almost equally acceptable for reproduction has already occurred. The parent lizards are barely 22 months of age and are, themselves, zoo born specimens. This early sexual maturity was unexpected since I had thought that although the animals were quick to reach adult size, the capability to reproduce occurred somewhat later (Bartlett 1981). However on June 27, 1981, two neonates were found in one of the rockpiles. Their measurements, which were identical, were: 124 mm total length; 61 mm snout-vent length; 15 mm head width. Upon discovery both were moved into temporary indoor facilities due to the predaceous attitudes of the adults. In a terrarium with both incandescent and fluorescent (Vitalite ©) lighting they began to feed almost immediately and have shown a definite preference for insects as opposed to prepared foodstuffs.

In keeping with all other members of the genus, *kreffti* produces living young. These number from 2 to 6 under ordinary circumstances and it is thought that as a rule the number of young produced may increase with the age of the female.

REFERENCE

- Bartlett, R.D. 1981. The Saxicolous *Egernias*, Australia's Animated Pine Cones. *Notes From Noah*, Northern Ohio Association of Herpetologists 8(6): 10-13.