

Yakka skink life history & ecology

The yakka skink is active during cooler parts of the day, dusk and sometimes at night. Individuals dig a deep burrow system under and between partly buried rocks or logs, or into old root tracts at the base of remnant stumps. They may also utilise old rabbit warrens, deep gullies, tunnel erosion/sinkholes or under rural buildings.

The yakka skink is omnivorous, consuming soft plant materials and fruits and a wide variety of invertebrates (beetles, grasshoppers, spiders) that venture into or near the burrow entrance. It produces live young, with around six per litter.

Threats to the yakka skink

Loss of habitat due to clearing and thinning

The focus of vegetation clearing in the Brigalow Belt is shifting from the essentially cleared Brigalow ecosystems on fertile soils to the eucalypt woodlands on poorer soils. Consequently the survival of dry woodland/open forest species with limited geographic ranges and/or specialised habitat requirements, such as the yakka skink, remains uncertain unless conservation action is undertaken.

Inappropriate roadside management

Roadsides and road reserves often provide suitable reptile habitat. Populations of reptiles that live within linear remnants, such as roadside strips, are particularly vulnerable to disturbances that remove essential microhabitat features, for example, rocks, logs, dense leaf litter and fallen bark. Road widening and maintenance works may also impact on yakka skink populations by destroying burrows.

Removal of wood debris and rocks

This species is threatened by the removal of its microhabitat, which includes partly buried rocks, fallen logs and leaf litter.

Ripping of rabbit warrens

The practice of ripping rabbit warrens is known to kill yakka skinks as well as other species like woma pythons, and also destroys important shelter sites.

Feral animals

The yakka skink is vulnerable to predation by foxes and feral cats.

Case Study – A botanic refuge

The Myall Park Botanic Gardens, maintained by volunteers and a caretaker, is a safe haven for the threatened yakka skink. In 2007 the gardens applied for a TSN Community Grant to help protect the skink and many other species from feral predators and grazing animals, which degrade the habitat.

The yakka skink is the flagship animal for the local town and the Gardens are vital for its survival.

The project has two aims. Firstly, to reduce the number of grazing animals, such as rabbits and kangaroos, so habitat isn't degraded further. Secondly, to reduce foxes and cats, which prey on vulnerable reptiles like the yakka skink and birds that use the gardens.

Important areas of high biodiversity value within the Gardens have been enclosed with a mesh fence to protect habitat. A floppy type of mesh is being trialled to see if it can keep grazing and predatory animals out without restricting the movement in and out for smaller animals such as other reptiles.

Community members are helping the conservation of the yakka skink by taking part in the fox and cat trapping. Workshops have been held to train community members in the safe use of the traps. This will hopefully lead to a gradual reduction in the numbers of feral cats and foxes in the local area.

What you can do

- Maintain large, healthy, connected patches of suitable habitat – for example poplar box, ironbark, brigalow and mulga woodlands.
- Retain fallen timber and ground cover as these provide essential habitat.
- Implement coordinated feral animal control measures.
- Survey roadsides before undertaking road widening or maintenance operations. Flag and protect suitable habitat and burrows if found.
- Avoid disturbance of colonies by ensuring grazing practices are sustainable, maintaining good ground cover or restricting grazing by fencing if necessary.
- If burning, use cool burns in a mosaic pattern that promote patchiness and leave areas of ground cover unburnt.
- Consider entering into a conservation agreement for conservation and land management assistance.
- Report sightings to the TSN. Taking a photo of live or dead specimens is useful to help identification.
- Help the yakka skink by reporting any activities that you see that are likely to harm them or their habitat to the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts – Compliance and Enforcement Branch. Visit www.environment.gov.au/epbc/compliance/index.html or freecall 1800 110 395 for more information.

Contacts

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Reference

Environmental Protection Agency (Queensland), www.epa.qld.gov.au/nature_conservation/wildlife/az_of_animals/yakka_skink/.
Richardson, R. (*In prep*). Draft National recovery plan for Queensland Brigalow Belt Reptiles. Report to the Department of the Environment and Water Resources, Canberra. WWF Australia.