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Amphibians and reptiles

Reptiles and amphibians are inextricably linked in most people's minds, though the physical differences between them are considerable, and they have very different ecological needs. These can be summarised very simply: amphibians have soft, scale-less skin with limited tolerance for drying out, and their soft-shelled eggs are usually laid in water or wet places. Frogs are the only representatives of this group in Australia, and because of their specialised needs the great majority of them are wetland animals for at least a part of their life cycle.

By contrast, the scaly skin of a reptile is designed to keep moisture in so desiccation is not a problem except in extreme conditions, so many reptiles live in arid places. Others have become secondarily associated with water, though the presence of open water is not always necessary to their well-being. The hard or leathery shell of a reptile egg also allows them to breed a long way from any water supply, though it also means the eggs would drown if laid in water, and to get around this problem some aquatic reptiles have become livebearers whose eggs develop into miniatures of the adult inside the mother.

Frogs – a disappearing act

All native amphibians in Australia, including those variously referred to as froglets, toads, toadlets and burrowing frogs are true frogs, even though the bodies of some may be squatter and more 'warty' looking than those of their more slender and stylish relatives. The only true toad in Australia is the toxic and unlovable cane toad (see Plate 19), discussed with other introduced vermin in Chapter 6.