

# New record of the invasive Asian House Gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*) in Canberra

Dustin Welbourne

School of Physical, Environmental and Mathematical Sciences, University of New South Wales Canberra, PO Box 7916, Canberra ACT 2610, Australia.

Email: [d.welbourne@student.unsw.edu.au](mailto:d.welbourne@student.unsw.edu.au)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7882/AZ.2012.029>

Key words: invasive species, gecko, reptiles, urban commensal.

Until recently, biotic distributions were largely dictated by the interactions of dispersal, evolution, and plate tectonics (Huggett 2004; Cox and Moore 2005). Now, merchandise and people are transported at unprecedented rates in an embrace of globalisation, thereby providing pathways for flora and fauna to breach previously impervious geographic barriers (Lowe *et al.* 2000; Stachowicz *et al.* 2002). Despite Australia's geographic isolation, it has not escaped this phenomenon as there are an estimated 80 invasive, non-indigenous vertebrate species, an order of magnitude more for invertebrates, and approximately 2700 species of non-indigenous plant that have established populations in Australia (Low 1999; Bomford and Hart 2002; Pimentel 2002).

Invasive organisms generally have numerous impacts attributed to them (Bomford 2008; Gong *et al.* 2009). The direct economic impact attributed to invasive vertebrates in Australia is \$743.5 million annually with invasive flora costing in excess of \$4 billion per annum (Sinden *et al.* 2004; Gong *et al.* 2009). Though quantifying a fiscal value for environmental costs is problematic, impacts can be contextualised in terms of species under threat (Bomford 2008). The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (2010) showed that invasive organisms are implicated as a key threat to more than 35% of Australia's threatened species.

The Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre (IA CRC 2010) stated that more than 90% of invasive organism impacts in Australia are confined to just five species: red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), feral cat (*Felis catus*), European rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), feral pig (*Sus scrofa*), and feral dog (*Canis familiaris*). In fact, the impacts from the four non-indigenous reptile species that have established on mainland Australia (Table 1) appear comparatively negligible; probably for two reasons (Burgin 2007; Newberry and Jones 2007). Firstly, as Hoskin (2011) identified, little research has been done within the Australian context to assess impacts that these non-indigenous reptile species cause. Secondly,

the majority of the non-indigenous reptile species that have established are confined to small, local populations (Bomford and Hart 2002). However, the Asian House Gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*) is the exception of the latter as its established distribution now spans much of northern Australia (Fig. 2a), with the most southerly population occurring in Taree on the mid-north coast of New South Wales (Hoskin 2011).

## Spread to the South: a new record from Canberra

In March of 2010 a Coca-Cola truck driver making a delivery to a cafe in the Gold Creek Village, Nicholls, ACT 2913 (-35.1905S, 149.0832E), alerted the author (working at the Canberra Reptile Sanctuary located at the same address) to a small lizard on one of the crates being delivered. The specimen was captured (Fig. 1) and positively identified by the author and confirmed by the ACT Government Vet, Dr Will Andrew (ACT Government 2010), as *H. frenatus*. The author confirmed with the driver that the truck had come directly from a warehouse in the Queanbeyan area that morning where regular bulk deliveries are received from the Sydney Coca-Cola depot. This event represents the



Figure 1. Specimen of *H. frenatus* collected from a crate of beverages being delivered to cafe in the Gold Creek Village, Nicholls, ACT 2913 (-35.1905S, 149.0832E).

Photo, D. Welbourne (Mar 2010).

Table 1. Non-indigenous reptile species known to have established on mainland Australia.

Species	Scientific Name	Extent of Establishment
Asian house gecko	<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i>	Broad
Mourning gecko	<i>Lepidodactylus lugubris</i>	Few localised
Red-eared slider	<i>Trachemys scripta elegans</i>	Few localised
Flowerpot snake	<i>Ramphotyphlops braminus</i>	Many localised

Source: Bomford and Hart (2002)

first confirmed record of *H. frenatus* to the Canberra region and supports the suggestion that individuals often disperse via airport, seaport, or terrestrial transport hubs (Low 1999, Hoskin 2011).

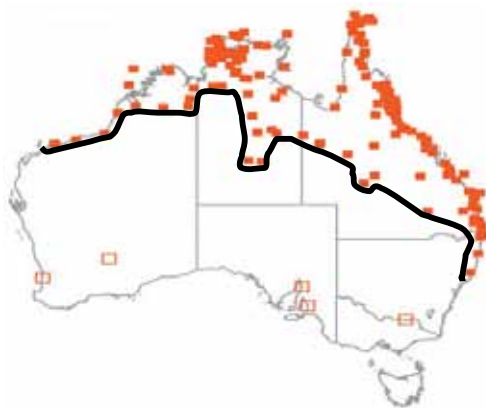
**A cause for concern**

The lack of establishment in southern areas of Australia by *H. frenatus* may be due to physiological constraints given the cold winters. Avery *et al.* (2010) showed that despite warm weather temperatures being adequate for breeding, the major limiting factor for invasive reptiles to persist is cold weather. Indeed predictive models (Fig. 2) that attempt to identify suitable habitat for *H. frenatus* do not identify areas south of Taree as suitable. However, these models are limited since they cannot generally account for microclimatic variation (e.g. the thermally buffered environment created by heating houses), or for short-term adaptive or long-term evolutionary responses in dispersing populations (Kearney *et al.* 2010). Hence, given that *H. frenatus* is highly commensal with disturbed

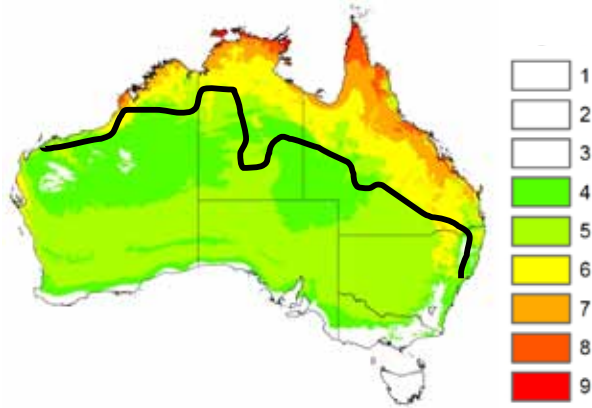
sites and human dwellings and due to its impacts (e.g. competition with native species and carrying of parasites) more attention to this species is warranted (Hanley *et al.* 1995; Lever 2006; Newberry and Jones 2007; Hoskin 2011).

In Australia there has been little research addressing the impacts of *H. frenatus* on native gecko populations, a problem compounded by the varied threat status applied to *H. frenatus* by different Australian government bodies. Hoskin (2011) noted that *H. frenatus* is not listed as a pest species or a species of concern at the federal level. Csurhes and Markula (2009) identified this species as a serious threat for QLD and in NSW it is of such little concern that it is listed as a pet species (National Parks and Wildlife Service 2006). Continued management of *H. frenatus* in this manner could create a source population within NSW that stifles management efforts in other states and territories. Thus, any management strategy will require congruent efforts across all states and territories to be effective (Hulme 2009).

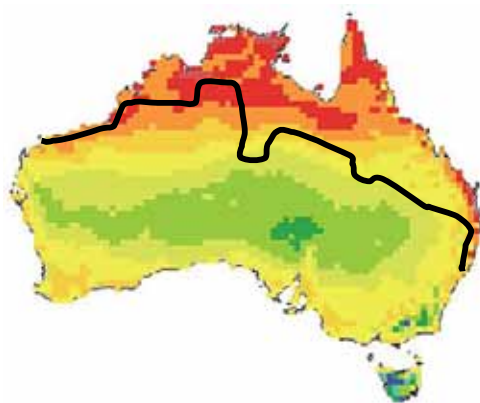
(A) Hoskin (2011, p. 243)



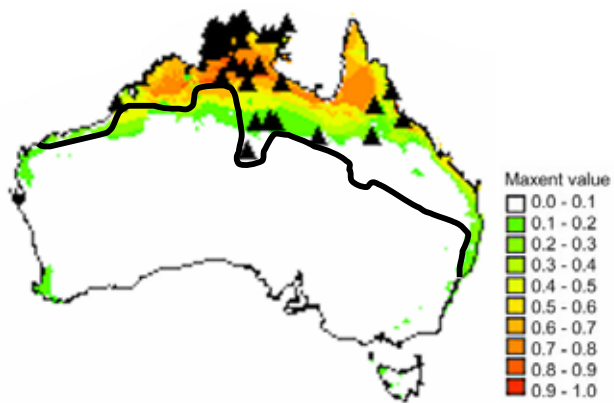
(B) D. Welbourne (unpublished, UNSW)



(C) Csurhes and Markula (2009, p. 11)



(D) Rodder *et al.* (2008, p. 240)



**Figure 2.** Known distribution and comparative *H. frenatus* models. (A) Known distribution of *H. frenatus* in Australia. (B-D) are predictions of potentially suitable habitat using different modelling techniques. Prediction (B) generated using a mechanistic modelling approach accounting for physiological conditions with legend of higher scores relating to higher establishment suitability of *H. frenatus* and threshold level of score 6. Prediction (C) generated by CLIMATCH software, red shows most suitable climate; orange and yellow indicate marginal suitability; and light green, dark green, light blue and dark blue indicate areas with generally unsuitable climate. Prediction (D) generated by Maxent, legend shows the probability for the cell to contain a presence record and the black triangles represent presence data used in the modelling. Heavy black line illustrates the southerly extent of the known range of *H. frenatus*.

## Conclusion

This new record of *H. frenatus* may indicate that further population spread has taken place south of Taree in New South Wales to the Sydney region and possibly beyond. Though it does not provide evidence that an established

population is present in the ACT area, it clearly exhibits that human-mediated dispersal continues to be a major pathway for invasive species dispersal. Ultimately, it provides another direct example that supports the need for congruent management strategies across State borders.

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, thank you to the truck driver for bringing this to my attention, many would have simply ignored the animal, and to Dr. Will Andrew for his speedy response to confirm

the taxonomy of the species. Also, thank you to Ms Julie Kesby and Dr. David Paull for proof reading and offering advice in preparation of the manuscript.

## References

- ACT Government 2010. World's most invasive reptile found in Canberra, media release, accessed 27 Feb 2012. Available at: [http://www.tams.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/188804/Worlds\\_most\\_invasive\\_reptile\\_found\\_in\\_Canberra.pdf](http://www.tams.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/188804/Worlds_most_invasive_reptile_found_in_Canberra.pdf)
- Avery, M.L. Engeman, R.M. Keacher, K.L. Humphrey, J.S. Bruce, W.E. Mathies, T.C. and Mauldin, R.E. 2010. Cold weather and the potential range of invasive Burmese pythons. *Biological Invasions* 12(11): 3649-3652.
- Bomford, M. 2008. *Risk Assessment Models for Establishment of Exotic Vertebrates in Australia and New Zealand*. Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre, Canberra, Australia.
- Bomford, M. and Hart, Q. 2002. Non-indigenous vertebrates in Australia. Pp. 25-44 in *Biological Invasions: Economic and Environmental Costs of Alien Plant, Animal, and Microbe Species* edited by D. Pimentel. CRC Press, New York.
- Burgin, S. 2007. Status report on *Trachemys scripta elegans*: Pet terrapin or Australia's pest turtle?'. Pp. 1-7 in *Pest or Guest: The Zoology of Overabundance* edited by D. Lunney, P. Eby, P. Hutchings and S. Burgin. Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales, Mosman, Australia.
- Cox, C.B. and Moore, P.D. 2005. *Biogeography: An Ecological and Evolutionary Approach, 7th Edition*. Blackwell Publishing, Carlton, Australia.
- Csurhes, S. and Markula, A. 2009. *Pest Animal Risk Assessment, Asian House Gecko, Hemidactylus frenatus*. Biosecurity Queensland, Queensland Primary Industries and Fisheries, Queensland, Australia.
- Gong, W. Sinden, J. Braysher, M. and Jones, R. 2009. *The Economic Impacts of Vertebrate Pests in Australia*. Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre, Canberra, Australia.
- Hanley, K.A. Vollmer, D.M. and Case, T.J. 1995. The distribution and prevalence of helminths, coccidia and blood parasites in two competing species of gecko: Implications for apparent competition. *Oecologia* 102(2): 220-229.
- Hoskin, C.J. 2011. The invasion and potential impact of the Asian House Gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*) in Australia. *Austral Ecology* 36(3): 240-251.
- Huggett, R.J. 2004. *Fundamentals of Biogeography, 2nd Edition*. Routledge, London.
- Hulme, P.E. 2009. Trade, transport and trouble: Managing invasive species pathways in an era of globalization. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 46(1): 10-18.
- IA CRC - Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre 2010. *A New Offensive Against Vertebrate Pests*. Invasive Animals CRC, Canberra, Australia. Accessed 02 Aug 2010. Available at: <http://www.invasiveanimals.com/about-us/>
- International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources 2010. *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species version 2010.3*, IUCN Red List Unit, Cambridge, London. Accessed 02 Aug 2010. Available at: <http://www.iucnredlist.org>
- Kearney, M. Wintle, B.A. and Porter, W.P. 2010. Correlative and mechanistic models of species distribution provide congruent forecasts under climate change. *Conservation Letters* 3(3): 203-213.
- Lever, C. 2006. *Naturalized Reptiles and Amphibians of the World*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Low, T. 1999. *Feral Future*. Penguin Books, Ringwood, Australia.
- Lowe, S. Browne, M. Boudjelas, S. and De Poorter, M. 2000. *100 of the World's Worst Invasive Alien Species: A selection from the Global Invasive Species Database*. Invasive Species Specialist Group, World Conservation Union, Auckland, New Zealand.
- National Parks and Wildlife Service 2006. *NSW Reptile Keepers License Species List (2006)*. National Parks and Wildlife Service, NSW, Australia. Accessed on 12 Jun 2011. Available at: <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/nature/reptileLicensingOutline.pdf>
- Newberry, B. and Jones, D.N. 2007. Presence of Asian House Gecko *Hemidactylus frenatus* across an urban gradient in Brisbane: Influence of habitat and potential for impact on native gecko species. Pp. 59-65 in *Pest or Guest: The Zoology of Overabundance* edited by D. Lunney, P. Eby, P. Hutchings and S. Burgin. Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales, Mosman, Australia.
- Pimentel, D. ed. 2002. *Biological Invasions: Economic and Environmental Costs of Alien Plant, Animal, and Microbe Species*. CRC Press, New York.
- Rodder, D. Sole, M. and Bohme, W. 2008. Predicting the potential distributions of two alien invasive Housegeckos (Gekkonidae: *Hemidactylus frenatus*, *Hemidactylus mabouia*). *North-Western Journal of Zoology* 4(2): 236-246.
- Stachowicz, J.J. Terwin, J.R. Whitlatch, R.B. and Osman, R.W. 2002. Linking climate change and biological invasions: Ocean warming facilitates nonindigenous species invasions. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 99(24): 15497-15500.
- Sinden, J. Jones, R. Hester, S. Odom, D. Kalisch, C. James, R. and Cacho, O. 2004. *The Economic Impact of Weeds in Australia, Technical Series No. 8*. CRC for Australian Weed Management, Adelaide, Australia.
- Welbourne, D. 2011. *The threat of non-indigenous reptile species to Australia: A tool for now and the future*. BSc Honours Thesis, School of Physical, Environmental and Mathematical Sciences, UNSW Canberra, Australia.