

Bucket List:

1. Grow out Tiger Snake
more than six feet long.



*Simon Fearn's obsession
with oversized elapids has
borne some record-
breaking fruit....*

*'This shot gives an idea of how
long his body is. His SVL is more
than 1600mm.'*

Photo: David Maynard.



Mick Thow would be the first to admit that he is an excitable chap with boundless enthusiasm for anything he does. One hot evening in March 2009 I was driving back to base after a long day in the field when Mick rang me almost breathless with excitement. He had just checked on his heavily-gravid female Chappell Island Tiger Snake and discovered that she had given birth to monsters! Mick was trying to explain to me the dimensions of the 22 neonates and the size of their heads. I had been keeping Tiger Snakes much longer than he had at this stage and was a little jaded and so I didn't treat his report with the gravity it deserved. I had, after all, seen some pretty big neonates over the years - including 13g, 300mm newborn snakes on Chappell Island itself. Several days later I visited Mick at his home in Ulverstone on Tasmania's north-west coast and was overjoyed to be able to select some of the new babies to rear. They were indeed exceptional, with enormous heads. In particular, I noticed immediately that their heads were longer than any other neonate Tiger Snakes I had ever seen, and I knew that this characteristic would facilitate a larger gape and thus allow them to swallow much larger food items than typical Tiger Snake neonates. This proved to be the case and these babies went straight onto large pinky rats and were taking fuzzy rats not long after.

I have previously described at length how I rear snakes (Fearn, 2014a; Lowe and Fearn, 2015), so will resist the temptation to go into details again here, but my goal was to get these snakes to a size

where they could be placed in my outdoor enclosures as quickly as possible. I was employed in a job that kept me very busy and away from home quite a bit, so having snakes indoors at that time was problematic. These neonates grew so fast that I was able to get them outdoors the following August when they were only five months old. In hindsight, I wish I had had the time to collect more detailed information on the size of these snakes at birth and their subsequent growth rates. What became clear to me quite quickly was that these snakes represented the best chance I was going to have of ever growing out a genuine 1830mm or 'six-foot' Tiger Snake. The 'six-foot' Tiger Snake became a beast of legend in my mind, because throughout my life I have heard endless stories of the existence of such creatures in the Tasmanian bush but never actually

seen one. There was just enough evidence to suggest to me that they might still exist (the odd skin, the occasional grainy photo) and of course there were also plenty of wild and captive-raised snakes that got close to the magic mark. It

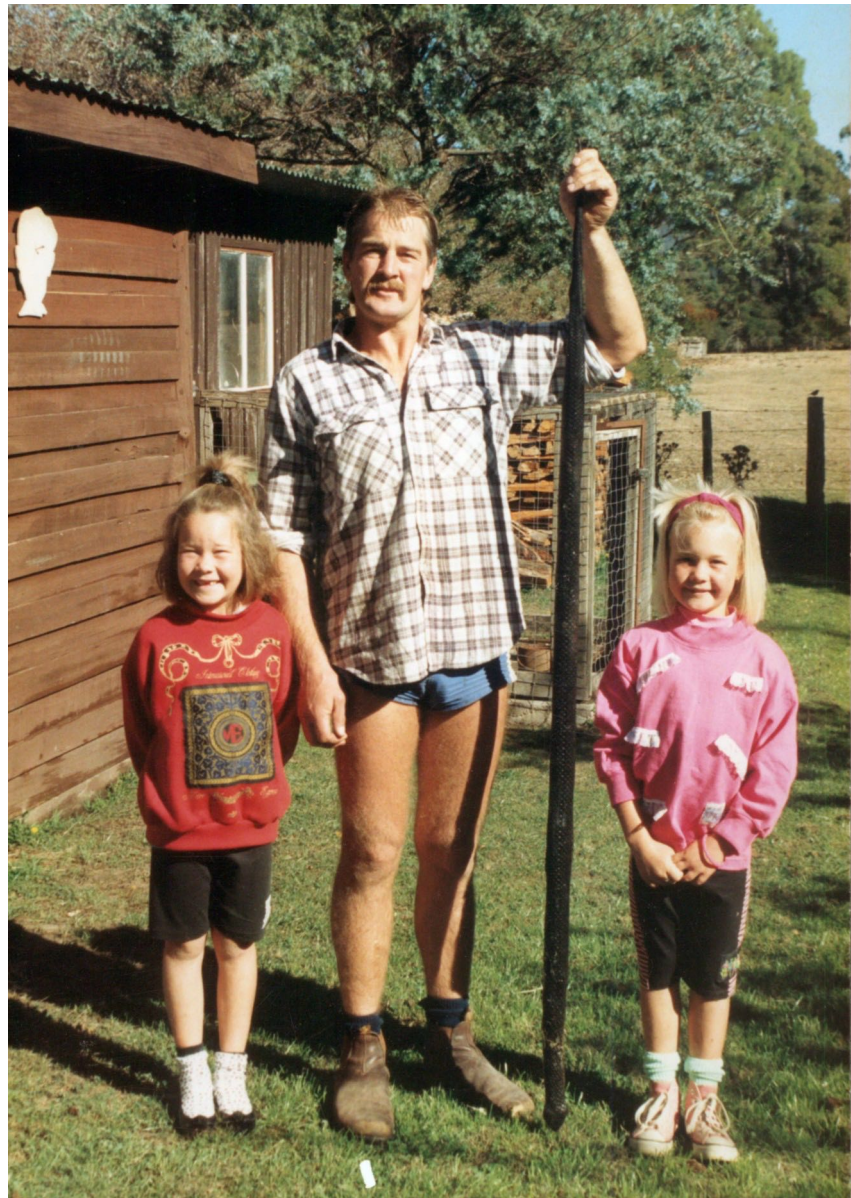
‘Mick’s Chappell Island Tiger Snake had given birth to MONSTERS.’

seemed that lots of Tiger Snakes throughout the Tasmanian region could grow to between 1706mm and 1760mm (5' 6" to 5' 8") and many captive specimens had. However, that last four to six inches to get to six feet seemed like a massive hurdle. The more I researched the maximum size of Tiger Snakes the more I realised that 'six feet' was a rounded up, rather meaningless figure applied willy-nilly all over the place and really had very little solid basis in fact. No one could present me with any good evidence of the current existence of such



creatures, in spite of the universal acceptance that six feet was the 'typical' size Tiger Snakes grew to in Tasmania.

That was until April 1990, when word got to me that a genuine six-footer was on display in the Bracknell shop. Bracknell is a tiny town near the foot of the western tiers about 60km west of Launceston. It is surrounded by a rich mosaic of farming land interspersed with remnant forest patches and regrowth. Just to the south of the town the Liffey River meanders through this habitat. Its edges were largely bordered by remnant forest and scrub; big log jams from floods occurred along its length and rocks cleared from paddocks were dumped along its margins. The mix of natural and man-made habitats provided ideal conditions for a host of introduced and native small to medium-sized mammals to live in high densities. In other words, it was exactly the sort of place where big Tiger Snakes would live. As luck would have it, I lived nearby at an even smaller settlement called Liffey at the time and was soon able to get my hands on the snake. Dennis Chilcott was born in Bracknell and worked on several family farms in the district. Tiger Snakes were plentiful and he and his family had killed many in the time-honoured tradition in rural Tasmania. On the afternoon in question, he was horse riding through a rough, semi-cleared paddock beside the Liffey River when he noticed a very large snake making its way to a log pile. Without a moment's hesitation he immediately dismounted, grabbed a hefty piece of eucalypt branch and clubbed the snake to death. One well-aimed blow just behind the head was all that was required and the snake was perfectly



Left: my record-sized tiger at three months of age. He was born a head and the rest of him grew on to it!
Photo: Simon Fearn.

Right: one of the giant tigers from Mick Thow's clutch at three months of age, pictured with a typical Tasmanian neonate of the same age for size comparison. Both snakes were fed as much as they would eat.
Photo: Simon Fearn.

Above right: Dennis Chilcott and daughters with the 1810mm male Tiger Snake he killed near the Liffey River at Bracknell in April 1990. This was (and still is) the only Tasmanian Tiger Snake I have measured close to 'six feet'. It weighed 2kg and allowed me to dream the impossible dream. Photo courtesy of Dennis Chilcott.





intact. I was able to measure it while it was still limp, and thus a very accurate relaxed length of 1810mm was recorded. This perfect example of a male Tiger Snake wasn't quite six feet, but just an inch or so under. However, it was obvious to me immediately that this was no old snake; its overall build and very low number of rodent bite scars indicated that it still had some growing to do. It was then that I knew for certain that such creatures did exist: albeit that they were apparently very rare. In a previous work I documented credible historical evidence of giant Tiger Snakes in excess of 1830mm in Tasmania during the rabbit plague era prior to 1954 (Fearn, 2014b and 2015). The Chilcott tiger showed me that those genes still exist today - even if the millions of juvenile rabbits do not. A couple of years ago I looked Dennis up and he still vividly remembered his big Tiger Snake and admitted that with the wisdom of passing years he would not kill a snake like that today.

My next foray with really big Tiger Snakes was on Chappell Island in the Furneaux Group, but even there genuine six-footers are hard to come by. Recently I amused myself by getting out all my relevant books and magazine articles and playing 'spot the six-foot Chappell Island Tiger Snake'. It's a game the whole family can play, but sadly no one wins! There are lots of pictures of men of relatively



Above left: one of my 12-year-old, captive-bred Chappell Island Tiger snakes. This specimen is 1725mm long and weighs 2.9kg. It's growing in length very slowly now and has commenced 'blocking out'. Because it is kept outdoors it has good muscle tone and is a very powerful snake. Photo: David Maynard.

Above right: the giant's father. A lovely tiger from Boat Harbour in north-west Tasmania. Photo: Mick Thow.

short stature holding large snakes, but none of them are clear six-footers and the vast majority obviously much less. There was a lot of rounding up to the nearest foot going on back in the day and claims of seven and eight feet snakes cannot be taken seriously without good corroborative evidence. I then had a look at the hundreds of images I have collected from the Terry Schwaner research era on Chappell Island between 1988 and 1993. There are heaps of big fat snakes in the 1760mm size range being held triumphantly aloft, but maybe two that would go six-feet and only one animal that just exceeded that length. All these animals (around 1500!) were very accurately measured, but sadly Terry never published much of the data that was collected. I have been to Chappell Island for extended periods on multiple occasions and caught hundreds of snakes there. While it is true that on

average they are longer and heavier than any other known population to date, genuine six-footers are uncommon and snakes longer than that are rare.

It was with all this in the background that I dared to dream of producing a giant with Mick's outsize babies. I believe the formula for success is genetics *plus* first clutch of young virgin female *plus* food *plus* time. The Mick Thow clutch of young possessed a good genetic mix for large size. The mother was a young, second-generation, captive-bred Chappell Island Tiger Snake and the father was a large wild-caught specimen from Boat Harbour, north-west Tasmania, with a big head. Genetic research (Keogh et al., 2005) clearly indicates that all the disjunct Tiger Snake populations (including many offshore islands) created when sea levels stabilised after the last ice age a few thousand years ago are very closely related and constitute a single taxon - *Notechis scutatus*. Localised conditions of climate but especially prey type and seasonality have resulted in rapid and repeated selection for different body sizes across these populations. While not being separated for long enough to warrant specific or sub-specific status, some of these populations appear to have

diverged sufficiently from the parent populations on the mainland and the main island of Tasmania to display some apparent 'intergrade vigour' when crossed. I discussed this phenomenon in relation to Tiger Snakes at greater length in a previous article (Fearn, 2014a) and given the frequency of reports of Tiger Snakes being seen in the sea between islands, rare but natural interbreeding probably occurs between islands in close proximity with favourable wind and current conditions for migrating snakes. It would seem obvious that if you want to

**'Only a tiny fraction
of the biggest and
fastest-growing
neonates survive....'**

grow out really big Tiger Snakes, you would simply breed and raise pure Chappell Island specimens. However, this strategy often appears to result in disappointment because many people simply don't understand how the ecology of the island works. The selection for size is laser-like in its intensity and results in a near 100% death rate among the 20,000

or so neonates born on the island each year. Only a tiny fraction of the biggest and fastest-growing neonates survive to adulthood. Bridging the gap from skinks to a 60g Mutton Bird chick is simply beyond the capacity of the vast majority of young snakes. If you breed Chappell Island tigers in captivity and raise the young it is a statistical



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Left: two years old and starting to get my hopes up. Not only is he beautiful, but he always had a very long-looking body. Photo: Simon Fearn.

Below right: getting ready for a work out - you can see I need it! About to stretch the big boy to get his SVL, ably assisted by a rather nervous Peter Maynard. Photo: David Maynard.

certainty that most wouldn't make the grade on the island. Over several captive generations the situation only gets worse. That is probably why I have never seen any captive-bred Chappell Island tiger grow as long as the largest specimens in the wild, regardless of how long they live and how much food they eat.

numbers of neonates, possibly because they simply have more room in their body cavities. A relatively small female's first clutch tends to consist of a small number of larger neonates. As stated earlier, Mick's clutch were able to ingest pinky rats right from day one and the animals I raised have all been good feeders. The extra length of their jaws has allowed them to get down rats that standard Tiger Snakes

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cannot swallow regardless of their size. My record-breaking snake can take the largest breeder rats that other keepers willingly give to me because they have no snakes capable of consuming them. The fact that it is a strong, regular feeder and has been provided with the best food available has undoubtedly assisted it to attain prodigious proportions, but this would not have been possible without favourable genetics and size at birth. In my experience, Tiger Snakes kept outdoors in good conditions (this precludes a 'tick farm' that just happens to have some snakes in it!) typically take a decade to grow as long as they are ever going to be. From that point on they start to 'block out' - shunting more energy into bulk and head size. A classic example is a snake in my collection from Lake Sorrel in Tasmania's central highlands that was wild caught as a young adult in 2004. It grew quite quickly to around 1370mm but then slowed down dramatically. Between April 2011 and January 2018 it has only grown from a total length of 1482mm to 1521mm, in spite of being a good feeder, and it will be lucky to make five feet. My giant tiger on the other hand was 1346mm long at two years of age with a weight of 720g, and by December 2017 was 1858mm long (a little under 6' 1") and 2.8kg. The amazing thing is that he is still growing rapidly and has not yet started to block out. I suspect that he will reach a peak of between 6' 4" and 6' 6" in another three seasons and weigh around 3.5kg. He will be a challenge to measure by then as I only just had the arm span to stretch him out along the tape measure for his most recent snout to vent measurement (for a discussion on the best way to measure snakes,

see Fearn, 2007). The giant also has a brother in my care who is shorter (1709mm and 1.9kg) but with a bigger head. I suspect that he too will eventually attain 6 feet but he does not feed as consistently for as long, as he enters into a sexual frenzy and goes off his food by mid-January every year.

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