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## Snakes, spiders and Tasmanian devils — they're all in a day's work

**John Weigel AM** moved to Australia from the US State of Colorado in 1981, to be a reptile keeper at the Australian Reptile Park, Gosford, NSW. He now owns the park with his wife Robyn. The park, celebrating 53 years' operation this year, is a zoo, tourist attraction and life-saving organisation.

The Australian Reptile Park runs a snake- and spider- milking program and is the sole supplier of these venoms to the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, which produces life-saving antivenom. John has milked snakes more than 40,000 times — perhaps a record — without a single serious bite. He was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2008 for his contribution to tourism, antivenom production, and herpetology.

In the early 2000s, John was one of the first to realise that the Tasmanian devil was in danger of extinction since “devil facial disease” was discovered in 1996. Since then, 90 per cent of devils in the wild have gone, and the disease affects 90 per cent of the Tasmanian landscape.

Devil Ark was John's innovation: a breeding facility for the Tasmanian devil which aims to send disease-free devils back to Tasmania once DFTD has run its destructive course. The Devil Ark site is in the NSW Barrington Tops with its Tasmania-like conditions and climate. This was a hugely ambitious project and, despite little government assistance, Devil Ark is the biggest mainland breeding facility with 120 devils at present and the species' greatest chance of survival in the wild. Gigantic free- range enclosures allow the devils to retain their natural behaviour (which can't be done in a traditional zoo).

Coincident with the deregulation of reptile- keeping in NSW, John produced the definitive book on the care of native reptiles: *Care of Australian Reptiles in Captivity*. First published in 1988, it has been reprinted nine times, more than 35,000 copies sold, and remains the most important work on the subject. A few years later John produced *The Snakes of Southeast Australia* — a field guide to the snakes of the most populated area of Australia, which has been reprinted for the fifth time.

John has made more than 20 expeditions to the Kimberley Ranges in WA – Australia's last great wilderness. Of the new species he discovered there, two — a spectacular tennis-ball-sized and -shaped red frog, 'Weigel's toad' (*Notaden weigeli*), and a highly venomous snake, the pygmy king brown snake (*Pseudechis weigeli*) — were eventually named by scientists in honour of their discoverer.

An over-enthusiastic “twitcher” (bird watcher), he is now travelling around Australia, trying to break the record of 720 sightings in one year. This project is called “The Big Year” and John's tally so far is 706 birds. Recently he was in Broome, visited Ashmore Reef; then went to Lord Howe Island, Cairns, Horn Island, Boigu Island, Saibai Island, Mount Molloy and Brisbane, all before mid- November. Before year's end he'll visit Christmas Island, Cocos Islands; go by boat from Perth to Hobart, then on to Invercargill, NZ, via Macquarie Islands. John's “Big Year” ends in Sydney on December 21. He plans then to write a book about his experience. He believes there is much more to do — he's only 56. He and Robyn have three adult children and two grandchildren.



*John Weigel AM prepares to release a 'founder' Tasmanian devil at Devil Ark (above).*



*John after receiving his Order of Australia award, with wife Robyn, son Anhel, and Daughter Blanca.*