



# WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

▲ **The full montane:** the luminous montane glass frog.

► **Intrepid couple:** wildlife photographer Michael Williams and his wife, Sharon.

▼ **Snake charmer:** a Murray-Darling carpet python.

Snakes crawling between his legs in a Costa Rica jungle . . . **Cheryl Critchley** reports on what a forklift driver at Footscray market does for fun in his spare time

**W**HEN forklift driver Michael Williams knocks off after carting fruit around Footscray market, he doesn't head to the pub for a beer. Instead he goes bush with wife Sharon to capture rare and endangered animals on film.

The intrepid Melbourne wildlife photographer has scoured the planet to raise awareness about native animals.

His shots are natural and unstaged, giving them a striking raw beauty. A lizard stretches in the sun, yawning, as a snake slithers majestically down an old tree stump. Both are obviously relaxed and at home.

Williams, 37, has even travelled to Costa Rica, where he waded through snake-infested swamps to snap 19 frog species for US researcher Brian Kubicki.

"It was awesome," Williams says. "We were surrounded by snakes. They were crawling between our legs."

It is hard to believe that the British National History Museum Wildlife Photographer of the Year finalist hardly picked up a camera until he was 32.

Williams, who is nominated for his stunning shot of a stumpy-tail lizard, grew up an artist. He loved drawing and graphic design and played the guitar. He rarely picked up a camera.

"Just your normal Instamatics . . . when your parents would let you have a go," he says. "I never really had the desire to take shots. I never gave it a thought."

It wasn't until Williams met wife Sharon, 37, that the bug bit. Sharon, a travel wholesaler, is a bushwalker and studies conservation biology at Deakin University.

Her enthusiasm rubbed off and Williams began recording what they saw. He taught himself about lighting and composition, and set up *It's a Wildlife Nature and Wildlife Photography*. He still hasn't had a formal lesson.

But that didn't stop him from winning the Australian Museum in Sydney's Up Close and Spineless photo competition's professional prize last month for his shot of two stilt flies mating in Costa Rica.



By day, Williams drives forklifts at Footscray market, starting at 3am.

In their spare time he and Sharon travel Australia working on conservation projects with friend and noted Wimmera naturalist Clive Crouch.

They recently observed a rare Murray-Darling carpet python Clive had been seeking for 30 years. Williams' photo of it is stunning.

"It looks like I picked it up off the ground and draped it over the stump," he says.

Snakes are a big part of Williams' life. He fears for their future because of habitat destruction, feral cats, foxes and drought.

"There's been a dramatic decline in snake numbers in the past five to 10 years," he says. "Lots of snakes that you used to see all the time — tigers and red-bellied blacks — you just don't come across any more."

Williams, who works four days a week, hopes to eventually take photographs full time. He sells his photos on

his website and donates a portion to wildlife conservation. He also releases limited-edition prints, such as his spectacular Costa Rican frog series.

Williams admires what Steve Irwin achieved and says his death at the hands of a stingray was a tragic accident. But he minimises his risk.

"I like to take a few risks but not to the point where I'm going to die," he says. "I've never been bitten or attacked by an animal."

"A lot of people forget that you're in their environment, you're in their habitat . . . especially people who get taken by sharks."

The closest Williams came to disaster was when an agitated brown snake got caught in a trap.

"They tend to stress out, snakes," Williams says. "We got it out and it was quite irate. It lunged towards me."

**It's a Wildlife:** [www.itsawildlife.com.au](http://www.itsawildlife.com.au)

**London National History Museum Wildlife photographer of the year:** [www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto](http://www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto)



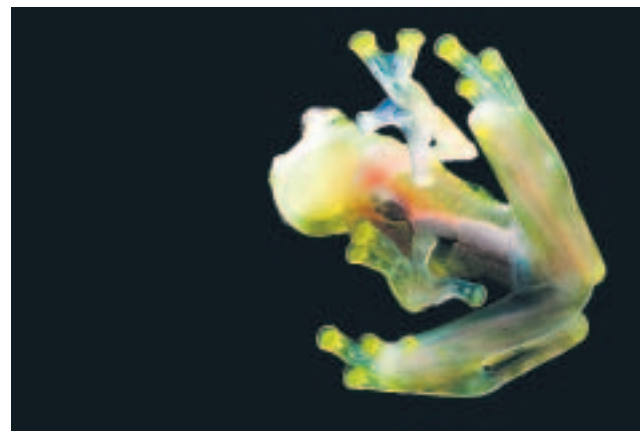


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▲ **Stilt life:** Michael Williams' prize-winning shot of two stilt flies mating.

◀ **Hello, possum:** the western pygmy possum is a small nocturnal marsupial.



▲ **It's the lizard from Oz:** Michael Williams has been nominated for an award for this stunning shot of a stumpy-tail lizard.

◀ **In a glass of its own:** Williams went to Costa Rica to snap 19 species of frog, including the reticulated glass frog.

