

Lace Monitors and Termite Mounds

At Pedro Swamp, there are many termite mounds on the hills and in the forests surrounding the swamp itself. Holes appear in these mounds at different times of the year. They can be low or high on the mound, shallow or deep, and are made by different animals:

1. The shallow, triangular holes near the base of a mound tend to be made by the Short-beaked Echidna (*Tachyglossus aculeatus*), and
2. The smaller, round and deeper holes, that can occur low or high, are made by the Lace Monitor (*Varanus varius*).

Both the Echidna and Lace Monitor feed on termites but the deeper holes can indicate Lace Monitor breeding. These holes appear in late summer when the monitors lay their eggs, and in spring when they return to dig out their young. After mating during the warmer months, the female Lace Monitor looks for an active termite mound and digs a hole, starting near the top. A tunnel is dug down towards the centre and a large cavity at the end becomes the egg chamber. She lays her eggs by resting in the tunnel, with only her head visible at the entrance. When laying is complete, the hole is partially refilled by the female and the termites complete the task by repairing the mound around the eggs. The termite mound provides good incubation over the winter, regulating both temperature and humidity, and offering protection from predators.

In spring, the female Monitor returns to dig out her young. At Pedro, a property adjacent to ours, a female was seen digging a hole in a termite mound over two to three days, only her tail and rear legs visible. Ten or twelve hatchlings then emerged, each one about 30 cm in length from nose to tail. They quickly dispersed into the bush and up a nearby tree, which is partly hollow and provides shelter for up to three of the reptiles over the warmer months. The brightly coloured young were seen returning to the termite mound over the next week, and an adult was seen sheltering in there too. The mound and a hatchling are shown below.



Lace Monitor hole in a termite mound



Lace Monitor hatchling on a nearby tree

Reference: Dennis King and Brian Green, "Goannas: The Biology of Varanid Lizards." 1999.