

CALM NEWS

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DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND LAND MANAGEMENT

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CALM Wildlife Officer, Peter Collins with the slaughtered penguins. Photo courtesy Albany Advertiser

Cat among the penguins?

THE carcasses of some 20, freshly killed little or fairy penguins was the grisly sight that met the dismayed gaze of three CALM wildlife officers recently.

The dead penguins were found on Shelter Island, a small inshore island located at Torbay, near Mutwon Bird Beach, west of Albany, by Peter Collins, Bernie Haberley and Kevin Morrison.

Peter said the island was separated from the mainland by a narrow, deep-water channel about 100 metres wide and was a favoured breeding habitat for a number of species of sea birds including the fairy or little penguin.

"The purpose of our visit was to follow up reports that black rats, thought to be established on the island, may have contributed to the decline in seabird breeding activity, Peter said.

"It was while we were setting rat traps that we found a number of fresh paw prints of a cat in

patches of soft sand.

"But it was not until we reached the first of two penguin breeding colonies that we discovered, near the entrance to its burrow, a freshly killed little penguin.

Bite marks

"Bite marks around its head, beak and legs clearly showed teeth impressions consistent with those of a cat.

"While evidence of fresh diggings around the entrances to some burrows indicated the penguins had only just come ashore and were preparing for nesting, many of the burrows were still unoccupied.

"Concern for the penguins increased as we found fresh cat tracks around the entrances to some of the unoccupied burrows.

"A thorough search through the second colony on the southern end of the island, revealed 19 dead little penguins, bringing the total number killed to 20.

"All had been killed

since the night before our visit and all bore bite marks around the throat, head and legs, similar to those found on the first dead penguin.

"None of the birds had been eaten by the animal that had killed it, although three had their heads chewed off.

"One freshly killed black rat was also found, confirming that this pest is also present on the island.

"The fact that neither the penguins nor the rat had been eaten, indicated the killer had not been hungry but had simply gone on a killing spree.

Cat traps

"Fearing for the remaining birds, we set two cat traps that same day, re-baiting and checking them regularly over the ensuing three weeks, but no cats were caught.

"Fortunately, the killing of the penguins also ceased.

"This could mean that the cat was no longer on the island, or that, for the time being, it had stopped

killing penguins for reasons unknown and was too wary to be caught in a trap.

"How the cat came to be on the island is still a mystery.

"Perhaps it had swum the comparatively short distance from the mainland to the island during calm conditions, though this is considered unlikely.

"Another possibility is that some well-intentioned person heard about there being rats on the island and decided to release a cat there to kill the rats.

"The killing of the penguins was given extensive media coverage, resulting in encouraging and widespread support for CALM's efforts in protecting our wildlife from the depredations of feral cats and foxes.

"Post-mortems on the penguins revealed that they were more likely to have been killed by a cat than by a fox and that the birds had been in good condition with ample fat reserves to carry them through the July to March breeding season."

Fire-fighting fitness a top CALM priority

by Verna Costello

CALM has launched an ambitious program designed to raise staff fitness and health levels.

The program involves those who are largely engaged in demanding physical work, with particular emphasis on fire-fighters.

Ultimately, it is planned to incorporate all staff in the program as part of CALM's health and welfare policy.

Fire-fighters first

Executive Director Dr Syd Shea said he believed CALM personnel involved in physical work must be fit enough to ensure their health and safety and that those who fight fires should be regarded as a top priority.

"As members of CALM's listed fire-fighting force, it's important that they're equipped physically to undertake their role without risk to their own health or that of work mates," Dr Shea said.

Unions' agreement

The program has been designed with the assistance of the Department of Human Movement at the University of Western Australia (UWA), and has been developed with the agreement of all major unions with members in CALM.

A pilot program was initiated by the Nannup District staff earlier this year and involved 38 crew, field and office staff.

The program was well received by the majority of the Nannup team, thus laying the foundation for its adoption by other Districts.

The format of the program involves a two-day seminar conducted by Mr Nick Randall of the UWA Human Movement Department, and incorporates a health and fitness assessment of each participant.

Results confidential

Results of assessments are given in confidence to each person, together with a suggested course of action to raise health and fitness levels where desirable.

The seminar covers a range of topics including health care to prevent coronary heart disease, stress-awareness and relaxation techniques, diet and lifestyle awareness, and the benefits of aerobic activities.

During the practical sessions, participants form themselves into their everyday work teams.

They then work together on a range of exercises designed to bring them to

the level of fitness needed to carry out their tasks.

Participants are shown that by working with and encouraging each other within their teams, they can ensure the success of the program - and enjoy themselves in the process.

UWA study

A study is being commissioned by Fire Protection Branch through the UWA, to assess minimum levels of fitness required to undertake different fireline duties ranging from fire-fighters to controllers and support staff.

The study will involve the monitoring of body responses to typical work duties required of the different fire control roles.

From this study, fitness benchmarks will be established that will provide achievable targets for the different categories of fire-fighters.

Dr Shea said the initiatives were part of his overall desire for a safe and productive working environment for all CALM employees.

Guarantee

"They should not be seen as threatening anyone's employment and I give my personal guarantee this will not occur," Dr Shea said.

The first health and

Continued page 2



Warming up for their fitness test, from left to right, are: Nambung National Park ranger Terry Harrington, Yanchep Park ranger Therese Jones, Safety Officer, (Como) Tom Wood and officer, Wanneroo Marilyn Ramsay. They all can be called upon to fight fires.

Photo by Verna Costello

