URBAN ANTICS

by Andrew Cribb

A Haunting in Suburbia

Screeeeech, screech . . . thump . . . rattle . . . rattle.

The house lights clicked on in the sultry dark of a summer night, and a string of expletives issued from the next room. 'Bloody little so and sos. Where are my golf clubs?'. Footsteps clumped down the hall and the front door banged.

We were witnessing a nightly ritual, enacted with monotonous regularity, month in and month out. It didn't seem to matter where or when we lived, we were members of a small, but select group. The front-line in an unceasing vigil against things that go thump in the night.

It might have been Floreat Park in the 1960s, Bunbury in the '70s, Wanneroo in the '80s. The rest of suburbia slept, while we battled the demon-haunted dark. You could always tell fellow hauntees by the trembling handshake, and gaunt look in their eyes.

After the rattling and shouting subsided outside we knew too well the sequence of events to follow.

First, mysterious yellow circles would appear in the corners of the lounge ceiling, and multiply with frightening rapidity. As one was beginning to fade, the next would appear. A week later a faint musky odour would begin to permeate the house, gradually growing stronger as the summer wore on. Friends would drop in less often, and leave more quickly. The curse was beginning to take effect.

Soon scufflings, rattlings, and faint snuffling noises would whisper through the darkened house.

Strange droppings, spontaneously generated, it seemed, by the very air, would liberally coat the car in the garage. The apple tree in the backyard would start to grow half-eaten apples . . . Amityville was kid's play by comparison.

Then it was time for an exorcism. In the '60s and '70s, instead of a priest it was a wildlife officer. Not bell, book, and candle, but a rented wire trap. This was radical action for a radical situation.

After the first 'haunting', it was interesting to learn the nature of our poltergeist. Not rats or cats, but the not-so-common brushtail possum: a beautiful small furry creature with bright eyes, a bushy tail, and no roof manners.

In their native setting brushtails live and nest high up in tree hollows. Often they occupy the same trees for years, or even generations. Males tend to be territorial, and have a definite 'home range', seldom venturing outside unless forced to move by a cataclysm. Females appear more flexible, and will occasionally share a part of their territory with other females, or move in and share a male's home tree when nesting.

After the young are born and weaned they move out, seeking their own 'possum tree', and territories. Young males, particularly, are forced to find fresh pastures where they won't clash with established males.

Possum territories are not large, and appear to extend only about 200-300 m in any direction. But, this can include a lot of roofs in suburbia.

In the metropolitan area they are one of the few native mammals that has survived in close proximity to human society. They can, and do, live and breed in small bush areas, provided they can find a suitable tree to dwell in. Their main requirement is a large enough hollow, high above the ground. Because most large cavities in trees are formed from broken branches, or tops, most possum trees are large, old, and often in decline or dead. Surveys in the forests of the South-West have found that possum trees are seldom, if ever, less than 40 cm in diameter. You can usually tell a possum tree by the pathway of scratch marks which lead up the trunk.

The next best thing from a possum's perspective, when these trees fall over, or are lopped, is a nice warm, cosy roof cavity — preferably in a yard which provides an abundance of fodder in season.

How does this help you, the hapless hauntee in suburbia? Possums are a protected species, and molesting them is not permitted. The best advice, straight from the wildlife officers who have been coping with the possum tribe for years, is make your roof uninviting. The process is simple. A liberal sprinkling of mothballs in the roof cavity will send them running. Then get some chicken wire and search for any entries into your roof. Then nail them up. Your house is now possum proof, and if you ever get haunted again you know the answer. □

Landscope

Volume 2 No. 3
Autumn Edition/March 1987

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Published by Dr. S. Shea, Executive Director, Department of Conservation and Land Management, 50 Hayman Road, Como, W.A. 6152.

Executive Editor: Sweton Stewart
Editor: Liana Christensen
Designer: Trish Ryder

All Maps by Department of Conservation and Land Management Mapping Section

Offset plates by Photolitho-PM.
Typesetting by Printworks.
Printed in Western Australia by the Department of Services, State Printing Division, ISSN 0815-4465.

Editorial

W.A. is a vast, sparsely populated State, and it is not uncommon to hear some parts of it described as 'the last frontier'. But there are few, if any, parts of W.A. that have not been affected by European settlement.

Evidence of western civilization in some of the most remote areas is far too often the empty can. But even where there are no obvious traces, the effects have been profound.

There is compelling evidence, for example, that the displacement of Aboriginal communities from much of inland W.A. — and the subsequent removal of Aboriginal firing practices — is directly responsible for major changes in vegetation, which in turn has resulted in the virtual extinction of many native animals.

It is not always easy to pick the effects of European civilization on the natural environment even when the history is well-documented. This *Landscope's* account of the woodlands around Kalgoorlie talks about the often horrific environmental damage, but an observer of these woodlands today would have difficulty recognizing that vast areas were clearfelled less than 50 years ago.

While the concept that we should 'let nature do its thing' has superficial appeal, the reality is that the purity of nature has been, and will continue to be, distorted by human presence. We have no option if we want to sustain the unique ecosystems of W.A. but to apply management principles.

The history and management problems of Benger Swamp, which feature in this edition, illustrates two fundamental points. Firstly, even the most disturbed areas of W.A. can make a major contribution to conservation. Secondly, we must be careful not to change a system that works even though the way it works may not be 'natural'.

As complex and as difficult as the task of understanding ecosystems is, the social and political factors which influence the type of management that can be applied are often more difficult to deal with.

The key to good management is an understanding of the processes that drive the ecosystem. Once we understand what the natural processes are, we can then devise management systems which will mimic them.

The only way to ensure that rational decisions are made on environmental management is to provide the facts .

COVER PHOTO

Just when you thought you had seen every angle on our State symbol, photographer Jiri Lochman surprises you with a fresh perspective.