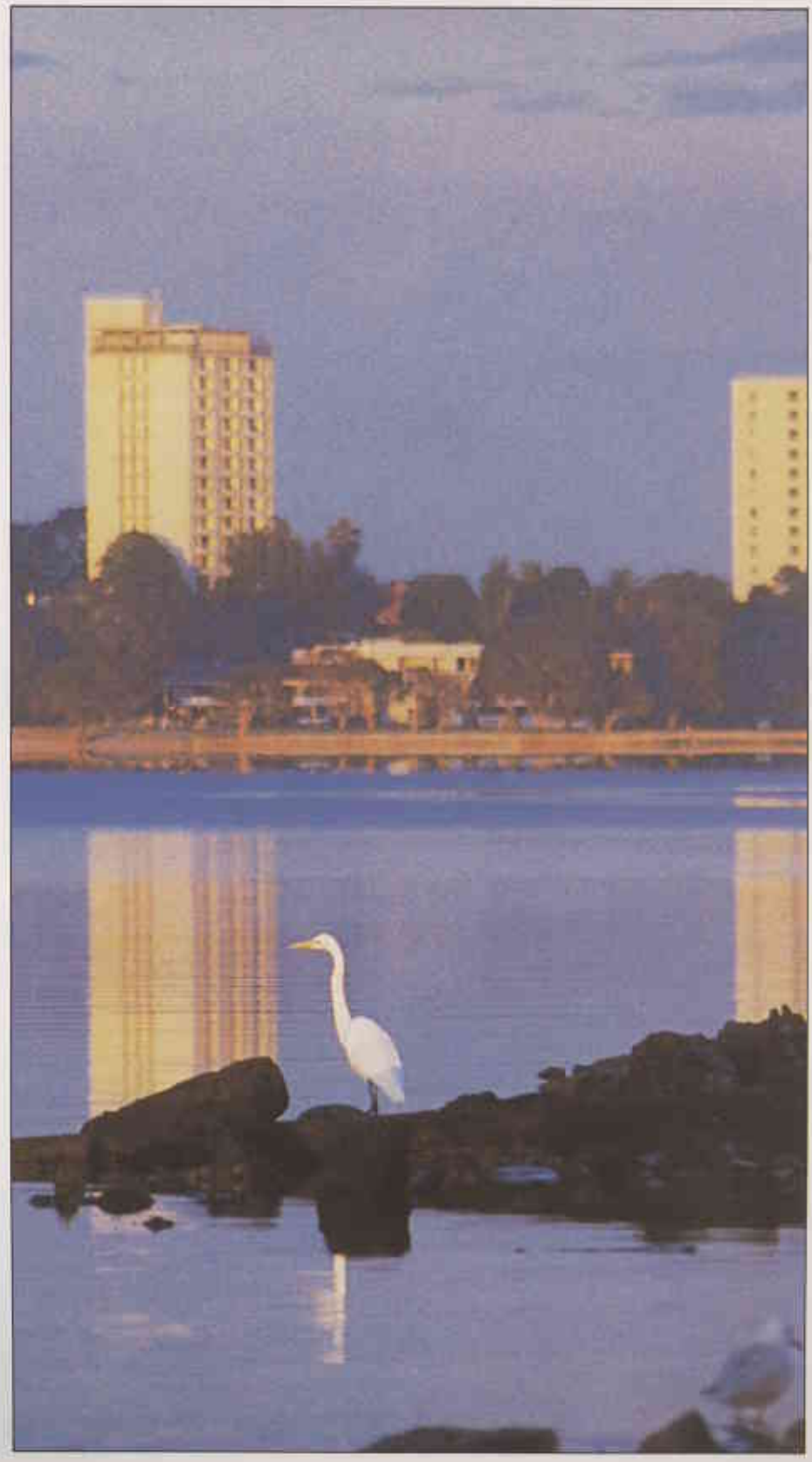
Down by the Riverside.

by Colleen Henry-Hall

Photographs by Andrew Cribb



A Great Egret, white body stillfrozen in the dawn light, picks up one foot, places it delicately in the mud, pauses, and jabs with its sharp, yellow bill. Another step, a pause and another jab as it feeds on tiny shrimp and other mud creatures.

The tidal flats of the Swan Canning Estuary are the feeding grounds of this egret and other species of waterbirds, which depend on wetlands for feeding, breeding or loafing (resting and roosting).

The flats are their dinner tables; the stands of rushes and river gums along the shore their bedrooms.

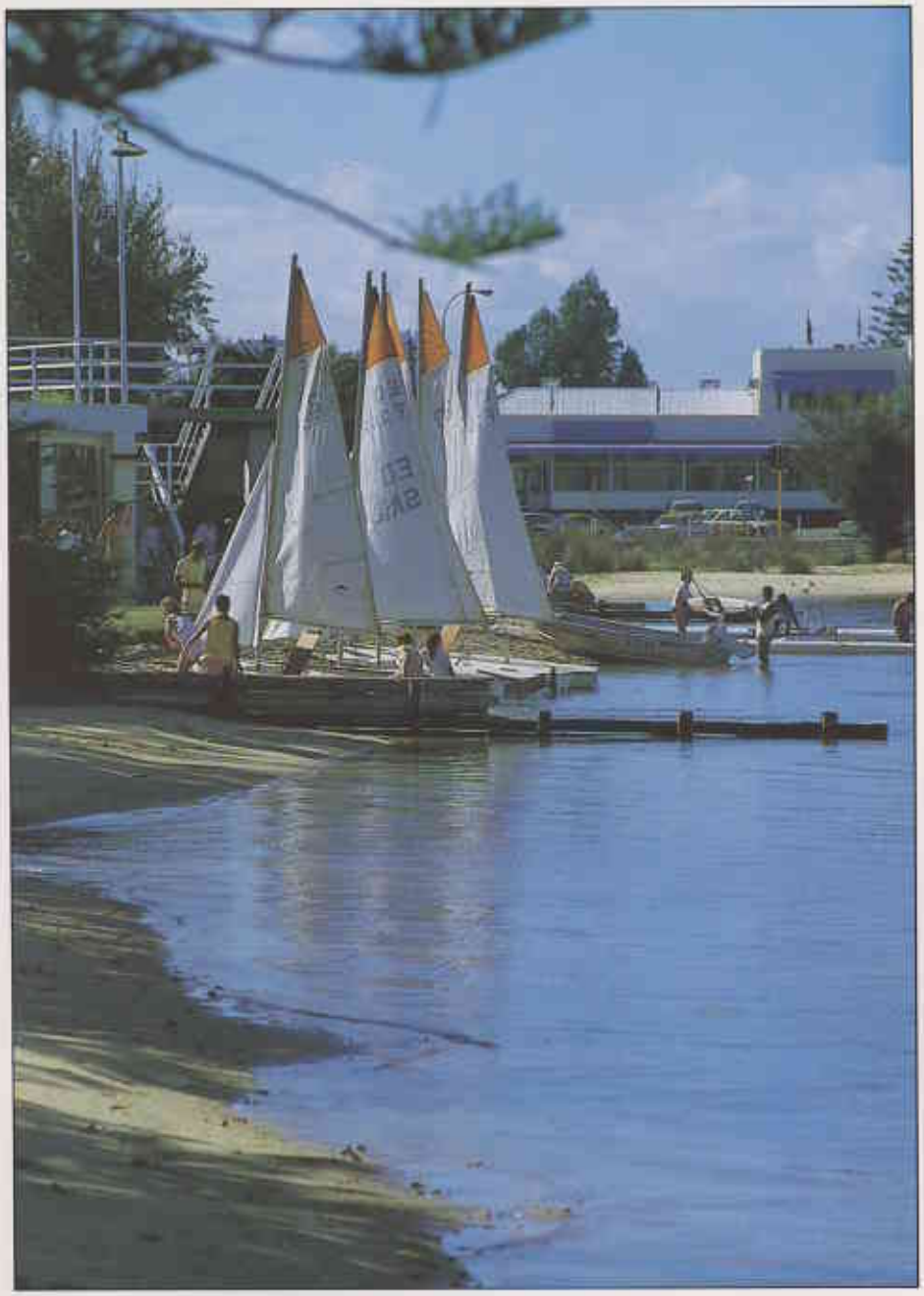
Surveys by the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union have shown that about 10000 waterbirds use the Swan Canning Estuary each year.

Eighty-seven waterbird species have been recorded here. As far as we know, no other wetland in W.A. supports as many.

That so many birds, and so many types of birds, use a river near a city this size is remarkable.

But whether the birds and other wildlife will exist on the river in the future is not guaranteed.

Three relatively large areas of habitat — Alfred Cove, Pelican Point and Milyu Nature Reserve — and smaller tidal flats and wetlands on the estuary are all under threat.



Sailing, fishing, water-skiing; but what about the wildlife?

The river is a quiet backdrop — while a busy city rushes by (below).

A freeway foreshore — breakfast table for straw-necked ibis and pelicans (bottom).

On the city's doorstep, they are endangered by development, dredging, recreation. For them to survive, we must control public access, manage the impact of nearby recreation and control development on adjacent land.

Proposals to safeguard the river's future are the focus of a report by the Swan River Management Strategy Task Force.

Headed by Dr Bruce Hamilton, a chemist seconded from the Environmental Protection Authority, the task force was established by State Cabinet in December 1986.

The task force aims to establish management strategies which will be used by other agencies to prepare detailed management plans for the Swan Canning Estuary.

The conservation of the last remaining natural areas on the Swan Canning Estuary is one of its major concerns.

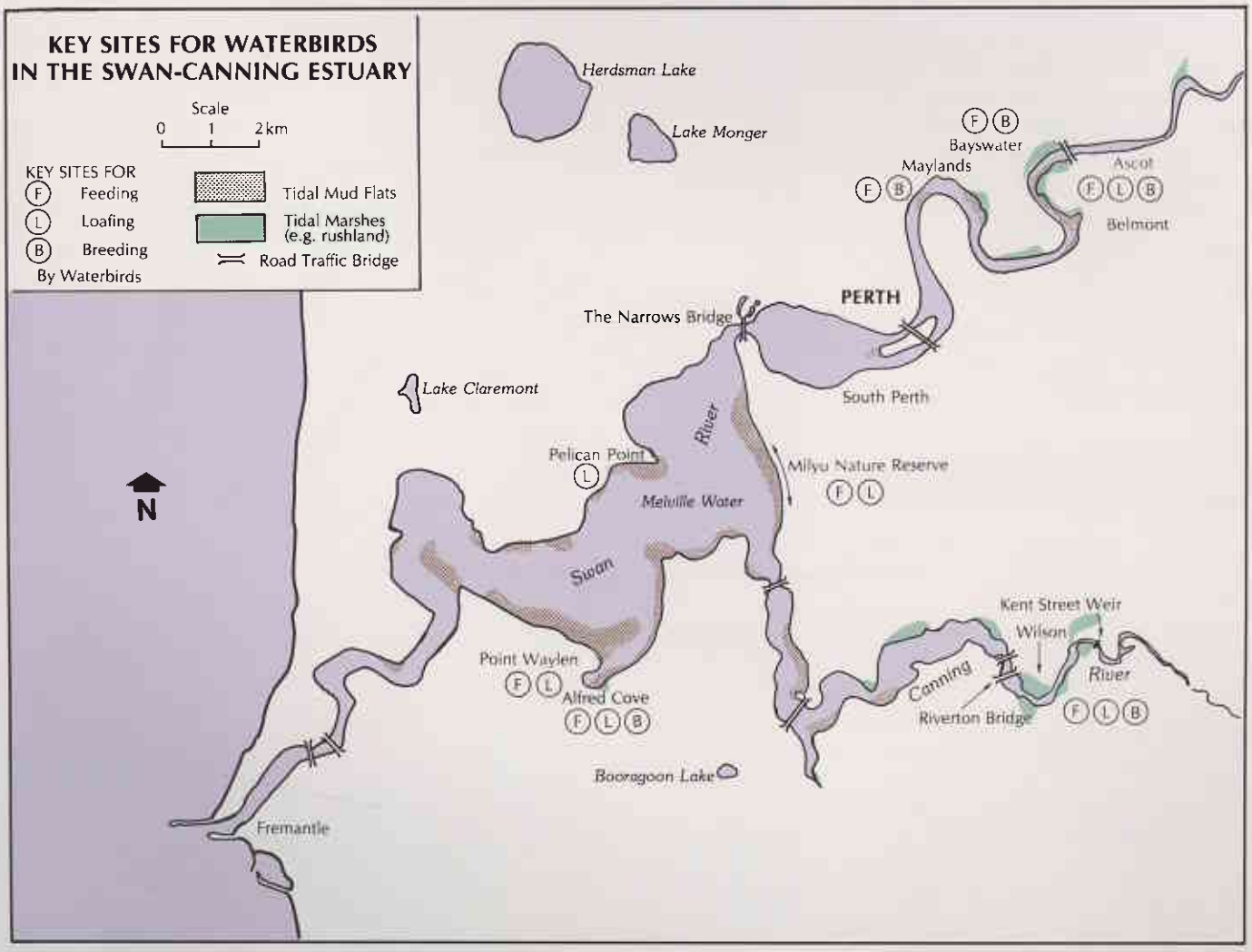
The Swan Canning Estuary wetlands (more than 120 wetland fragments can be picked out in a metropolitan street directory, says the RAOU's Roger Jaensch) are an important part of the coastal wetland system that stretches from Dongara to Dunsborough.

The large number of waterbird species that use the river do so because here they find the different environments they need for survival.

Open water, tidal mudflats, beaches, tidal marsh, tidal pools and channels, riverine woodland and artificial structures — almost everywhere on the river birds can be found feeding, floating or flying.

There are wetlands outside the metropolitan area, but, as Conservation and Land Management Research Scientist Jim Lane says, 'If the Swan Canning Estuary wetlands were lost due to mismanagement or neglect, the waterbird populations which they support would also disappear. We can't assume that these birds would go elsewhere because those other wetlands are fully used already.'

Many of these waterbirds are migratory: they come from Siberian icelands, through China and Japan, Vietnam and Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia to the shallows of the Swan Canning Estuary.

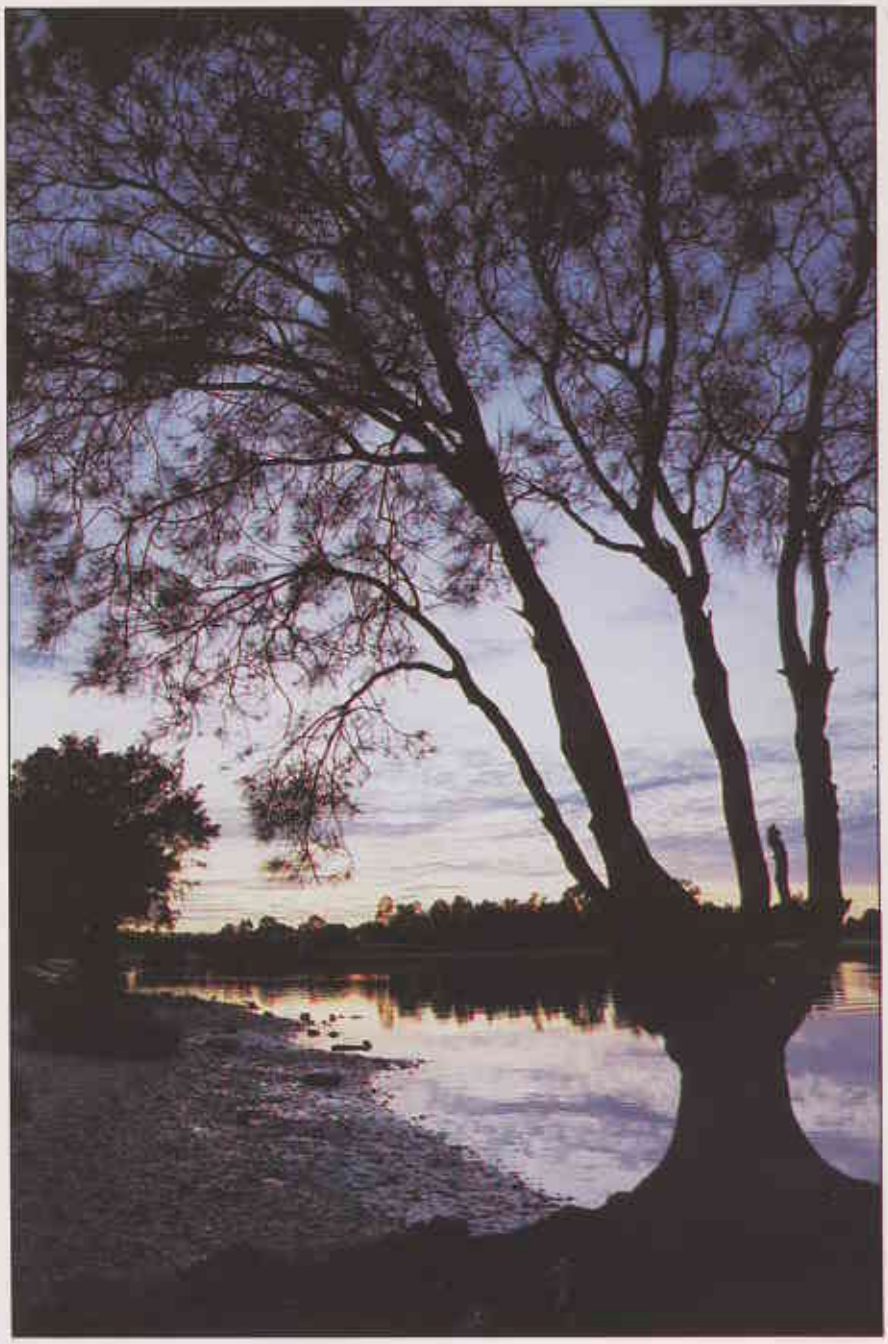


Because they pass over many borders, their protection requires international co-operation. The Japan-Australia and China-Australia Migratory Birds Agreements (JAMBA and CAMBA) are just such treaties, binding us to the conservation of wetlands that migratory waterbirds use here.

Fringing wetlands play a part in keeping the river healthy and clean. Salt marshes filter land drainage that comes through them. Runoff from roads contains lead: fringing wetlands can trap heavy metals and various hydrocarbons before they reach estuarine waters. The rushes in a wetland lay down an organic peat that can bind up pollutants and nutrients, regulating their passage into the river.

The river is living, changing, complex. Everything that happens in it or along its banks affects it. Dredging, reclaiming land, building, boating, dumping wastes, fishing, even walking can change the river's make-up in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. What we do and how we do it can have very lasting effects on this fragile system.

Eurasian Coot, Buff-banded Rail, Black Swan, Sacred Ibis, Great Egret, Little Black Cormorant, Pelican, Pacific Black Duck: their survival depends on us. □



Riverfront constructions are slowly encroaching on our urban wetlands (top).

The Swan estuary has a heart of gold in the first light of an autumn morning (right).

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Shipwreck at Broome (Jiri Lochman).

EDITORIAL

For more than 100 years W.A. has recognised the importance of protecting significant areas of its natural heritage.

Today, about 4.5 million hectares of our State is classified as national parks, vibrant natural museums ranging from the hardwood forests of the south-west to vast inland deserts that represent our unique terrestrial flora and fauna.

Until now, however, there has been a missing element: the marine environment.

Clearly, its absence has made our park system less representative of W.A.'s environment, especially considering that the State has some 12700 km of coastline.

Recently a start was made to address this imbalance with the official opening of the Marmion Marine Park, W.A.'s first marine park.

The primary objective in establishing this park, which is located on metropolitan Perth's doorstep, is to conserve significant examples of our marine heritage, and to encourage public understanding, appreciation and continued enjoyment of the marine environment in ways which will leave it unimpaired for future generations.

These same values apply to the proposed Ningaloo Marine Park which is situated along 260 km of the State's coastline south of Exmouth. Ningaloo will be vested in the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority as a marine park in July.

Both of these marine parks not only allow for the development of proper management techniques to protect the marine environment, but also to enhance recreation.

Marmion reef has long been a popular holiday destination for many Western Australians who fished for the huge groper and crayfish offshore, and swam in the protected lagoons.

Ningaloo might be less well known because of its isolation, but the tourist industry is expected to promote this area of our coastline and the adjacent Cape Range National Park and, as a consequence, it will become one of the State's premier tourist attractions.

The establishing of marine parks will provide many benefits.

Some intangible, such as the knowledge that future generations will be able to appreciate areas of unspoiled natural beauty.

Others more tangible, such as the enjoyment of visiting a marine park.

There will also be benefits in terms of jobs created and the expansion of a growing and viable tourist industry.

Furthermore, marine parks will provide ecological benchmarks for research into natural processes and into the relative effects of marine and coastal uses.

W.A. has a responsibility to protect special marine environments and to encourage public appreciation of these areas now and in the future.

Our marine parks will do this.