

CROC OF GOLD

Crocodiles are very effective hunters, but up in the north of the State the tables are being turned - about 90 saltwater crocodiles are to be caught for a new crocodile farm at Wyndham.

In fact humans have hunted crocodiles all around the world for their valuable skins for many years.

About 25 000 saltwater crocodiles are believed to have been harvested in WA from 1945 until they were legally protected in 1970. Freshwater crocodiles were also taken.

As a result, crocodile numbers dramatically declined.

In 1977-78, it was estimated that there were about 2 200 non-hatchling saltwater crocodiles in WA. The population was resurveyed in



1986 and estimated to be around 2 400.

In 1988, after a number of applications, the Government decided to allow crocodile farming on a trial basis.

A farm is now being established at Wyndham, based on a combination of breeding in captivity and ranching (taking eggs or hatchlings from the wild and raising them in the farm).

This crocodile gives its hunters the evil eye.

Photo - Cliff Winfield

For initial stocking, the farm may catch 90 saltwater crocodiles from the Cambridge Gulf and its associated rivers and 200 freshwater crocodiles from Lake Argyle.

Before CALM granted permission for catching to proceed, scientists were contracted to survey saltwater

crocodile nesting areas in tidal rivers of the Kimberley and freshwater crocodile numbers in Lake Argyle and Lake Kununurra.

The farm's existence should help safeguard the wild population; under its license conditions, it has to supply crocodiles to restock the wild population if monitoring proves it is warranted.

CALM officers supervise catching operations, which must take place outside existing or proposed conservation reserves and important breeding areas.

A four-person team searches the river in a small punt at night, when the animals are most active.

"You see their blood-red eyes shining in the spotlight," said Wildlife Officer Russell Gueho.

The light dazzles the crocodile and allows its hunters to get close to it.

The hunters catch the animals with light ropes. The crocodiles are brought to the boat and nooses and cord are used to truss their jaws.

The animal is then put in the boat, and a hessian bag is placed over its head to quieten it down. The back legs are also restrained.

"It's important to treat the animals with respect. They are constantly rolling and splashing about until you get them on a boat, and even the small ones could probably take your hand off," said Russell.

Only crocodiles up to four metres long are caught - the larger animals are left in the wild.

The farm has collected quite heavily from around the Wyndham boat ramp and launch area.

"However there is evidence that new crocodiles have already moved back into the Wyndham area - it may be quite a dynamic population," said Russell.

A BIRD IN THE HAND...

Did you know that one Western Australian hospital is strictly "for the birds"?

The WA Native Bird Hospital cares for sick, injured and orphaned birds.

Referrals to the hospital come from CALM, the Perth Zoo, RSPCA, veterinarians and members of the public.

Over 700 birds are admitted each year suffering from road accidents, cat attacks and poisoning. Orphaned chicks also find their way to the hospital.

After being examined on arrival, "patients" are settled into a cosy, warm "ward" where they can eat or rest quietly.

Once settled, any broken wings are splinted and other needs attended to.

Feeding wild birds is a difficult task and meals may consist of seeds, fish, mice or live insects.



Fledgelings are fed every few hours and are raised until they are old enough to be placed in aviaries with other birds that have recuperated.

Once in aviaries, the birds may exercise and learn to fend for themselves. Eventually, identification bands are attached to their legs and they are released.

The hospital provides qualified veterinary care. It is run by dedicated volunteer staff who manage to raise funds through raffles, donations and sponsorship.

A sponsorship scheme is available to individuals who want to do their bit to help care for our native birds.

By filling out a "Sponsor-A-Bird" application form and enclosing \$20 per bird, sponsors receive a package containing a certificate of sponsorship, a self-adhesive decal and information on their bird's injury and its progress.

An application form and further information is available from the WA Native Bird Hospital, PO Box 232, Mundaring, WA, 6073.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME 5 NO 2 SUMMER EDITION 1989/1990



Dolphins, whales and seals frequently strand along the WA coast. Find out who helps them and what they do on p. 10.



Powerful forces have formed the rocks and land surface of WA over billions of years. See p. 48.



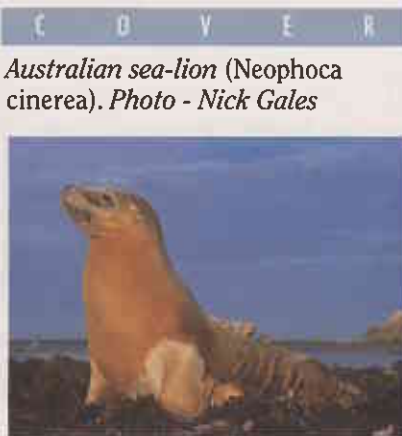
Why are the thousands of feral camels that roam inland Australia the scourge of the desert? Turn to p. 22.



Explore the fascinating subterranean worlds deep beneath the earth on p. 28.



Inlets and rivers, towering karri and tingle forests, rugged coastline and remote wilderness areas - Walpole-Nornalup National Park has it all. See p. 15.



Australian sea-lion (Neophoca cinerea). Photo - Nick Gales

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Managing Editor: Ron Kawallak

Editor: Carolyn Thomson

Designers: Louise Burch/Robyn Mundy

Production: Karen Addison/Margaret Wilke

Maps: Project Mapping, CALM

Advertising: Tim Langford-Smith ☎ (09) 389 8644 Fax: 389 8266

Colour Separations by The Colour Set

Printed in Western Australia by Kaleidoscope

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