

URBAN ANTICS!



As a kid, what would I have done without my local swamp?

Forty years ago in a somewhat less sophisticated society with fewer recreation facilities, the local swamp or lake was our gang's little "jungle" - our after-school experience. Things are not the same today: television, super toys and other entertainments keep us from such places.

Some 3000 million years ago, life on our planet evolved from primeval bodies of water. Today, wetland depressions still provide a keyhole view of primitive life-forms and jog memories of childhood escapades.

There is nothing more relaxing and enlightening than to plonk your feet into the shallows of a secluded pond in a well-vegetated swamp. Let's imagine you've done just that. SHHHHHHH - remain still and quiet. Let your senses tune in to this other world.

Look down and you will see water fleas, tadpoles, shrimp, small fish and a myriad of other water bugs swimming over your feet. Keep still and you will be buzzed by different types of coloured dragonflies. As these marvellous creatures skim across the water their huge multi-celled eyes enable them to catch insects on the wing and devour them while still in flight.

Coots, ducks, moorhens, and sometimes swans, raise a cacophony of sounds as they squabble for territory and crash through reeds and thickets.

The occasional moving shadow above is a swamp harrier, kestrel or goshawk searching for a meal of unprotected duckling, insects or water rat.

Time to move out a little deeper. Methane gas bubbles from your footsteps in the mud, giving off an unpleasant but nonetheless stimulating, smell.

If you look to the shore you may see a heron or egret stalking fish, frogs, small tortoises, gilgies or other dwellers of the shallows.

Raise your eyes to the branches of overhanging trees and you may spot the motionless forms of night herons, owls or frogmouths as they await darkness to take their part in the swamp community.

Glance back to the still, reflective waters and, from time to time, you will see concentric rings of disturbance, as long-necked tortoises push their heads through the surface for a breath of fresh air and a look around.

Your attention could be distracted at this stage as a kingfisher slices through the air to snatch a lizard from a log on the opposite shoreline.

If you stay until dusk, a bonus swampland experience will be yours. After heavy rain, or at times of peak water-level, the calls of different frog species produce an orchestra of sound.

In the 1940s and 1950s Jackadder Lake and MacDougal Park Lake in the Perth suburbs of Woodlands and Manning provided my initiation into wetland exploration. These areas were then pristine swamps on the edge of civilisation in Perth.

I hope you, too, can find places like these to make contact with your ancestral beginnings.

JOHN HUNTER

Did you know ...

Before European settlement, Aborigines who lived by our urban swamps preyed heavily on the long-necked tortoise. Today, prolific numbers of long-necked tortoises prey on young water birds, causing some species to have second or third broods.

In the last 200 years, 75 per cent of pristine wetland habitat on the Swan coastal plain has been destroyed by land reclamation or the diversion of water.

A book, A Naturalists' Guide To Perth, \$10.95 from CALM's Como office, will help you to enjoy urban wildlife and wetland habitat.

LANDSCOPE

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Rock-wallabies threw down the gauntlet to scientists trying to trap them for research. Who ended up winning the catch-me-if-you-can contest? See page 35.



Scientists will use modern technology to restore two rare and endangered mammals to an area in the Gibson Desert from which they have become extinct. See page 10.



Shells, tiny crabs and sundry other creatures are sure to please the curious naturalist who invades the intertidal zone at low tide. Explore the place where the shore meets the sea on page 23.



Waterbirds flock to the Vasse-Wonnerup wetlands in their tens of thousands, some travelling over 10 000 kilometres from summer breedings grounds in northern China and Siberia. Turn to page 17.



It's the burning question! Is prescribed burning in spring or autumn better for the jarrah forest? Or is there another alternative? See page 28.

FEATURES

DESERT DREAMING NEIL BURROWS AND CAROLYN THOMSON	10
SWAMPED WITH BIRDS JIM LANE	17
WHERE THE SHORE MEETS THE SEA BARRY WILSON	23
SEASONED WITH FIRE NEIL BURROWS	28
TRAPPINGS OF SUCCESS JACK KINNEAR	35
BACK FROM THE BRINK ALAN DANKS	41
ISLAND OF BUSH, SEA OF WHEAT GORDON FRIEND	44
UNDER FIRE TANYIA MAXTED	49
A QUESTION OF BREEDING JOHN BARTLE, TREVOR BUTCHER AND RICHARD MAZANEC	51

REGULARS

IN PERSPECTIVE	4
BUSH TELEGRAPH	5
ENDANGERED OCEAN FERN	27
URBAN ANTICS	54

COVER

The designs of desert artist Benny Tjapaltjarri show events associated with the Pakuru or golden bandicoot dreaming in the Gibson Desert. The three central roundels depict rockholes and the others represent hills. The background dots show the vegetation of the area.



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