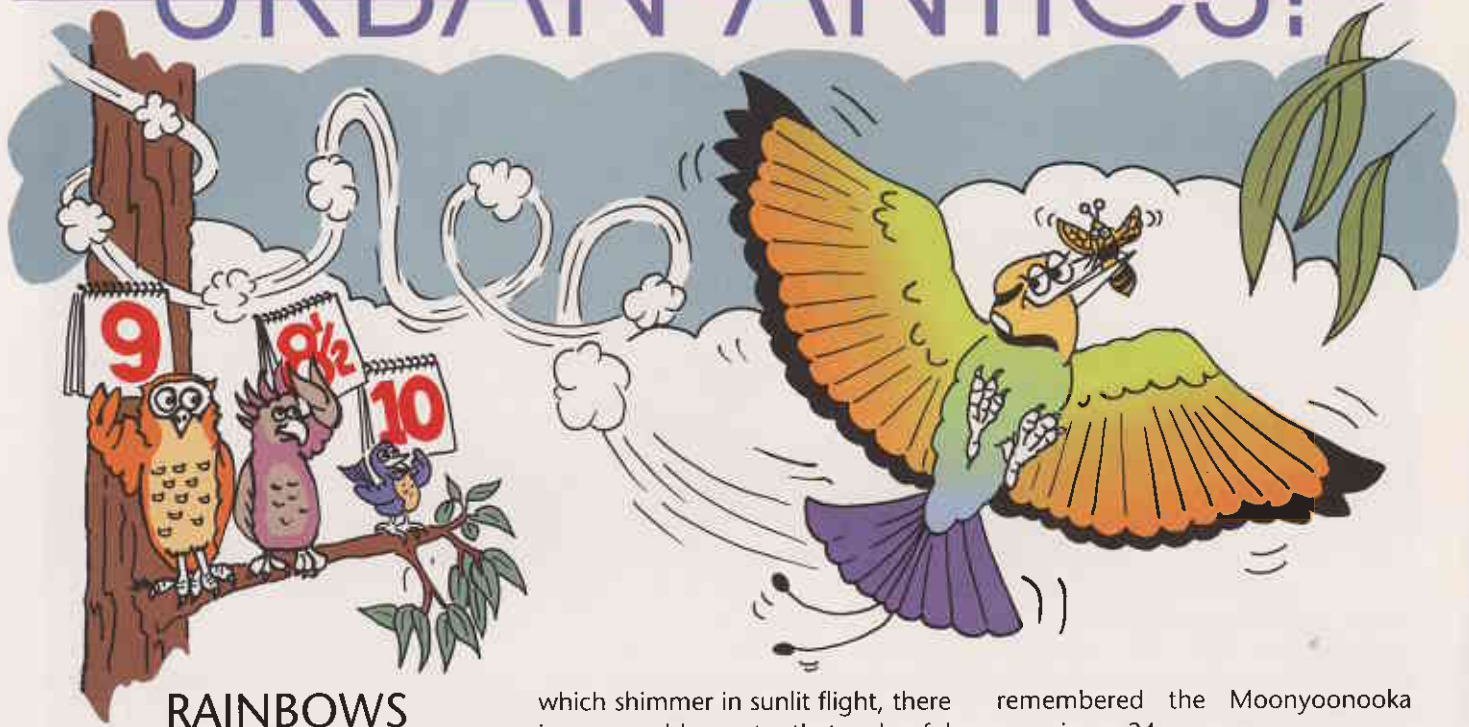


# URBAN ANTICS!



## RAINBOWS

"Hey, Jim! Look at that, a flaming bird-of-paradise."

In only five seconds a shiny streak of green and gold had performed more aerial feats than a monkey on a grapevine.

This was no urban antic. The place was Moonyoonooka, some 20 kilometres east of Geraldton. It was November 1966 and 40 degrees Celsius in the water bag, the air thick with bushflies.

My mate muttered through clenched teeth (to avoid an insect lunch) and cast verbal doubts on my state of mind.

The next day I again chose to sit in the stubble and red dust on the bank of the Coyilura River and be entertained by *Merops ornatus*, the rainbow bee-eater.

Rainbow bee-eaters, sometimes also called gold-diggers or, more often, just rainbow birds, are quite common over most of mainland Australia. However, because of their nomadic habit and seasonal appearance in the Perth area these birds are spasmodically "discovered" rather than constantly seen.

The creature is not a bird-of-paradise, but because it has two tail wires up to 50 millimetres long (slightly enlarged at the tips) and gorgeous colours of pale green, blue and bronze

which shimmer in sunlit flight, there is a resemblance to that colourful group.

The bee-eaters' long, fine-curved black bills appear to continue as a band of black feathers through their eyes, giving them a masked-bandit look. Because of this, together with their short legs and small feet, the birds are often mistaken for kingfishers.

Rainbow bee-eaters consume all kinds of flying insects, not just bees. They are expert at removing, or rendering harmless, the stings of wasps and bees before swallowing the insects.

In the Perth region, from summer to late autumn, sporadic groups move around coastal and sub-coastal districts.

Fortunately, my front yard is high and overlooks Wembley Golf Course, a magic spot for bird-watching. Here, I can watch groups and pairs dash after prey and soar with erratic twists and turns, their magnificent coppery flight-feathers reflecting the sun with metallic brilliance.

Whilst out for an evening stroll last January, my son Joel and I saw two birds perched on power-lines in a City Beach street, like silent upright sentinels.

Within a few minutes each creature descended to a sandy cutting on a vacant block and disappeared into a round hole about five centimetres in diameter. That was really something for a seven-year-old to see, and I too

remembered the Moonyoonooka experience 24 years ago.

The metre-high bank had seven holes in it. Most were unused, their entrances adorned with dusty spider-web curtains. Two were renovated with fresh diggings at the entrances. These were the nesting tunnels of the bee-eater. We left them undisturbed in their precarious spot.

It is winter now, and the melodious pirr-pirr-pirr of the rainbow bee-eaters has temporarily gone. They have migrated north, to be replaced with mist and real rainbows.

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JOHN HUNTER

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### *Did you know ...*

*There are twenty-three species of bee-eater. Between them they range from Europe to Africa and through Asia to Australia. Africa boasts the brightest coloured and the greatest number of species.*

*Our one Australian species is found in all States except Tasmania.*

*Most birds from southern climes migrate north for winter. Some of them go beyond our shores to New Guinea, the Lesser Sunda Islands, and the Solomon Islands. A few even reach the Ryuhu Islands of Southern Japan.*

# LANDSCOPE

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Each weekend, hundreds of novice scuba divers take the plunge. Get the most out of your diving on page 10.



How do birds fly? How do some reach speeds of over 80 kilometres per hour? Learn about avian aerodynamics on page 28.



A very different landscape replaces what was once a thriving timber industry. Rediscover Cannington in the 1850s. See page 42.



Western Australia grows some rare and stunning native spider orchids. Their alluring nature will delight the reader on page 34.



Seaweed! Delicate and beautiful, or slimy and smelly? Decide for yourself on page 20.

## C O V E R

Back in the early 1970s, Western Australia proclaimed the numbat (*Myrmecobius fasciatus*) as its State emblem which may have saved its life. With the help of scientists and new techniques, these delightful creatures are now fighting back against extinction. See page 15.

Illustrated by Martin Thompson.



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Managing Editor: Ron Kawallik

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Designers: Robyn Mundy/Steve Murnane

Production: Karen Addison

Advertising: ☎ (09) 389 8644 Fax (09) 389 8296

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