

URBAN ANTICS!

ENCOUNTER WITH A BLOWFISH



Splot -----gishhhhh-----
"That'll teach you to pinch my bait," snarled the little boy as the mangle of flesh squelched and pulped under his sneaker.

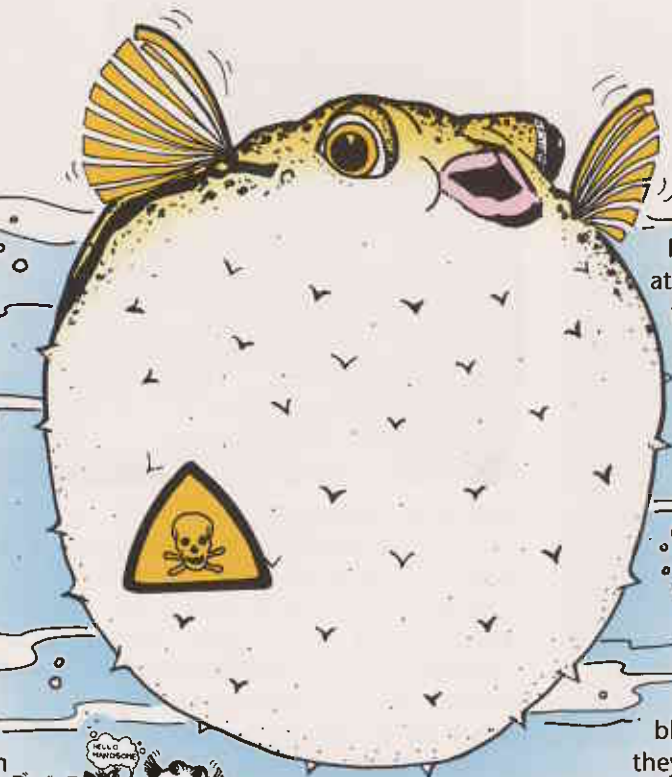
The landing was littered with rotting and dried bodies, some in a state of indescribable mutilation.

The scene resembled the set of a horror movie, but in fact was a favourite fishing spot close to the city. The victims were *Torquigener pleurogramma* - common blowfish.

Blowfish are slimy, brown-splotched and goggle-eyed little beasts, which are caught by the thousands each year in the Swan Estuary and at metropolitan coastal beaches. They are perhaps the most maligned and physically abused of all urban dwellers.

The name blowfish, or puffer, is derived from the fish's ability to balloon into a sphere two or three times its original size. When frightened, excited or annoyed, it gulps water or even air into a sac on its belly. It swells inside its tough elastic skin like a tube inside a tyre, so as to discourage predators. When the fish feels safe, it releases the air or water, deflating to its normal shape.

About 100 species of blowfish are found throughout the world. Our local species may reach 300 mm in length, but a giant in the northern hemisphere reaches about one metre long and weighs some 13 kg.



Many weird specialisations are attributed to the blowfish, but the most dangerous is its ability to poison.

Hidden in the entrails of each fish is the substance tetrodotoxin, which is 275 times more deadly than cyanide. Just a tiny amount of this chemical, barely enough to fit on a pinhead, is enough to kill a person.

There is no known antidote. So be a little kinder to the blowfish - as ugly as they are, they are still creatures worthy of wonder.

When you're getting no bites from other fish, they're great fun to catch.

JOHN HUNTER

Did you know ...

Their buck teeth and massive chewing muscles can tear apart crabs and oysters, and have been known to nip rusty fish-hooks in half.

They have iridescent blue and green eyes which are quite mobile. In some species the eyes darken automatically as light intensity increases, like the lenses of some manufactured eyeglasses.

In Japan, one blowfish species (called fugu) is highly regarded as a food - at about \$200 a serve! - even though it has caused hundreds of deaths there over the last two decades.

LANDSCOPE

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In the central Kimberley, a screw-pine-surrounded creek - just one of the threatened areas in this fragile frontier. Turn to page 22.



Until 1984 more was known about what was underneath the Nullarbor than what was on top. But with such a vast area to study, where do we start? See page 16.



Public awareness and involvement is vital in the conservation of WA's rare and endangered flora. Page 49.



Ten WA mammal species have become extinct in the last 200 years. What can be done to ensure no more are lost forever? Page 28.



Forests protect our environment. They also provide timber. How do we strike a balance? Turn to page 35.

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C O V E R

Dolphins and whales are perhaps the best-known inhabitants of Western Australia's coastal waters. But this unique area is also home to an astonishing range of marine flora and fauna, from sea-turtles and coral reefs in the north to sea-grass banks and great white sharks in the south. See page 10.

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