

TO CATCH A WATERBIRD

Some 1 800 waterbirds have been colour-marked as part of the Swan Coastal Plain Waterbird Project over the past two years. The wings or beaks of the birds are given tags coded by colour and letter. Nasal saddles are put on ducks, while wing tags are put on egrets, ibis, spoonbills and herons.

Although this is a fairly simple and painless operation, the process of catching the birds is a little more complicated. There is no cost-effective way of catching adult egrets, ibis, spoonbills and herons for wing tagging, though it is relatively simple to obtain large numbers of nestlings.

All the birds nest in trees in wetlands, but at different heights. Great egrets and white-faced herons nest up to 15 metres above the wetland, rufous night herons six metres, and yellow-billed spoonbills three metres. Straw-necked ibis and sacred ibis often nest in large mound-like nests made of sticks in the base of trees.

All the species being wing-tagged have a nesting period of about eight weeks between hatching and first flight. Because mortality rates are naturally high, birds are tagged as close to flying age as possible to maximise the chance that they will survive.

However, it is difficult to pursue an egret through the tree canopy 15 m above the wetland, unless you happen to be very good on stilts, so these birds are usually banded when they are under five weeks old and less likely to leave the nest. Ibis, on the other hand, are at wetland level and can be caught easily, so they are usually around five weeks old when banded.

In contrast to the large wading birds, large numbers



of adult pacific black ducks can be lured to a food source and caught using a large net, which is thrown over the ducks by a number of cannons. When enough ducks have congregated around the food source, the charges are detonated and the net is shot over the heads of the unsuspecting ducks. They are then taken from the net and transferred to a holding cage for sexing, ageing and tagging.

The project, known as Scopewest, will discover whether waterbirds on the coastal plain have seasonal patterns of movement. The colour-marking provides a pool of identifiable birds whose movements can be followed by volunteers and interested members of the public.

If you see any colour-marked duck or large wading bird, please report it to Stuart Halse at CALM's Wildlife

Rufous night heron chick wing-tagged for identification as part of the Swan Coastal Plain Waterbird Project.

Photo - Stuart Halse

Research Centre. Phone Stuart on (09) 405 5100, or write to him at PO Box 51, Wanneroo 6065, giving details of species, the colour and code of the saddle or tag, and the place and date when the species was observed.

MICE IN THE CLASSROOM

Native hopping mice are going back to school to give WA children the chance to get to know native animals in their classroom.

Most school children only get to see introduced animals - house mice, Norway rats, guinea pigs, goldfish or rabbits - at school. But Dr Stephen Davies, formerly of CSIRO Wildlife in WA, has changed all that.

Dr Davies has been granted a licence under the Wildlife Conservation Act to keep a small breeding colony of Mitchell's hopping mice in captivity at York High School. Dr Davies' daughter Elizabeth,

a biology teacher at the school, will try to breed from the colony, which so far consists of two young females and a male.

Mitchell's hopping mice can be found throughout the semi-arid areas of southern Australia from the WA coast to the Big Desert area of Victoria. They are nocturnal, sheltering during the day in deep burrows. They feed on seed and a few insects and green plants. In times of drought, roots are eaten as a source of both food and water.

A similar colony of Mitchell's hopping mice was set up at Thornlie Senior High School

by Dr Davies in the early 1980s. It is hoped that once mice are born from the York school colony, they will be distributed to other schools throughout the South West of the State.

To collect the mice, Dr Davies joined Drs Michael Bamford and Phillip Ladd in a fauna survey of Kangaroo Hills and Calooli Timber Reserves near Coolgardie, where the Mitchell's hopping mouse is common on the sandplains. The survey was funded by Grosmont Joint Venture (a gold mine) through CALM as part of the rehabilitation conditions on the mining lease.



Visitors from around Australia are discovering what those who live nearby already know - D'Entrecasteaux...C'est Magnifique. Turn to page 10.



Seabirds nest on Pelsaert Island in the Houtman Abrolhos by the million. See page 17.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME SIX NO. 3 - AUTUMN EDITION 1991



There's more to invertebrates than slugs, maggots and spiders. Turn to page 28 to find out just why invertebrates are so important.



What has happened to Fitzgerald River National Park since the 1989 wildfire? See page 34.



Explore the Dampier Archipelago, a group of rocky islands with a violent past and a wealth of wildlife. Turn to page 48.

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C O V E R

Invertebrates play an important role in the ecosystem of WA's jarrah forest. Earthworms, termites and ants fragment leaf litter and mix organic matter. Some soil and litter invertebrates stimulate plant growth. Soil insects such as larval beetles feed on roots, stimulating the plants' growth rate. Our cover illustration is Philippa Nikulinsky's impression of this process at work in the jarrah forest.



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