

CAT AMONG THE PENGUINS

A cat is believed to have been responsible for the deaths of 20 little (or fairy) penguins on Shelter Island.

The penguins were found on the small inshore island which is located at Torbay, near Mutton Bird Beach, west of Albany, by three Department of Conservation and Land Management wildlife officers.

The island is separated from the mainland by a narrow, deepwater channel about 100 metres wide and is a favoured breeding habitat for a number of species of seabirds including the little penguin.

CALM wildlife officers Peter Collins, Bernie Haberley and Kevin Morrison were visiting Shelter Island to follow up reports that black rats, thought to be established on the island, may have contributed to the decline in seabird breeding activity.

It was while setting rat traps that they found a number of fresh paw prints of a cat in patches of soft sand.

But it wasn't until they reached the first of two penguin breeding colonies that they discovered a freshly killed little penguin near the entrance to its burrow. Bite marks around its head, beak and legs clearly showed teeth impressions consistent with those of a cat.

While evidence of fresh



diggings around the entrances to some burrows indicated the penguins had only just come ashore and were preparing for nesting, many of the burrows were still unoccupied.

Concern for the penguins increased as fresh cat tracks were found around the entrances to some of the unoccupied burrows.

A thorough search through the second colony on the southern end of the island revealed 19 dead little penguins, bringing the total number killed to 20.

All had been killed since the night before the wildlife officers' visit and all bore bite marks around the throat, head and legs, similar to those found on the first dead penguin.

None of the birds had been eaten by the animal that had killed it, although three had

their heads chewed off.

One freshly killed black rat was also found, confirming that this pest was also present on the island.

The fact that neither the penguins nor the rat had been eaten indicated the killer hadn't been hungry, but had simply gone on a killing spree.

To protect the remaining birds, two cat traps were set that same day; they were checked and re-baited regularly over the ensuing three weeks, but no cats were caught.

Fortunately, the killing of the penguins also ceased.

This could mean the cat was no longer on the island, or that, for the time being, it had stopped killing penguins for reasons unknown and was too wary to be caught in a trap.

How the cat came to be on the island remains a mystery. However, it is possible, though highly unlikely, that it had swum the comparatively short

Little penguins, sometimes called fairy penguins, favour small islands for breeding.
Photos - Ray Smith

distance from the mainland to the island during calm conditions.

Another possibility is that some well-intentioned person heard about there being rats on the island and decided to release a cat there to kill the rats.

The penguin killings received plenty of media coverage, resulting in encouraging and widespread support for CALM's efforts in protecting wildlife from depredation by feral cats and foxes.

Post-mortems on the penguins showed they were more likely to have been killed by a cat than by a fox and that the birds had been in good condition with ample fat reserves to carry them through the July to March breeding season.



LANDSCOPE

VOLUME EIGHT NO. 3 AUTUMN ISSUE 1993



'Where there's fire there's smoke'. We look at one of the lesser known and misunderstood products of bushfires on page 10.



Banksias and blackboys are normally associated with the sandplains of the coast and wheatbelt rather than the Great Victoria Desert. See page 22.



The mountains of the Stirling Range are a refuge harbouring many ancient species of spiders. Spider expert Barbara York Main shows us some of them on page 28.



The disappearance of the Zuytdorp remained a mystery for many years. The story of its rediscovery and the formation of the Zuytdorp Nature Reserve is on page 42.



A new book, Perth Outdoors, aims to encourage people to get outdoors and enjoy nature and to learn more about Perth's unique natural communities. See page 35.

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COVER

The palisade spider (Neohomogona stirlingi) is endemic to the Stirling and Porongurup Ranges. It builds a shallow burrow with an open entrance surrounded by a palisade, or collar of leaves and twigs, which may project several centimetres above the ground or litter.

The illustration is by Philippa Nikulinsky.



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Cartography: CALM Land Information Branch
Colour Separation by Prepress Services
Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print

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