

TURTLE TOUR

Dedicated volunteers are helping the Department of Conservation and Land Management's (CALM) Western Australian Marine Turtle Project team collect valuable data on sea turtles nesting on beaches of the Ningaloo Marine Park.

There is now opportunity for people who would like to financially assist this project and have some professionally guided hands-on contact with turtles without having to meet the work commitments of the full-time volunteers. This is provided through a tour offered jointly by CALM and Coate's Wildlife Tours.

The highlight of the tour is four nights on the beach observing and tagging turtles. In addition, there are guided tours of the Ningaloo Marine Park, including snorkelling on the reef, and of Cape Range National Park, with a visit to ridges and canyons of the range. Lectures on coral reef biology and fish and bird identification, together with a visit to the dolphins at Monkey Mia on the return journey to

Perth, complete the tour package.

Green turtles (and occasionally loggerheads and hawksbills) nest on the shores of the marine park. The annual summer nesting period between October and February provides an excellent opportunity to learn something about nesting turtles, and opens the door to research on other parts of their life at sea.

Sea turtles do spend practically all their life at sea, but adult females must come ashore to lay their eggs. The nesting turtles generally leave the water at night, moving slowly up the beach slope, often with frequent stops to take a breather on the way. On reaching what is considered a suitable spot, the turtle will first dig a large shallow hole in the dry surface sand. She will then dig a smaller, deeper hole at the rear for her eggs. When this is successfully completed the turtle will lay dozens of round whitish eggs into the hole, and then cover them. A lot of effort is put into this task,

including back filling the excavation, before leaving the beach. This final procedure disguises the position of the eggs, and perhaps helps protect the valuable investment from foxes and large sand-goannas. It may also help direct other turtles away from immediate digging up of the clutch just laid.

Under supervision of an experienced tour guide biologist, eco-tour participants will be able to observe the nesting process, have the chance to count some egg clutches as they are laid, and help tag, measure, and record other data for some of the nesting turtles. Participants are registered as CALM volunteers for this purpose.

The turtles are marked for identification using titanium flipper tags, which resist both corrosion and reaction with the body. If the tagged animals are found again at whatever place they may turn up, it is possible to get information on movements, growth, age, and reproductive patterns that will help scientists and managers

better understand and conserve the species.

Marine turtles are amazing creatures - relics of the dinosaur age, having lived on Earth for more than 200 million years. Turtles seen on the beaches may be 50 to 100 years old. They commonly return to nesting beaches in the same area at three to six year intervals, with females laying three to five times during a breeding season.

The tour is run twice yearly, usually in December and January. For further information contact Coate's Wildlife Tours on (09) 447 6016 or Freecall 008 67 6016 (country and interstate callers). For information on the full-time volunteer program contact CALM's WA Marine Turtle Project team on (09) 405 5100.

Green turtles (Chelonia mydas) nest on the beaches of Ningaloo Marine Park between October and February each year.

Dozens of eggs are deposited in a small hole and carefully covered. Photos - Eva Boogaard



LANDSCOPE

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Wildfires are synonymous with Western Australian summers, but what can be done to lessen the threat to life and property? Lachlan McCaw discusses the problem on page 49.



Daisies belong to the Asteraceae family, one of the world's largest families of flowering plants. Suzanne Curry presents some of them in 'Delightful Daisies' on page 41.



Aborigines have eked out a living in the harsh Western Desert region for thousands of years. Their intimate knowledge of the desert is helping scientists learn more about its plants and animals. See 'Digging Sticks and Desert Dwellers' on page 10.



'Rainforests and Bats', on page 34, tells the story of the recent LANDSCOPE Expedition to the Mitchell Plateau.



Can images from space help locate desert mammals? See 'From Buckshot to Breakaways' on page 23.

FEATURES

DIGGING STICKS & DESERT DWELLERS
PETER BINDON & DAVID GOUGH 10

THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION.
ANDREW BURBIDGE & ANDREW BROWN 17

FROM BUCKSHOT TO BREAKAWAYS
GRAEME LIDDELOW & PER CHRISTENSEN 23

HOW MANY GEESE ARE ENOUGH ?
ANDREW BURBIDGE, BERNIE HABERLEY, STUART HALSE,
JIM LANE & GRANT PEARSON 28

RAINFORESTS AND BATS
KEVIN KENNEALLY, DAPHNE EDINGER
& NORM MCKENZIE 34

DELIGHTFUL DAISIES
SUZANNE CURRY 41

WILDFIRES - LIVING WITH THE THREAT
LACHLAN McCAW 49

REGULARS

IN PERSPECTIVE 4

BUSH TELEGRAPH 6

ENDANGERED GREY HONEYEATER 53

URBAN ANTICS 54

SPECIALS

ARBOR DAY POSTER COMPETITION 46

COVER

Cape Barren geese live on the islands and rocks of the Archipelago of Recherche. A few years ago their numbers appeared very low and their survival was in doubt. However, a recent survey of the islands has brought good news with a marked increase in the bird's population.

The illustration is by Philippa Nikulinsky.



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