

# URBAN ANTICS!

## MUSK DUCK

It had been a long dry summer. Multicoloured hover flies danced on the waving leaves of long grass as the last warm rays of an autumn sun beat down on the near empty Perry Lakes.

I leaned back under the copious canopy of eucalypt woodland, closed my eyes and let the cacophony of ravens, lorikeets, coots and swamphens take control.

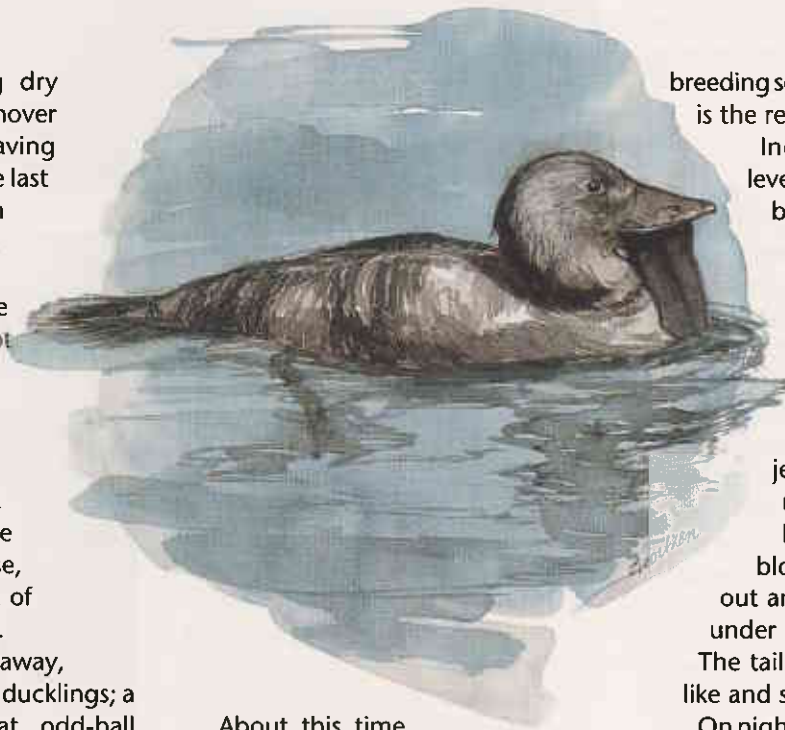
Suddenly, from the depths of a beautiful noise, I was awakened to a set of staring black beady eyes.

There, not two metres away, was the ugliest of all ugly ducklings; a bumbling, stumbling, fat, odd-ball "quacker" that looked as if it had staggered from the catastrophe of an ocean oil spill.

I had never seen a musk duck out of water before, let alone up close, for they are usually the secretive denizens of deep, open water or aquatic thickets. This bird had obviously been used to human visitors, but because of low water and resultant diminished food supplies, he had tried the brash begging approach, more usual of silver gulls and black ducks.

The appearance of the creature was extraordinary. A sort of grotesque and prehistoric-looking beast that seemed to find walking on solid ground most difficult. This fine male specimen had a large curious pouch-like leather comb hanging loose under the lower bill, which further enhanced its reptilian appearance.

Alas, I had none of the live aquatic animals that would have been his normal fare and after a few minutes of agitated indecision, he shuffled toward the lake, slipped into a nearby pool and disappeared among thick weed.



About this time of the year, large numbers of musk ducks (*Bizura lobata*), also called divers or steamers, can be seen spread across newly replenished open waterways, apparently keeping themselves to themselves. Although not a rare bird, the musk duck is usually observed only at a distance where it swims partly submerged like a cormorant.

The blackish, seemingly waterlogged feathers, goose-like triangular beak and stiff, pointed tail feathers are features quite different from most other species of duck. When swimming, the tail feathers lie flat on or just below the surface of the water.

The bill shape indicates that this diver feeds almost entirely on aquatic insects, mussels, snails, crayfish and frogs, which are sometimes collected on deep and extended dives to the bottom of a lake. To escape detection, the bird will sink until only the eyes and nostrils are exposed, then dive silently to swim away and surface under cover.

The musky odour of the oil preen gland on the male, especially in

breeding season, is exceptional and is the reason for its naming.

Increasing winter water levels are the trigger for the breeding season to begin and the male musk duck, with its remarkable courtship performance, is one heck of a show pony.

The bird sails out into a clear pool and kicks jets of water up to two metres above and behind. It raises its head, blows its neck and cheeks out and expands the bladder under its bill into a large disc. The tail feathers are raised fan-like and spread over its body.

On nights near open water if you hear a tremendous "k-plonk" and an ear splitting whistle you will know that it's not a bunyip, or a UFO, just an amorous musk duck.

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## JOHN HUNTER

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### DID YOU KNOW?

- Musk ducks are seldom observed on the wing as they are thought to fly mainly at night. They need a wind assisted take off and fly well, but more often than not, crash-land on water.
- Females are smaller than males, and have only a small rudimentary lobe under the bill.
- No pair bond is formed. The flamboyant courtship attracts females, and as each arrives she is fertilised and goes off on her own to build a well-concealed nest in a clump of cumbunji.

# LANDSCOPE

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*Hand in hand with nature. This brushtail possum is just one of the animals studied during fauna surveys of the Batalling Forest. See page 16.*



*Lush vegetation and a welcoming smile greet you as you arrive at Mt Hart Homestead, the 'Oasis in the Leopolds'. See page 48.*



*'Fire, Wind and Water', on page 42, tells of recent research into the rehabilitation of exploration tracks in the Rudall River area of the Little Sandy Desert.*



*Deep beneath the Southern Ocean lies the wreck of the Sanko Harvest. This rotting hull is now an artificial reef attracting marine life and divers alike. See page 23.*



*Plantations of brown mallet in the early 1900's began a chain of events that resulted in the 'Woodland Wonderland' of Dryandra. See page 28.*

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## COVER

Woylies prefer clumped, relatively open vegetation with sandy soils that are easy to dig. They are found, among other places, at Batalling Forest and the Dryandra Woodland. See stories on pages 16 and 28.

*The illustration is by Philippa Nikulinsky.*



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