URBAN ANTICS!

MORE REPTILIAN ESCAPADES

The warmth of late spring and early summer brings with it the beating of myriads of little wings and the trampling of squillions of tiny feet. This is the time when most species of insects and small animals radiate to seek new domains, food sources, mates and nests.

With winter moisture still in the ground, ants sporting large new shiny wings ooze like treacle from tree stumps and swarm skywards, while bobtail lizards scuttle dangerously on warm roadways. At night, moths on their way to egg-laying, seem to swirl uncontrollably around street lights, and spiders spin wondrous webs in just about any place.

One beast that moves out of its usual habitat during spring and summer, and occasionally pays the ultimate price on our urban roads, is the oblong or long-necked tortoise *(Chelodina oblonga)*.

Two species of tortoise are found in our suburban area: the very rare, short-necked western swamp tortoise, which is found only in two special reserves in the Swan valley north of Perth; and the oblong tortoise, which is common in most waterways.

The oblong tortoise has a long, thick neck about the same length as its somewhat flattish oblong shell or dorsal carapace. Although the neck cannot be effectively withdrawn into its shell, it is a potent weapon when used to lunge at moving prey.

Food is mostly aquatic insects, and crustaceans. However, larger prey such as fish, tadpoles and even young ducks and coots are eaten. Clasped tightly in its horny, beak-like mouth, the animal proceeds to shred the food with black, needle-like claws that protrude from small webbed feet.

During winter, some tortoises move from permanent water to temporarywater bearing depressions. They remain in these until the water dissipates and then move back into nearby permanent lakes, swamps, pools and even brackish estuaries near the coast.

Towards the end of winter and during spring, when water level is high and food is abundant, the tortoises mate. This is done without leaving the water and, no doubt, with great difficulty, even though the male's plastron or ventral shell is slightly concave to accommodate the female's shell.

Up to three clutches of eggs are laid between September and January.Nesting in spring occurs when the air temperature is above 17.5°C and a rain-bearing low pressure system approaches. Many female tortoises leave the water to nest on the same day.

A nesting site is chose somewhere between a few metres and hundreds of metres from the water. It is dug in firm soil and comprises avertical shaft about 150 mm deep and 50 mm wide, leading to a small chamber at the bottom. Having used both her hind feet to dig and after cupping the soil to one side, a tortoise will lay and then gently manoeuvre with one foot, 2–16 cylindrical-shaped eggs.

After egg-laying, the soil is scooped back into the hole and periodically firmed using the hind feet. When the area is level, the totoise raises her body by extending her hind legs and repeatedly slams her plastron down onto the sand. The virtually undetectable nest is then left and the animal heads back to the sanctity of the water. After about 220 days, the youngsters hatch and disperse.

Most of our urban waterways are now surrounded by roads. Unfortunately, tortoises have no alternative but to cross these busy thoroughfares to nest or seek new domains.

If you are driving past any waterway, especially in early summer, give a thought for the wildlife there. Slow down. Don't be a 'hare'; give the poor old tortoise a chance!

JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- *Up to three clutches of eggs are laid from September to January. However, all clutches hatch at the same time, the following August–an incubation period of up to 300 days!*
- *Hatchlings are about 30 mm in length and weigh 6 g. They keep growing throughout their lifespan of several decades, and can reach a shell size of around 270 mm in length and a weight of 2 kg.*
- *Oblong tortoises cannot tolerate lengthy periods of drought. If its swamp dries up, a tortoise either moves to permanent water or buries itself in the muddy bottom.*

LANDSCOPE

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The golden whistler is a common forest bird. 'Forest Focus' (on page 10) discusses a five-year study into the effects of timber harvesting on forest birds, insects and mammals.

The 10th Light Horse Memorial Trail is one of two walktrails in Neerabup National Park. The story on page 22 takes you inside this little-known park in Perth's northern suburbs.

In the closing days of 1991, heavy downpours of rain flooded Rowles Lagoon in WA's Goldfields; and so began an unusual year of floods, frogs, flowers and fires (see page 42).

Aboriginal people of the northern deserts call the black-headed python 'warrurungkalpa', which roughly translates as 'grinder or crusher of rock wallabies'. See the story on page 17.

Radio collars are fitted to feral cats to help scientists track their movements. 'Hunting the Hunter', on page 36, focuses on research into the habits of these supreme desert hunters.

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

The majestic and graceful whale shark visits the north-west of Western Australia each year and is fast becoming a major tourist attraction. What does the future hold for the world's largest fish? See page 28.

The illustration is by Danka Pradzynski.

Managing Editor: Ron Kawalilak
Editor: David Gough
Contributing Editors: Ray Bailey, Kate Hooper, Carolyn Thomson
Scientific and technical advice: Ian Abbott, Andrew Burbidge, Paul Jones
Design and production: Maria Duthie, Sue Marais
Finished art: Sue Marais, Gooitzen van der Meer
Illustration: Gooitzen van der Meer
Cartography: Promaco Geodraft
Marketing: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (09) 334 0296 Fax: 334 0489
Subscription enquiries: ☎ (09) 334 0481
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Department of Conservation and Land Management,
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