

URBAN ANTICS!

THE BUTCHERBIRD A TOPNOTCH DISSECTOR

The bearded dragon was caught napping in the early-morning winter sun on a City Beach sandhill. It was cold, immobile on a stick of dead wood, trying to acquire body heat to enable normal activity. The kids inspected his fine reptilian attributes and after a half hour of warm laps and hot hands, he was raring to go back to the peaks and swales of the dunes and ... freedom.

Had it have been the bush near home, cats and kookaburras would have made a meal of our find, so my son felt extremely happy for me to conduct a 'critter release' in the sanctity of the beach reserve. By the look in his eyes, I could tell it was another fine fatherly decision.

In an open area surrounded by vegetated high dunes, the reptile exploded to freedom and bounced like a wind-whipped tumbleweed over the sand and into the undergrowth. Then, ...whoosh, plop... in a flash, our 'friend' was hanging limp in the beak of a grey butcherbird, which had resettled on a dune-top saltbush. Whoops.....! I hadn't checked the party for gate-crashers. My son's eyes again conveyed an apt message...nice one boof-head! Was that directed at me, or the bird?

Over the last few years, the grey butcherbird (*Cracticus torquatus*), like the Australian raven and a few other large bush birds, has increased in numbers in and around our backyards. While generally frequenting the middle story of eucalypt forest and open woodlands across the State, pairs of grey butcherbirds are now easily seen and more often heard during early morning walks throughout Perth inner suburbs.

As its name suggests, the grey butcherbird has acquired great skills in the art of 'butchery' and the use of 'tools' as it prepares its food. Most of the bird's prey are insects, frogs,

reptiles, small mammals and nestlings. Prey that is too large to swallow, is often wedged in the fork of a tree branch, or impaled on a fence or spike to enable dismembering. Also, they have been observed to cache food in nooks and crannies.

Like all species of butcherbird, and yet unlike the passerine that it is, the 'grey' has a most rapacious and greedy nature, which sees the bird continuously soliciting for food. My backyard aviary is constantly visited, with the birds clinging tenaciously to the wire or frantically patrolling the perimeter. In bush areas, the grey butcherbird usually sits watchfully in high branches to dive or drop onto prey.

Belonging to the same family as magpies, the grey butcherbird is smaller and of a more robust build. It has a large flat head, a strong magpie-like beak with a fine hook and rather short legs with weak looking feet. Unlike the magpie, it hops over the ground or along branches.

The adult birds are not gregarious. They form permanent pair bonds and defend permanent territories, sometimes with extreme aggression, around their untidy saucer-shaped nest of twigs.

At present, grey butcherbirds can be seen mixing with nectar-eating red wattlebirds in urban parks and gardens. While some people confuse the two in flight, they are quite different when perched, both spry and bold, and preferring to keep an eye on each other. Often, a squadron of wattlebirds can be seen nervously 'tailgating' a butcherbird in flight. During spring, however, the attacks become loud beak-snapping encounters as nestlings come onto the butcherbird menu.

The grey butcherbird, which is actually a black and white bird with a silver back, simply fits the niche attributed to most birds of prey. A raptor it is not, but a songster it most certainly is. There is little to match the outstanding vocal gymnastics of this



avian predator. If there was Olympic gold for voice and song, then this bloke would 'bolt it in'.

On crisp early mornings, if you venture into the garden or nearby park and just listen awhile, you might hear a pair of grey butcherbirds chortling their territorial song in distant duet. This is usually a deep mellow piping of musical scales. As a complete contrast, you might then be blasted by a defence crescendo of mad, high-pitched screaming. To top it off, if you can hear another bird, but can only see a 'grey', ten-to-one it will be the butcherbird, mimicking another species.

BY JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW

- Butcherbirds are recognised in flight by their short, fast moving wings and long, square-ended tail.
- There are four different species of butcherbird in Australia: the black-backed, the black, the pied and the grey. There are many subspecies.
- Grey butcherbirds nest in much the same site year after year; the female incubates three to five brownish green eggs speckled with red to brown spots.

LANDSCOPE

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The Perth Observatory celebrates its centenary this year, and during its 100 years' life it has played some major roles in the world of astronomy. Find out more on page 10.



John Forrest National Park has long been a popular picnicking spot for Perth residents, but this place of beauty has much more to offer. See page 16.



The Cape Range, in north-west WA, is known for its harsh environment. But if you look a little closer you'll discover the vast 'Range of Flowers' that live there. See page 28.



In 1961, the noisy scrub-bird was rediscovered at Two Peoples Bay. In 1994, the Gilbert's potoroo turned up unexpectedly. Find out more about this haven for the lost and found on page 35.



If all goes to plan, the Ord River area, will soon be known as a prime farming area for rare tropical timbers. Find out why on page 23.

FEATURES

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF STARGAZING JAMES BIGGS	10
JOHN FORREST NATIONAL PARK: A PLACE OF BEAUTY GEORGE DUXBURY	16
TROPICAL TREE FARMING ANDREW RADOMILJAC & MANDY CLEWS	23
A RANGE OF FLOWERS GREG KEIGHERY & NEIL GIBSON	28
TWO PEOPLES BAY: A HAVEN FOR THE LOST AND FOUND ALAN DANKS	35
WESTERN SHIELD CARIS BAILEY	41
BANKING FOR THE FUTURE ANNE COCHRAN, ANNE KELLY & DAVID COATES	49

REGULARS

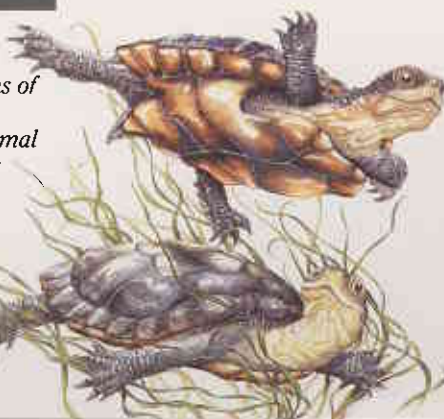
IN PERSPECTIVE	4
BUSH TELEGRAPH	6
ENDANGERED MARSUPIAL-MOLES	34
URBAN ANTICS	54

COVER

Fox-baiting has been shown to be a major tool in rebuilding populations of native animals. Now, scientists are embarking on a Statewide feral animal control program to help bring back native species, such as the western swamp tortoise, from the brink of extinction. The project is called 'Western Shield'.

The story is on page 41.

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