

# URBAN ANTICS!

## Flying Kites

Some 100 million years ago, the great reptiles were lording it over the other inhabitants of Earth. But within a few million years, one of the smaller species, fed up with its humble, earthly existence and sick of being continually forced to leap from trees and boulders to escape predators, had drastically changed.

And so evolved the strange-looking *Archaeopteryx*, possibly the first 'bird' and only one of many reptiles whose scales were to evolve into feathers, enabling them to fly.

It wasn't for some further 95 million years that humankind emerged, to forever look skywards with a jealous admiration of all winged creatures, especially the raptors, the birds of prey.

Raptors are found in all environments throughout Australia, and one such creature, which is still common in some urban areas, is the black-shouldered kite. This gull-sized member of the Accipitridae (family of eagles, hawks, harriers and kites), like all true birds of prey, has fine, razor-sharp talons to trap and grip prey, and a hooked beak to slice and tear flesh.

Against blue sky, the black-shouldered kite (*Elanus axillaris*) is most resplendent in its white, black and silvery grey plumage, as it sits atop the stag head of an old dead tuart tree. Bombarded by magpies and wattlebirds, this solitary hunter quietly surveys the immediate area for insects, amphibians, small reptiles or rodents.

Although it is also conspicuous over open paddocks and grasslands, the kite is seen mostly along roadways in the coastal environs of Perth and in open areas. These partly nomadic birds appear to be abundant one moment and scarce the next as they

seek and exploit available food resources.

It hunts mainly after dawn or towards dusk by sailing out from a vantage point, fluttering and gliding on upswept wings. Its deep red owl-like eyes, enhanced by a black plumage stripe, fix onto prey some 20 metres below. Hovering gracefully and skilfully, often with the tail down and wings beating almost backwards and forwards, the bird prepares to attack. Then, with wings high above its back, it plummets, sometimes pausing in mid-air to stabilise and plummet again, finally disappearing into grass and thicket, where strong thickly scaled legs and sharp, dagger-like talons perform a *coup de grâce*.

During the long breeding season between April and November, black-shouldered kites may be seen in aerial courtship as they soar and flutter together. With amorous aggression, the male dives at the female, whereupon she rolls in mid-air, locks claws with her mate and carries him whirling down, to rise and perform again and again.

While people view raptors as a source of awe and inspiration, we have also caused them to suffer persistent persecution, habitat loss and pesticide poisoning.

While attitudes are changing, most of humankind still has mixed feelings toward these predators, which know no human morals. They are simply beautiful creatures, chained by countless centuries of evolution to an instinctive pattern of action.



BY JOHN HUNTER

### DID YOU KNOW?

- Typical kites have the basal joints of the inner toe fused to form a single unit.
- The Accipitridae are members of the Falconiformes and share a number of characteristics with the true falcons, including a pointed, decurved bill, gripping feet and external nostrils located in a fleshy cere.
- Black-shouldered kites are usually found paired and, with an abundance of food, breed rapidly. Occasionally, a female will incubate a second clutch (sometimes with a new mate) while the male is left to feed the newly fledged young.



# LANDSCOPE

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*The threat from below . . . How can we defeat our greatest environmental enemy? Read about salinity and what we can do about it on p. 10.*



*Dryandra, one of the last refuges of the native wildlife. Now you can experience this woodland wonderland for yourself. Find out how on p. 36.*



*Europeans brought alien plants and animals to WA's rangelands, which have since become degraded. What can be done? See p. 42.*



*One of the best aids to plant conservation is completely invisible. See our plant DNA story on p. 18.*



*How old is the Stirling Range? Read about this stunning area in our story on p. 48.*

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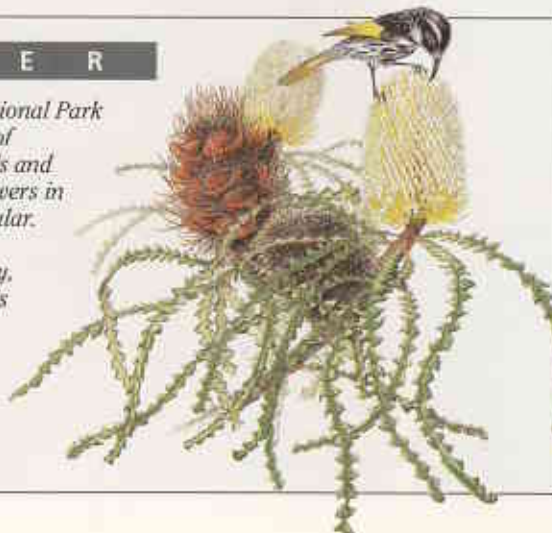
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## COVER

*The Fitzgerald River National Park boasts a startling array of habitats, mammals, birds and other species. Its wildflowers in spring are often spectacular. Our story on p. 28 is a fascinating tale of variety, beauty, and threat in this aged land.*

*Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky*



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