on the WILd SiDe

From wildflower collecting to trafficking in wild animals, wildlife is open to all manner of commercial exploitation, some of it legal, some of it not, and all of it subject to strict regulation. The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) has the role of ensuring compliance with the laws that protect Western Australia's wildlife, and for CALM's 30-strong team of wildlife officers, protecting wildlife in the bush is more about dealing with people than with animals.

By David Mell and Mandy Clews

Albany-based Wildlife Officer Peter Collins was feeling a bit weary by the time he had twice waded out chest-deep in the Southern Ocean to get an accurate tape-measurement of the length of a half-submerged stranded sperm whale. The animal was dead, but an important part of a wildlife officer's job is to collect morphometric data (size, shape, form etc.) on beached cetaceans for scientific research. As he pulled himself up onto the rocks in the shallows, he turned to look back at the animal, just in time to see an enormous white pointer shark launch itself out of the water onto the whale carcass to feed, followed closely by a second huge white pointer. Seconds earlier he had been wading chest-deep alongside the whale at the point where the sharks emerged.

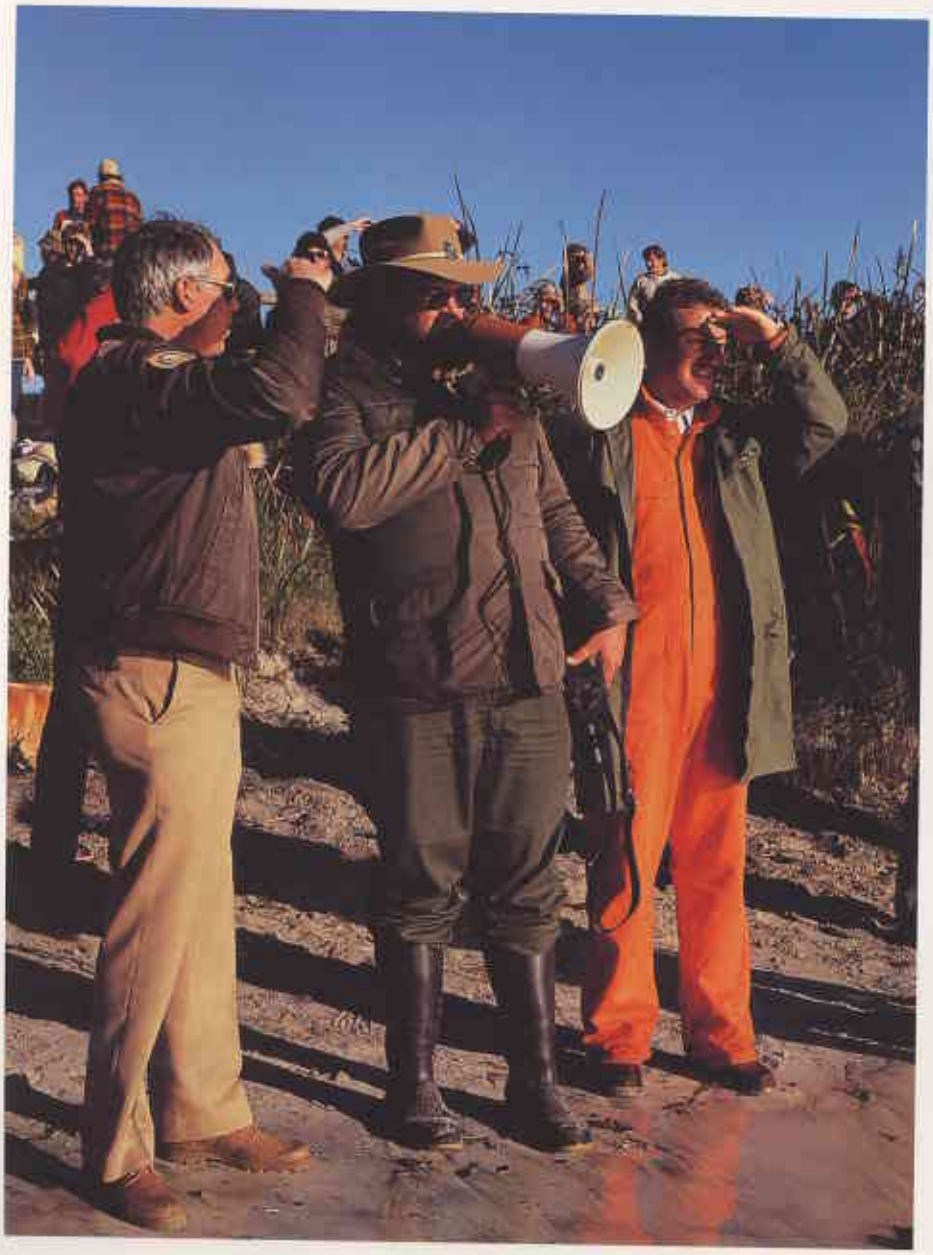
Peter was understandably a little shaken, especially when he realised the sharks had been present the whole time he was in the water.

Most wildlife officers have had many memorable experiences with fascinating wild animals, such as desperate whales stranded on a beach, prehistoric-looking leopard seals with flip-top heads and massive teeth, venomous snakes or rogue crocodiles. But by far the most unpredictable situations that arise in the day-to-day job involve encounters with people. Whether it's organising surveillance to intercept animal traffickers, coordinating volunteers at a mass whale stranding, or intervening on the spot where members of the public need to be advised of 'the rules', the wildlife officer's main focus is usually human behaviour and how best to manage it.

Wildlife officers—30 of them, located in a regional network covering Kununurra, Broome, Karratha, Carnarvon, Geraldton, Moora Merredin, Kalgoorlie, Narrogin, Bunbury, Albany, Esperance, and the Perth metropolitan area—emphasise public awareness, offer guidance and assistance, and monitor wildlife-related industry (such as whale-watching, wildflower collection, or kangaroo-harvesting), interceding, wherever possible, before any offence occurs to keep operations on track. To do so, they require highly specialised training. They are skilled in flora and fauna identification, and knowledgeable about ecology, habitat and animal behaviour. They are trained in interpersonal communication and they use highly specialised equipment, such as transponders and DNA sampling kits, and many of them have scientific qualifications.

WHERE PEOPLE MEET ANIMALS

Each year, CALM's wildlife officers receive thousands of calls asking for help dealing with injured or orphaned animals. In most cases, where the animal has already been rescued, the problem can be dealt with by putting callers in touch with volunteers who care for injured wildlife. Where the problem is beyond the capability of volunteer carers or the animal has not yet been captured, wildlife officers are called to perform the rescue operation. They may find themselves disentangling pelicans from fishing lines, attending to wild ducks suffering from botulism or



Previous page
Volunteers are a vital component of CALM's nature conservation effort. Here, concerned volunteers take shifts to stand in freezing water to support a recovering whale.

Left: Rescuing marine mammals is a team effort. Coordinating staff and volunteers, and ensuring their safety, is just one of the roles of wildlife officers.
Photos – Jiri Lochman

blue-green algae poisoning, capturing and relocating crocodiles, or dealing with mass strandings of cetaceans.

Wildlife officers also have a responsibility to educate the public to minimise harm from dangerous fauna—this may include school talks on appreciating wildlife, and various strategies to protect people from swooping magpies during breeding seasons. They also monitor Western Australia's conservation estate to ensure that wildlife is not disturbed by human activity.

LOOKING OUT FOR THE WHALES

One area of increasing importance in protecting and conserving wildlife is in the whale-watching industry. Whale-watching tourism has undergone rapid growth in recent years. As whale populations have gradually increased, migrating animals are 'stopping off' more often on their journey, calling in at sheltered points along the south coast and near Perth. Consequently, migrating whales are becoming more and more accessible to boatloads of tourists.

While public fascination with whales may be good news for marine conservation, whales are sensitive animals and care has to be taken, particularly with mothers and calves, to ensure they are not disturbed by carelessly navigated boats. Every whale-watching tour operator requires a licence. This sets out strict conditions, including a minimum distance to be maintained from the animals and how to approach them so as to minimise the disturbance. CALM's wildlife officers liaise closely with the industry, maintaining regular contact with operators from the moment they receive their licenses.

New licensees are personally briefed by a wildlife officer to ensure they understand the terms of the licence and to give them the opportunity to ask questions. Officers then arrange times to go out on the operators' boats to give them in-the-field advice about how to comply with the conditions. Once the licensees are in operation, wildlife officers carry out a program of monitoring at sea. Where necessary, they may board boats to speak to operators to remind them about the regulations. Wildlife officers also talk to boat operators' clients about whale behaviour, biology and natural history, and are often asked to demonstrate the recording and playback of humpback whale songs using a hydrophone. Finally, CALM conducts an annual seminar for whale-watching tourism operators, bringing them up to date with any new regulations and any new scientific information that may be useful to pass on to clients.

Whale-watching industry liaison works well, because it is in the interest of operators for the whales to be behaving as naturally as possible. Any behaviour that upsets the whales could in the first instance make for dangerous conditions on the water, and eventually could drive the whales away, and with them, the commercial viability of the industry. Other areas where wildlife officers maintain industry liaison include kangaroo management, crocodile farming, emu farming, wildflower collection and aviculture. Similar principles apply, with officers making sure regulations are clearly understood, and then keeping a friendly eye on operations to ensure people abide by them.

Above: Cockatoo nests are checked regularly by wildlife officers in the fight against illegal nest robbing and bird trafficking.
Photo – Max Lawrence

Right: As part of a strategy to increase the chance of survival for stranded whales, wildlife officers ask volunteers to adopt a whale until its release.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

AT THE 'POINTY END' OF THE ACT

Meanwhile, each year, wildlife officers submit several hundred reports of breaches of the Wildlife Conservation Act. The incidents range from relatively minor matters that are dealt with by issuing a formal written warning, to more serious matters where offenders are charged and wildlife officers are called to give evidence in a court of law. The most serious cases involve the trafficking of native birds and reptiles overseas and large-scale destruction of flora. In a recent case, an offender was fined $15,000 for his part in the taking of protected flora on Crown land, and a similar but smaller-scale offender was fined $4,000.

There is also frequent liaison with wildlife authorities in other States. For example, CALM is currently investigating trafficking of black cockatoos and rough-scaled pythons, believed to have been taken from the wild in Western Australia, that have ended up in other States.

BUILDING A KNOWLEDGE BASE

Many of the activities of CALM wildlife officers present opportunities to add to our knowledge of native flora and fauna. For example, few individuals or agencies outside CALM have the knowledge, expertise or resources to deal with stranded whales or dolphins. As the main agency to respond to such events over the years, CALM has been able to build a growing expertise in dealing with this little-understood phenomenon (see 'Saving the Whales', *LANDSCOPE*, 1986–87). Officers attend 20–30 stranding events a year, including individual animals as well as groups. The events that really grab headlines and get noticed tend to be mass strandings. Since 1985, there have been 12 of these, several of which have occurred in the Augusta area. The scientific information CALM has amassed over that time has shed some light on these events and the species involved.

Strandings are situations where gathering scientific information and rescuing animals are equally important. During these events wildlife officers employ their technical skills in identifying the species they are dealing with and collecting data and tissue samples. They also fulfil an important role in the Incident Control System, using 'people' skills in coordinating the efforts of masses of volunteers under stressful, exhausting and sometimes dangerous conditions. These volunteers are untrained, ordinary people, with big hearts and a lot of commitment, who frequently make a heavy emotional investment in the outcome of the rescue effort. Wildlife officers watch both the animals and the people very carefully, to ensure that the volunteers are not becoming too stressed or tired, as their safety is paramount. When beached animals are beyond recovery and a decision is made that they need to be euthanased, the volunteers, who have been partners and stakeholders in the operation from the beginning, are fully informed and involved. There is a formal protocol for this, where the matter is fully discussed and explained, and volunteers are encouraged to express their opinions and feelings. It is a very distressing situation for volunteers and wildlife officers alike, but at the end of the day such decisions

Above right: Wildlife officers check animals and discuss farm management with licensed emu farmers.
Photo – Max Lawrence

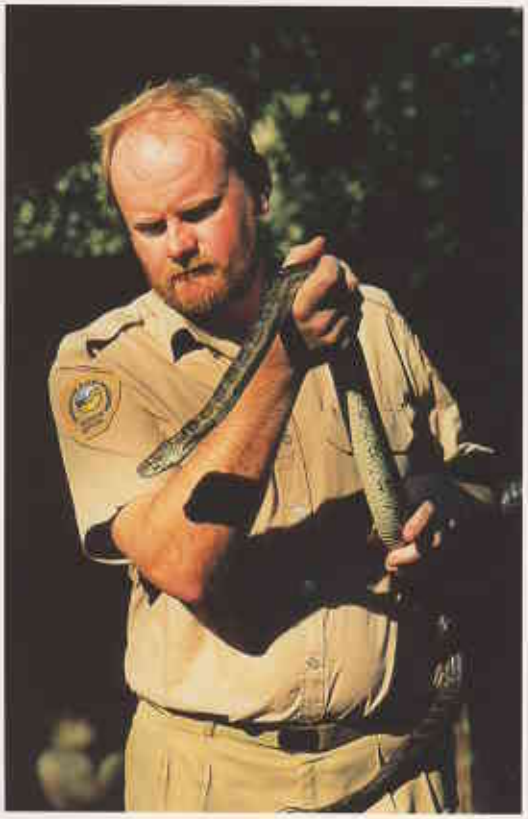
Right: The musk duck, once mistaken for a seal in a metropolitan lake!
Photo – Babs & Bert Wells/CALM

are made in the best interests of the animals so that their suffering is not prolonged.

STRANGE BUT TRUE

One thing can be said for the 'ups and downs' of protecting wildlife: there's never a dull moment. One lesson wildlife officers learn very early in their training is not to rely on the identification skills of well-meaning people. In any given year, they take thousands of telephone calls that remind them of this fact, and their tales could fill a book.

For example, a caller rang wildlife officers with a complaint that she could not go to work because it required walking past 'deadly birds'. It turned out that nesting swallows in the eaves of the office building were dropping down to escape and fly away as people approached. The caller had just watched the famous Hitchcock film *The Birds* on video and believed she was being attacked by a deadly pack of birds. Another caller rang to say there was an 'alligator' under her car, which turned out to be a bobtail skink. Another excited caller rang saying he had just captured 'a death adder with legs', another bobtail skink.



Wildlife officers also received reports of a seal living in Lake Monger, in the middle of the Perth metropolitan area. Despite assurances that this was highly unlikely, the callers were insistent. An investigation revealed the culprits to be large male musk ducks, an unusual-looking species that sits low in the water.

In other incidents, a reported stranded dolphin on a Perth beach turned out to be a dead groper, seven stranded 'baby seals' on a beach at Safety Bay turned out to be sea slugs that had washed ashore, and a huge deadly snake on a doormat threatening a panicky caller was a wall skink (wall skinks grow to only 10 centimetres in length).

Nevertheless, wildlife officers cannot afford to become cynical about their work. They remember the incident of the Albany dugong. A report that a dead dugong had been washed up on a beach near Albany, several thousand kilometres away from its normal habitat in the warm, shallow tropical waters of the north-west, seemed unbelievable. When the local wildlife officer went to check, he was able to confirm that the unfortunate animal was indeed a dugong. It must have been brought down the coast in the Leeuwin current, which swept it around the Cape and deposited it on a beach east of Albany.

It was a thought-provoking experience, one that served to remind wildlife officers of the variability of the work they do, and the endless possibilities within it. Wildlife officers certainly don't want people to be discouraged from reporting what they see happening just because they think they might not be taken seriously. Nothing is discounted; anything is possible, and things turn up in the strangest places. It's all in a day's work.

Above left: Reptiles, such as this carpet python, are a prime target for the black market. When apprehended by wildlife officers, reptile traffickers are charged and may be subject to heavy penalties.
Photo – Max Lawrence

Left: Not 'death adders with legs' or baby alligators, but harmless bobtail skinks. Wildlife officers are keen to educate the public about our native wildlife.
Photo – Babs & Bert Wells/CALM

David Mell is Chief Wildlife Officer with CALM and can be contacted on (08) 9334 0292 or by e-mail davidm@calm.wa.gov.au

Mandy Clews is a freelance writer and regular contributor to *LANDSCOPE*.

Can WA's sharefarming plantations also help fight greenhouse gases? See 'Farming Carbon' on page 17.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME FOURTEEN NUMBER 1, SPRING1998

With increased numbers of travellers, the Canning Stock Route is in need of some TLC. See 'A Track Winding Back' on page 10.

The job of a CALM Wildlife Officer is as much about dealing with people as it is about protecting our native wildlife. See 'On the Wild Side' on page 23.

The Esperance Lakes Nature Reserves are a haven for water birds and a significant international wetland. See 'Picture the Lakes' on page 36.

There are billions of tiny white shells lining the 150-km Shell Beach in Shark Bay. But why are there so many concentrated here? Find out more on page 49.

FEATURES

A TRACK WINDING BACK
MANDY CLEWS.....10

FARMING CARBON
SYD SHEA.....17

ON THE WILD SIDE
DAVID MELL.....23

BOUNCING BACK
KEITH MORRIS, ROGER ARMSTRONG, PETER ORELL AND MITZI VANCE.....28

PICTURE THE LAKES
MARGARET KIERATH AND KLAUS TIEDEMANN.....36

PEOPLE PROTECTING PLANTS
ANDREW BROWN.....43

UNEARTHING THE SECRETS OF SHELL BEACH
PADDY BERRY & PHILLIP PLAYFORD.....49

REGULARS

BUSH TELEGRAPH.....4

ENDANGERED
ALBATROSSES.....53

URBAN ANTICS
CHESS KNIGHTS IN ARMOUR.....54

COVER

Two years into the Western Shield program and already three Western Australian native species have been brought back from the edge of extinction, and others are growing in abundance. 'Bouncing Back', on page 28, looks at the successes of the first two years and at where we hope to be at the turn of the century.

Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky

Executive Editor: Ron Kawalilak
Managing Editor: Ray Bailey
Editor: David Gough
Story Editors: Mandy Clews, Verna Costello, David Gough, Nigel Higgs, Mitzi Vance, Penny Walsh
Scientific/technical advice: Andrew Burbidge, Ian Abbott, Paul Jones and staff of CALM's Science and Information Division
Design and production: Tiffany Aberin, Maria Duthie, Sue Marais
Illustration: Ian Dickinson, Gooitzen van der Meer
Marketing: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (08) 9334 0296 Fax: (08) 9334 0498
Subscription enquiries: ☎ (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437
Colour Separation by Colourbox Digital
Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print

Visit *LANDSCOPE* online on our award-winning Internet site *NatureBase* at http://www.calm.wa.gov.au/

Published by Dr S Shea, Executive Director
Department of Conservation and Land Management,
50 Hayman Road, Como, Western Australia