

URBAN ANTICS



Duck Tales

I've got a soft spot for ducks, and so has the world, it seems, with millions of people loving those soft-core villains Donald, Daffy and nappy clad Baby Huey.

What is it then that endears these webbed wonders to little kids and adults alike; the huge flat feet, the wide-lipped bill, the ridiculous waddle, or the 'wet desert boots on a polished floor' sounding voice? Maybe its because most ducks appear never to get wet while swimming, fly with astonishing speed and yet, at spring times, appear terrestrial stumblebums on their feet. Besides, what other wild animal gives you the 'bottoms-up' while you're having a picnic at the lake?

Many ducks inhabit the wetlands of suburban Perth, but the largest local native species is the Australian shelduck (*Tadorna tadornoides*), sometimes called the mountain duck or grunter (not one of my relations).

Last spring, the Australian shelduck seems to have been more obvious in and around the coastal suburbs than in other years. During summer, large numbers of the birds congregate on inland waterways and farm dams. With the onset of winter, they disperse in all directions to find territories and prepare for breeding. Early morning walkers and joggers are quite amazed when they come face to face with these birds grazing

the grasslands, ovals and playing fields of the suburbs.

The Australian shelduck is unmistakable on the ground or on the water. It is a large, stocky, small-headed duck with an erect stance and legs well set forward; a large white collar and chestnut breast contrast with a dark body and head, unlike any other Australian waterfowl.

Equally at home in terrestrial and aquatic habitats, the ducks seek an open aspect, and are happy on large wetlands, mudflats, wide beaches, the open water of small swamps, salt lakes and coastal lagoons. The birds tolerate high salinity, but need freshwater seepages or wetlands for drinking.

Shelducks are common but sparsely spread over the south-west of the State. While they breed throughout their range, those that arrive in suburban haunts search out nest sites, usually in hollow trees but sometimes in limestone crevices on island shores or beneath saltmarsh shrubs. A brood territory up to several kilometres away, near to or containing fresh water, is selected and regularly patrolled by the male.

During September, a pair of ducks commandeered a huge tuart tree in the Wembley golf course. Like a pair of F-111s, they sorted out a multitude of bickering parrots, cockatoos, magpies and ravens to successfully breed four young.

On Matilda Bay foreshore, two adults and six young successfully clambered down Mt Eliza (Kings Park) and ran the gauntlet of Mounts Bay road traffic to graze on the Swan River foreshore. At one stage, the male duck was observed aerial dive bombing silver gulls as his spouse and charges headed out into the safety of open water.

Alas, there is always one sad story. In the suburb of St Johns Wood, a new ornamental water sump with fountains, waterfalls and vegetation was filled and activated, a most impressive piece of landscape architecture. Within a few days, out of Bold Park strutted two ducks and their new family. Into the cool fresh water plopped the young.

Unfortunately, no one had foreseen the possibility that a bunch of flightless fluffy ducklings would use the pond and be trapped by vertical lipped walls. Such is the situation where we all must be aware of the requirements to cater for natural events and wild creatures in our urban areas. Thank goodness stone ramps are now in place ready for next year's breeding season.

BY JOHN HUNTER

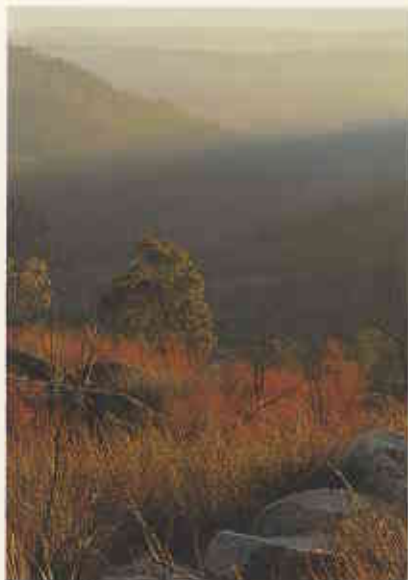
DID YOU KNOW?

- *The Australian shelduck derives its name from 'sheld' (parti-coloured) or the old Norse word 'skjoldi' meaning shield and refers to the shield-like band across the breast.*
- *Unlike to most ducks, the shelduck walks very fast and strongly on land.*
- *Besides seeds and terrestrial and aquatic plants, the ducks consume mussels, molluscs, crustaceans, water beetles, other insects and small fish.*

LANDSCOPE

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This land, where the Avon River cuts through the Darling Range, was home to WA's most notorious bushranger. His story is on page 10.



Just when everyone thought it was extinct, this small mammal suddenly reappeared. See 'Dibblers' on page 28.



100,000 hectares of bluegums by the year 2000. Was it a realistic target? See 'From Blue sky to Blue Chip' on page 35.



'What about the Animals', on page 21, discusses early findings from the Kingston Study.



'Karla Wongi: Fire Talk', on page 48, is a Nyungar perspective on the use of fire in the south-west of WA.

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COVER

One of Western Australia's best-known woodlands may be under threat now, but research by CALMScience Division staff is playing a key role in safeguarding their future. See 'Small Steps to Save Salmon Gums', on page 17

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