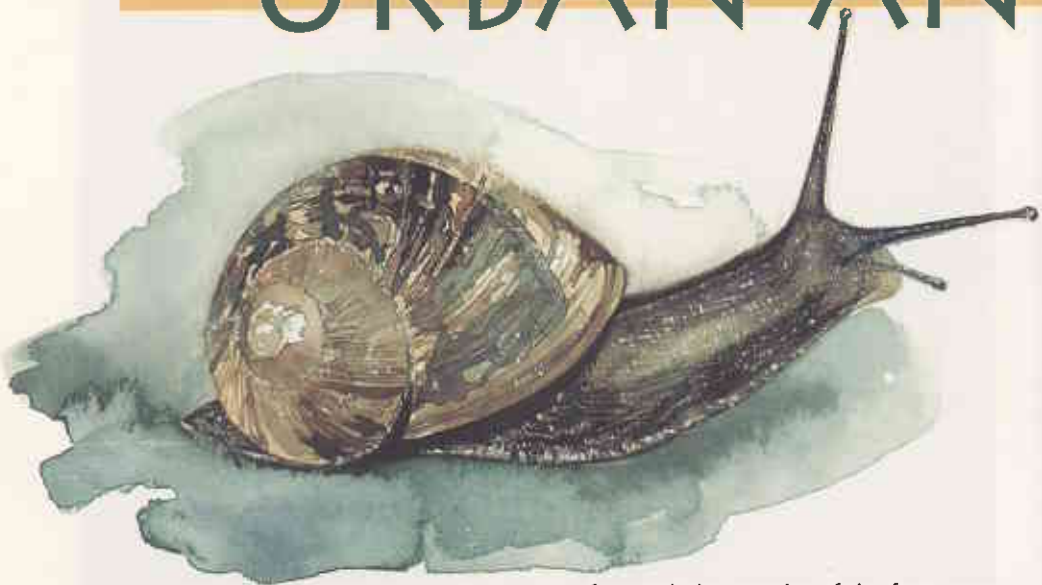
URBAN ANTICS



BIGFOOT TALES

Winter again. The air is crisp and washed clean of insects and dust.

With no dust and smudges on the recently cleaned sliding glass doors, the crystal clear views of glistening garden foliage are superb except for the 'snail trail' outline of WA left by a night-wandering slug on the exterior of the glass. 'Bother,' I mutter.

The generally mild Mediterranean climate around Perth is ideal for snails and slugs. They don't, however, fancy extreme cold, wind and heavy rain or sunlight and heat. In summer, they are active mainly after a thunderstorm or damp night, but from late autumn on, the occasional shower and cooler weather triggers 'full steam ahead' for feeding, mating, egg-laying and testing the patience of householders and landowners.

Snails and slugs are from the phylum (major division) of the animal kingdom called molluscs. In turn, they are from the largest class of molluscs known as univalves (Latin, meaning 'one shell') or gastropods (Greek, meaning 'belly and foot'). While the two types of animal are similar in structure and biology, snails have an exterior shell of calcium carbonate, covered in a protein coat that gives the colour and pattern, and slugs generally have none.

Terrestrial gastropods move by gliding along on a muscular 'foot'. This muscle constantly secretes mucus, which later dries to form the silvery 'slime trail' that is a clue to their presence. In propelling themselves forward, the muscles of the foot move backward, in a wavelike motion.

During hot dry weather, snails seek hiding places under garden foliage, general debris, fences and cracks, where they aestivate by sealing themselves in their shells with a parchment-like membrane. Slugs can lose 40 per cent of their body weight very quickly, but they compensate by being able to absorb water easily through the foot. Their hiding places are usually minute, seemingly impossible crevices in soil, bricks and plant stems.

The backyards and gardens of the Perth area have more than their fair share of land snails and slugs. Since the arrival of the first European settlers in 1829, we have imported several exotic species, which are those often seen at night demolishing newly planted seedlings or infesting Fido's bowl in search of minute scraps of meat. They also have the annoying habit of getting into alfresco letterboxes and chewing through mail. Any paper products are a tasty source of cellulose and starch, evident by smooth-edged holes rasped in your favourite magazine cover.

By far the most widespread land snail is the exotic common brown garden snail (*Helix aspersa*). This large gastropod (with a shell more than 30 millimetres in diameter) originates from Europe, and is referred to as *escargot* on some restaurant menus. Next most obvious is the white Italian (*Theba pisana*), with a shell usually less than 20 millimetres and often with fine brown concentric lines. It usually comes in plague numbers and needs alkaline sandy soils mainly near the coast.

Also, there is the small, pointed snail (*Cochlicella barbara*) with a greyish-brown conical shell less than 10 millimetres, and a larger relative often found during the day under the broad leaves of lawn thistles or in reticulation sprinkler holes.

Most obvious at night, but usually completely hidden during the day, are various species of slugs. Probably the most common is *Deroceras reticulartum*, a slimy beast about 50 millimetres long, with a voracious appetite. There is one relatively unknown tiny native snail found in our gardens. *Paralaoma caputspinulae* has a disc-like ribbed shell about two millimetres in size and is occasionally found under blades of buffalo lawn.

At present, it is not known if our fertilizers, pesticides or feral land molluscs, have displaced any native species. It would be nice to think there are still some hiding, waiting to be discovered.

BY JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- *A univalve has a radula, a horny strip with teeth on its surface to rasp food. Like finger nail growth, as the front edge wears out, it is continually renewed.*
- *Snails and slugs are hermaphrodites. Both members of a mating couple can lay eggs.*
- *Common garden snails excavate a small hole into moist ground several times a year and deposit 20-120 spherical pearl-white eggs, each 4mm in diameter. They hatch in 2-4 weeks.*

Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME FOURTEEN NUMBER 4, WINTER 1999

What does the future hold for our karri forest? Research provides some interesting insights. See page 18.

The photographic exellence of WA team Babs and Bert Wells was driven by a love of the job. See page 10.

Many WA women have played important roles in the conservation of our natural resources. Some of them feature in our story on page 41.

'Growing Gnangara Park', on page 35, continues the story of WA's largest proposed outer suburban native parkland.

Partnerships are important. Many private sector businesses and individuals are active partners in protecting our natural heritage. See page 47.

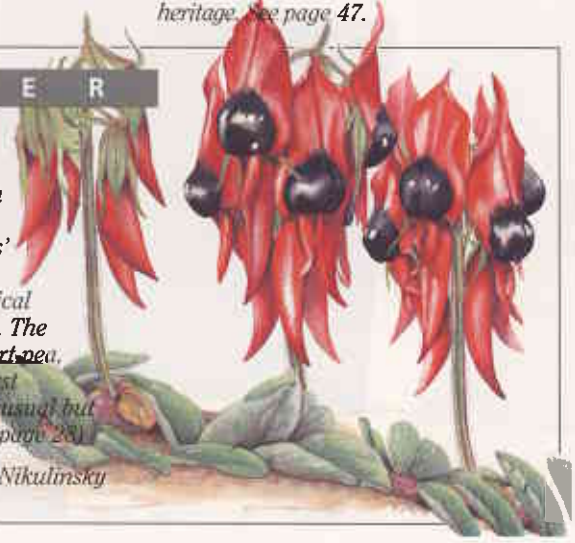
FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

The Dampier collection returns briefly to Western Australia for an exhibition at the WA Museum. The specimens' scientific interest is limited, but their historical significance is immense. The illustration is of the Sturt pea, and Dampier was the first person to collect this unusual but magnificent plant. (See page 28)

Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky



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