



# Discovering the Swan

Perth's Swan River is a recreational playground, attracting walkers, divers, windsurfers, picnickers, fishers and boaters. A new pocket-sized, full-colour book, *Discovering the Swan River and the Swan Estuary Marine Park*, is an excellent guide to many of its attractions, while a new management plan provides a blueprint for the conservation of the marine park and its adjacent nature reserves for years to come.



BY CAROLYN THOMSON-DANS, PETER DANS AND ANN STORRIE

The Swan River and its foreshores provide habitats for a large variety of plants and animals. Today, the river is a highly altered environment with relatively little of its original fringing vegetation left. However, three important reserves collectively form the Swan Estuary Marine Park. The park is made up of 190 hectares at Alfred Cove, adjacent to Attadale and Applecross; a 40 hectare area at Pelican Point in Crawley; and 95 hectares at Milyu, adjacent to the Como foreshore and Kwinana Freeway. These areas remain a haven for wildlife, especially the migratory wading birds that travel there from as far afield as Siberia.

At Alfred Cove there are a number of vantage points for viewing more than 140 species of flying visitors and residents. The semi-enclosed waters hide shell deposits dating back 6,000 years, as well as living shellfish sought after by the 33 species of wading birds. The seagrass beds adjacent to the mudflats support many of the animals on which



waders depend for food, and they are an important nursery area for fish and prawns. As well as the migratory waders, Alfred Cove is a happy hunting ground for ibises, egrets and other waterbirds.

At Pelican Point, you can see the birds and vegetation from an observation platform reached from Australia II Drive.

Milyu is the Aboriginal name for

samphire, and the main physical feature of the reserve is a small peninsula vegetated with sedges and samphire. Despite its proximity to the freeway, this area provides excellent feeding and resting areas for waders and other waterbirds. They can be seen from the beach or from the foreshore path. You can almost always see Australian pelicans at this day roost site.

All three reserves lie within 20 minutes drive from central Perth. Depending on which area you are visiting, you can drive to the nearest car park and walk to the foreshore. Birdwatching is popular and there are heavily used dual use paths (for the shared use of pedestrians and cyclists) along the scenic river foreshore. There are also information panels at the Milyu Nature Reserve, which is cared for by children from South Perth Primary School.

## MIGRATORY WADERS

Up to 10,000 migratory wading birds visit the Swan Estuary Marine Park each summer, coming from as far afield as Mongolia and Siberia.



**Previous page**  
**Main:** Aboriginal people once camped, fished and hunted along the Swan River.  
 Photo - Rob Olver  
**Inset:** The greenshank, one of 33 species of migratory wader protected under international treaties, uses the Swan Estuary Marine Park during the Australian summer.  
 Photo - Bill Belson/Lochman Transparencies

**Above:** Alfred Cove attracts the largest number of migratory waders of any site in the Swan River.  
 Photo - Jon Green/CALM

Thirty-three species of wader are protected under international treaties, which bind signatory nations to protect the birds and their habitat in all the countries through which they pass.

Most migratory waders congregate in flocks, jabbing their bills into shallow flats to obtain worms, snails, insects and minute crustaceans. The estuarine mudflats protected in the marine park contain high concentrations of food that replenish the energy of the exhausted birds after their long flight south. The birds move between the intertidal flats of the three areas in the marine park according to where feeding and roosting sites are available.

Different species arrive at varying times between August and November. Some of the birds sport their breeding plumage when they arrive. Others will moult to their breeding glory in February. Most waders will have left the Perth region by late March.

The red-necked stint (*Calidris ruficollis*) is one of the most abundant transequatorial waders. In some places elsewhere in Australia it arrives in tens of thousands. Despite its unprepossessing appearance, the red-necked stint is a remarkable bird. These tiny creatures, just 15 centimetres long and weighing only 30 to 40 grams, migrate from their breeding grounds in north-eastern Siberia and Alaska to spend summer in feeding grounds in Australia and south-east Asia. Their journey takes them through Mongolia, China and Japan. In March and April each year the majority will return to Siberia for the northern summer. The younger birds will often remain behind.

Other migratory waders that feed and roost in the Swan Estuary Marine Park include the bar-tailed godwit, whimbrel, grey plover, greenshank, common sandpiper, sharp-tailed sandpiper, red knot and curlew sandpiper.

### NEW MANAGEMENT PLAN

A management plan has just been released for the Swan Estuary Marine Park and its adjacent nature reserves. The plan was prepared by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), who are the park managers, on behalf of the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority (NPNCA) and the Marine Parks and Reserves Authority



(MRPA). It lays out a management strategy for the next 10 years.

The plan proposes the construction of a boardwalk for wildlife observation near Point Waylen looking back into Alfred Cove, with views of waterbird feeding and resting areas. The plan also advocates extending existing fencing to enclose Alfred Cove and Point Waylen and hence protect its wildlife from feral animals and indiscriminate use. A self-closing gate would allow access to the boardwalk.

In the past, the nature reserves adjacent to the three marine park localities have been greatly altered by weeds and excess landfill. The management plan puts forward a vision of restoring the original landscape and vegetation associations as much as possible, using historical photographs for inspiration. It is planned to re-establish native species, including flooded gum (*Eucalyptus rudis*) and

**Top:** The tiny red-necked stint is the most common migratory wader seen in the Swan Estuary Marine Park. Photo - Babs & Bert Wells/CALM

**Above:** You can almost always see Australian pelicans at Milyu (South Perth) in the Swan Estuary Marine Park. Photo - Jiri Lochman

salt sheoak (*Casuarina obesa*) in areas where they once occurred, while removing weeds, other introduced species and excess landfill.

The most significant threat to the values of the reserve system is disturbance of the waders and waterbirds. The plan proposes several strategies to address this issue and some have already been implemented. For instance, jet skis are now prohibited from the waters of the marine park and



CALM has sought the support of the Department of Transport to restrict the speeds of all powered vessels to eight knots. Additionally, powered and remote controlled vessels will not be permitted in the special purpose (wildlife conservation) zone of the marine park. These measures will dramatically reduce both vessel noise and wash, which are significant forms of disturbance.

Disturbance from pets has been recognised and new strategies are proposed for the whole reserve system. Creating an awareness of

**Top:** Bottlenose dolphins often thrill onlookers in the Swan River estuary, when they swim close to shore.

**Above:** Blue manna crabs are common in all estuaries of south-western Australia.

**Left:** The Western Australian seahorse is a diver's delight and is common in many areas of the Swan River.  
Photos – Ann Storrie

the impacts that uncontrolled pets can have on reserve values is paramount. Dogs are not permitted in nature reserves in Western Australia, however, this arrangement has not been well understood or enforced in the reserve system. Dogs exercising off leads can present significant disturbance to feeding waders and waterbirds. If feeding is disturbed to a large extent the birds may not be able to satisfy their energy requirements, which may contribute to a decline in numbers. The City of South Perth has implemented very workable local laws to minimise disturbance by dogs at Milyu, and CALM is currently working with the City of Melville to implement similar arrangements to minimise disturbance at Alfred Cove.

The management plan also highlights the need to fully explore the impacts that recreational prawning may have on reserve values. There is some evidence that the activity may trample and otherwise disturb the small crustaceans, worms and the like that are the main food source for waders. The plan proposes a research or monitoring program to fully investigate this possibility. One aspect of recreational prawning that can certainly impact on the birds is the dumping of by-catch at the water's edge. This smelly practice attracts feral cats and foxes. Public education is required to reduce the impact of these activities on the conservation values of the reserve system. For instance, returning the waste to the water (below the low water mark) and the use of bins will reduce the impact of prawning activities.

Fortunately, many other recreational uses of the Swan River have been found to have little, if any, impact on the environment. They include sailing, line fishing, walking along the foreshore, windsurfing and diving. It is these activities which are the main focus of CALM's new pocket-sized book, *Discovering the Swan River and the Swan Estuary Marine Park*.

## UNDERWATER WORLD

Divers in Western Australia are lucky to be able to scuba dive in a river that runs through a capital city. Many rivers and estuaries elsewhere in the world are so badly polluted, and so overcrowded with boat traffic, that



scuba diving, snorkelling and swimming would not be considered. The Swan River, however, is still relatively clean, and the estuarine marine life is exceptional. Seagrasses, anemones, tubeworms, colourful nudibranchs, octopuses, blue manna crabs, decorator crabs, prawns, catfish, gobies and bottlenose dolphins are all common inhabitants of the river.

Many dive schools use sites in the river for teaching, not just beginners, but also students doing commercial dive courses. No matter what the weather conditions, there will be no swell or severe chop on the river foreshore. Sometimes if the tide is flowing, you may have to be careful of a current out from the bank. Check at

the river's edge before swimming out too far. *Discovering the Swan River and the Swan Estuary Marine Park* has photographs and information that will help divers find and identify many plants and animals that live in the river, including the Western Australian seahorse. It also has maps and descriptions of excellent dive sites at The Coombs in Mosman Park and Harvey Beach in North Fremantle.

## WINDSURFING

The Swan River provides boardsailors with varying styles and skill levels with a wide range of sailing opportunities. In effect, the whole river (limited only by water depth, boating traffic and clear wind) is available to boardsailors, however, you cannot launch directly into some areas and must sail your board to some locations to experience the conditions that they offer.

**Above:** The limestone cliffs at Blackwall Reach were spared from quarrying, unlike many other sites on the Swan River foreshore.  
Photo – Rob Olver

**Right:** The Swan River has some interesting, protected dive sites, which provide subjects for macro underwater photography.  
Photo – Ann Storrie





**Above:** Cycling and walking along the foreshore are the most popular recreational activities based around the Swan River.

**Right:** Windsurfing is an extremely popular sport on the Swan River.  
Photos – Ann Storrie



Melville Beach Road, on the foreshore at Applecross, is perhaps the best year round location for boardsailing on the river. There are extensive grassy rigging areas along almost the entire length of Melville Beach Road and easy launching into shallow near-shore waters. These shallow waters are ideal for learning high performance manoeuvres such as water starts and high speed gybes. Should sailors fall, they can usually stand on the bottom and reorientate themselves. The orientation of Melville Beach Road makes it suitable for high performance sailing in any winds between the north (through the west) to the south. Beginners will find the location ideal in any wind direction as long as the strength is less than ten knots.

Another popular summer spot for both advanced and beginner boardsailors is Pelican Point. The shallow near-shore waters of Pelican Point offer similar benefits to Melville Beach Road with the addition of onshore showers, toilets and a mobile snack facility.

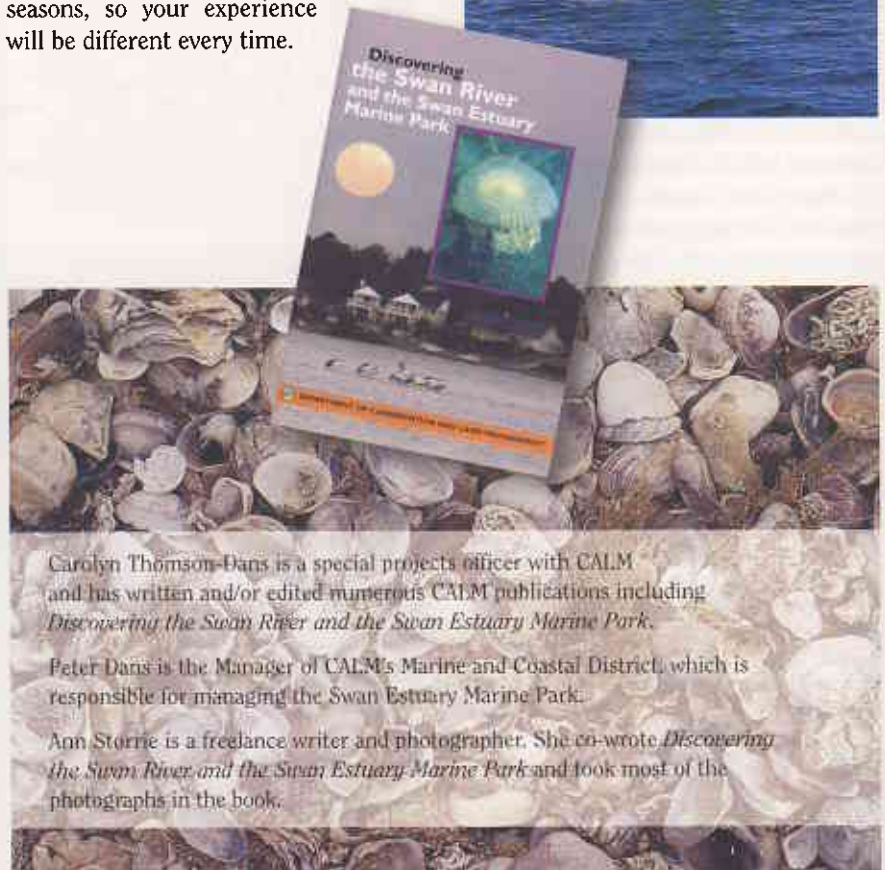
## WALKING

Undoubtedly the most popular recreational activity on the Swan River is walking along its shore. There are many places where you can see some of the original riverside landforms and vegetation. These include walks between Point Walter and Blackwall Reach and at Rocky Bay.

*Discovering the Swan River and the Swan Estuary Marine Park* has descriptions and maps of six wonderful walks along the river. Apart from the two walks mentioned above, the Freshwater Bay Walktrail, Pelican Point Walktrail, Between the Bridges Walk

and the Claremont Foreshore Walktrail are also featured in the book.

So what are you waiting for? If you like boating, diving, fishing, walking, cycling, windsurfing or birdwatching the Swan River offers boundless opportunities for recreation, and it is always changing with the seasons, so your experience will be different every time.



Carolyn Thomson-Dans is a special projects officer with CALM and has written and/or edited numerous CALM publications including *Discovering the Swan River and the Swan Estuary Marine Park*.

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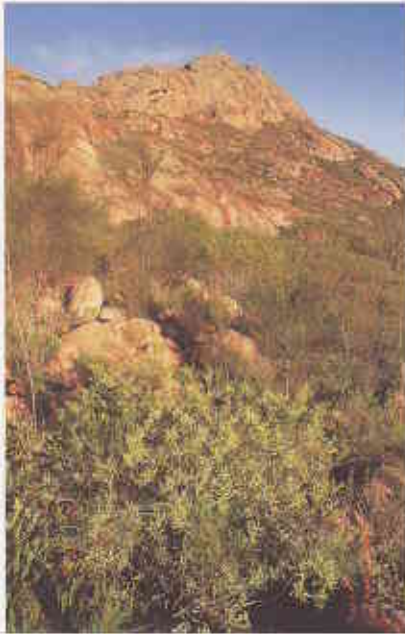
Ann Storrie is a freelance writer and photographer. She co-wrote *Discovering the Swan River and the Swan Estuary Marine Park* and took most of the photographs in the book.



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

# LANDSCOPE

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Peak Charles and Peak Eleanora, protected within Peak Charles National Park, form granite islands in a sea of bush. See page 10.



Butterflies have a short life span, but they bring pleasure to many people who visit Rottnest Island. See page 23.



The Swan River is a recreation area for humans and a home for migratory birds. See page 16.



A partnership between State and Commonwealth governments, and a group of pastoralists is helping to fill the gaps in the conservation estate. See page 43.



Many marine creatures have evolved ingenious survival methods. See page 49.

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## COVER

Well-known Australian artist Ken Done captures the colour and turbulence of the horizontal waterfalls on the Kimberley's Wandjina Coast.

Painting by Ken Done  
Racing Tide, Kimberley Coast, May 1999  
(51 x 36 cm) oil crayon and gouache  
on paper.



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