

URBAN ANTICS

Tree Top Mice

Black cumulonimbus clouds envelope an horizon of thrashing eucalypts, even the rigid stagheads of tuart splinter and shatter under the onset of another winter storm.

In the valleys of the coastal districts, very large, long-dead trees containing invaluable nesting hollows, nooks and crannies, finally succumb to the forces of nature and thunder to the Earth, eventually to become the fodder of termites.

Among the voluminous canopies of marri, tuart and garden trees, passerines (or perching birds), drenched in the torrent of wind and rain, tighten their vice-like grip on bark and branch and prepare for a seasonal ride of violence.

One of the smallest passerines currently enduring the metropolitan winter is the spotted pardalote (*Pardalotus punctatus*). This tiny, dark-coloured, white-spotted bird about 10 centimetres long usually frequents the southern cooler eucalypt forests, but is now in its seasonal visit around Perth.

Also to be seen is the slightly bigger striated pardalote (*Pardalotus striatus*), which is more common around Perth during spring and summer, but shifts to open woodlands in the north and inland areas in winter. Its appearance is quite different to the spotted species by having a black crown usually streaked with white, a very stubby black tail, black wings with a white stripe and a bright yellow stripe above the eye.

Four species of pardalotes occur throughout Australia. The spotted and striated pardalotes contain several subspecies and, where subspecies overlap breeding ranges, there may be some resultant hybridisation within each species.

The migratory wandering of all pardalotes is attributed to the availability of favourite food types. As foliage-gleaning birds that feed almost exclusively in eucalypts, they have long legs and hop, run and creep though high foliage like mice. They are rarely seen as they fly bullet-like, and usually at least twice the height of the tallest trees, as they migrate.

During the warm placid days of spring and summer, the incessant sounds of 'chip-chip, chip-chip' by striated pardalotes have resulted in the occasional name, 'headache bird'. In preparation for nesting, they have been observed to climb house walls and enter open kitchen windows in search of spider webs, while the occupants sit to lunch.

In the precinct of CALM's Wildlife Research Centre at Woodvale, a striated pardalote nested in a branch hollow some three metres above the ground. To the delight of staff, chicks were heard. However, a week later, a black-tailed monitor lizard (*Varanus tristis*) was observed protruding from the now silent hole. Such is life.

Soon, spring will be here again and while the spotted pardalotes presently clutch for dear life among the storm-tossed tree-tops, the coming of sunny days and spring will herald their departure to the south and the arrival of their striated cousins.

Keep your eyes peeled and follow the *chip-chip*. Eventually, you'll spot the 'tree-top mice'.

BY JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

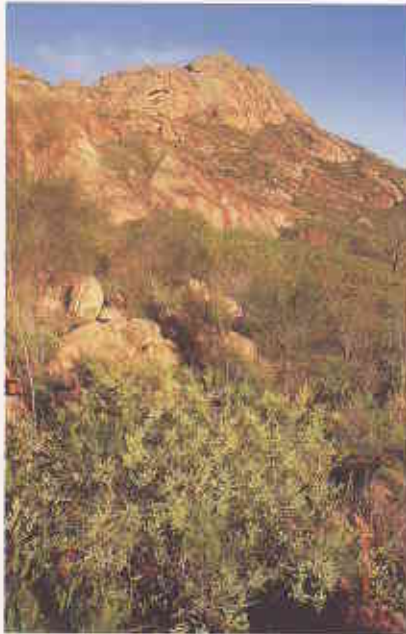
- *Pardalotes* have scoop-shaped bills and use them to prise sugary lerps—the white scaly coating of psyllid insects—from leaves and to pick up other small insects and grubs from twigs.
- Spotted pardalotes generally prefer to nest in ground burrows, while striateds prefer a high trunk hollow.
- While pardalotes are keen to attack others that encroach their nest sites, they are in turn often chased by aggressive honeyeaters. Watch your garden for the 'David and Goliath' show.



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.

FEATURES

- GRANITE ISLANDS IN A SEA OF BUSH**
PENNY HUSSEY.....10
- DISCOVERING THE SWAN**
CAROLYN THOMSON-DANS, PETER DANS & ANN STORRIE.....16
- BUTTERFLIES ON ROTTNEST ISLAND**
ANDREW WILLIAMS & ROBERT POWELL23
- CRUISING THE WANDJINA COAST**
CHRIS DONE28
- MANAGING A FIERY CHANGE**
RICK SNEEUWJAGT & NIGEL HIGGS.....37
- FILLING THE GAPS**
KEIRAN MCNAMARA, TONY BRANDIS & ANGAS HOPKINS.....43
- MARINE MIMICS – FIENDISH FISH**
ANN STORRIE.....49

REGULARS

- BUSH TELEGRAPH**.....4
- ENDANGERED**
ELEGANT SPIDER ORCHID.....36
- URBAN ANTICS**
TREE TOP MICE.....54

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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