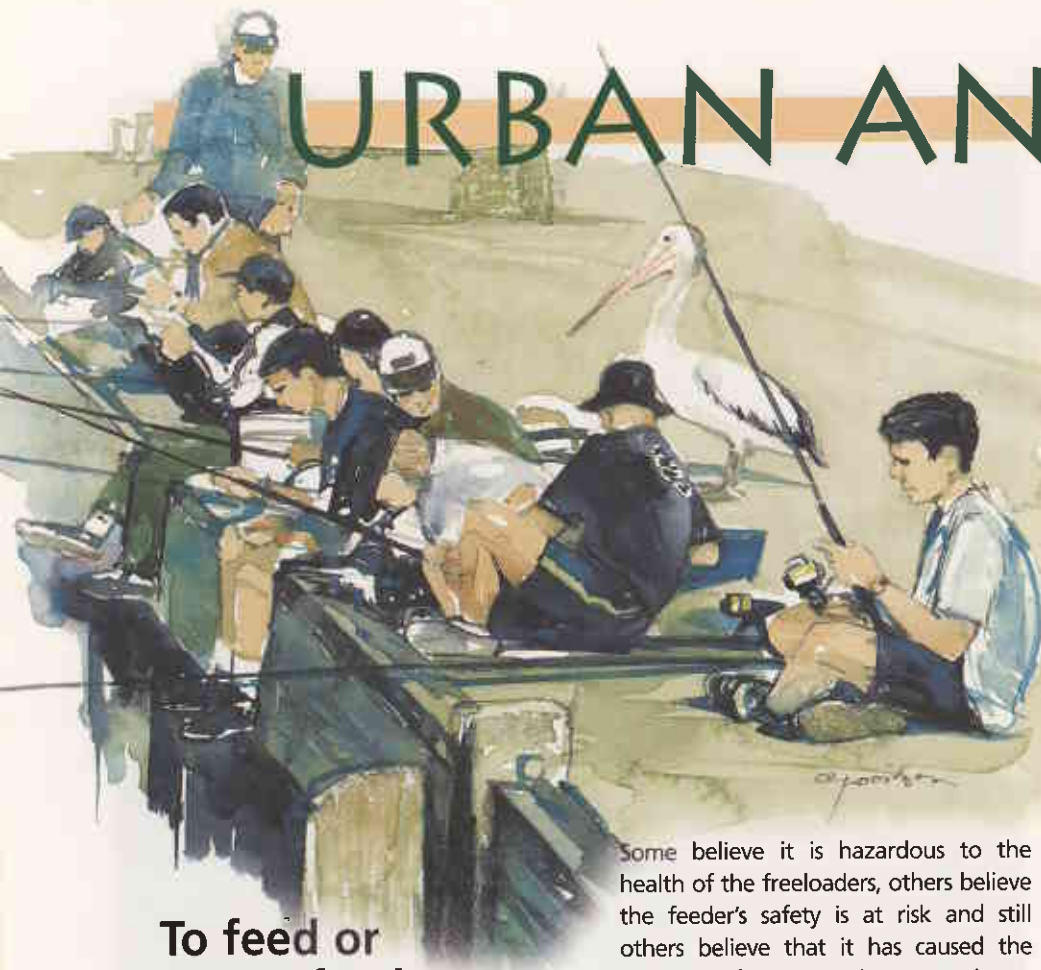


URBAN ANTICS



To feed or not to feed..

People are inquisitive by nature and it is not surprising that they have always been interested in collecting objects of various kinds, especially those relating to nature. It might also be said that the need for possession and entertainment resulted in the age old habit of attracting wild creatures to perform in our presence. Or is it simply a survival trait handed down from our ancestors to keep a ready food source close at hand?

One of my first treasured recollections about wildlife was feeding the garden birds on my grandfather's verandah in Subiaco. From this I learned a deep appreciation of nature and wild creatures. Across the road, old Mrs Cheese also used to do the same with her grandchildren and, if the truth were known (according to a recent survey in Brisbane), so did four out of every ten households in the street.

The old debate about whether or not to feed local urban wildlife is still simmering. According to a recent article in *Wildlife Australia*, we need to get scientists to study the effects of wildlife feeding. While there has been no serious scientific research conducted in the suburban environment to provide a valid conclusion, there are those who believe the ecological implications are not good.

Some believe it is hazardous to the health of the freeloaders, others believe the feeder's safety is at risk and still others believe that it has caused the numbers of certain nuisance species to explode.

For example, hand-feeding flocks of parrots in parks is thought to be exacerbating a situation where the numbers of several species are starting to cause property and vegetation destruction and, possibly, the displacement of other birds in Perth suburbs. Silver gulls and ravens have become frighteningly bold, noisy and messy at picnic sites and shopping centres, where scraps of rubbish are left about. And on it goes, with undesirable animals such as rats and mice also getting in on the act.

When the seasonal fruits of Moreton Bay fig trees fall at Matilda Bay on the Swan River, black ducks and other birds innately equipped with excellent food foraging skills, leave the picnic sites to concentrate on the banquet. The birds do not wait until the figs are exhausted, however, they simply move back and forth to other sites as opportunities arise. It is unlikely that occasional 'handouts' would provide a large proportion of an individual's diet, as wild seasonal food seems to be readily available and eagerly sought. On the other hand, it is a matter of concern at Lake Monger where a constant stream of tourists and locals are overfeeding wildlife. Here, the frequent distribution of large amounts of bread

can pollute the environment or cause nutrition loss by swelling and filling birds crops and stomachs to such an extent that they do not eat their natural foods.

In parks and waterways, where swans, geese and pelicans congregate in summer, food-offering visitors need to be wary of being nipped and careful to protect small children from being knocked over by exuberant beggars. Another hazard unwittingly created for urban wildlife and a sure way to spread disease, is when dropping-polluted residue seed from aviaries is fed to wild birds.

So are we doing harm when we feed the wild animals?

Non-native species should never be fed, either in public or private areas. Feeding of corellas, rainbow lorikeets and doves is likely to increase their high reproductive rate, causing negative impacts on native species and major problems for agriculture and for biodiversity conservation.

It is probably a good idea to curtail our habit of feeding wildlife in public places. However, minimal backyard feeding (not overfeeding) with appropriate kinds of food could provide owners with a better understanding of the natural world. It is imperative, though, to consider the needs of wildlife before our own.

BY JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- *Providing water dishes and planting your garden in such a way as to encourage native wildlife is a real buzz. See LANDSCOPE Vol 10 No 2: 10-16 (1994).*
- *If you have to feed native wildlife, do so sparingly so that they are not put at risk or become dependent on handouts from people.*
- *If you find sick, injured or orphaned native wildlife, the Department of Conservation and Land Management has a WildCare helpline. Call (08) 9474 9055.*

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

LANDSCOPE



VOLUME SEVENTEEN, NUMBER 2, SUMMER 2001-2002

020432

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 Colour Separation by Colourbox Digital.
 Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print.
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 Visit NatureBase at www.naturebase.net

Published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management, Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.

DEPARTMENT OF
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Conserving the nature of WA



Thirteen years in the making, the Cape to Cape Track offers a unique view of WA's most popular national park. See page 28.



Karijini's new visitor centre provides a cultural and environmental focus point for visitors. See 'Karijini Calling' on page 10.



Dirk Hartog Island is our largest island. It has a fascinating history and a valuable biodiversity. Find out why on page 17.



'Landscape at the Heart' is an account of the first LANDSCOPE Expedition to the Carnarvon Range at the edge of the Little Sandy Desert. See page 40.



Does the delicate work of Western Australia's botanical artists have a place in the high-tech world of science? See page 23.

COVER

Aboriginal names have always been part of Australia's history, and many of the well known names for Australian animals are in common use today. 'Ancient animals, ancient names' (page 35) makes a case for adopting more Aboriginal names for our native mammals. The brush-tailed phascogale, for example, was known to Nyoongar people as the 'wambenga'.

Cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky

