

urban antics

by John Hunter

Seal of Approval

The swirling effervescence bubbled around my face and blurred my vision, then... pop! A very large face resembling the neighbour's Labrador dog, with enormous black eyes and long stiff whiskers, stared down into my very soul.

It's one thing to go looking for a wild animal, but when it comes unexpectedly looking for you it's potentially a dangerous situation. When you think you can smell the steamy breath and see the grubby canines, you're not sure whether to scream, or rush out to buy a new pair of Speedos.

And so it was when the young bull sea lion decided to check me out in the surf at City Beach last year. He would have been on the way from his birthplace at breeding islands near Jurien Bay to seasonal resting grounds just off the Perth metropolitan coastline. Here, the animals loaf in small groups on a few islands and other rock outcrops while the females and their new pups stay at home to suckle and fish the environs of the rookeries.

The Australian sea lion (*Neophoca cinerea*) is one of the rarest sea lions in the world, and the only one found solely in Australia, from just east of Kangaroo Island in South Australia to the Houtman Abrolhos Islands near Geraldton in Western Australia.

Of the order Pinnipedia, seals and sea lions are those marine mammals that have streamlined bodies, forelimbs modified as flippers, webbed hind limbs, and a tail reduced to a stump. The order comprises true seals, eared seals (fur seals and sea lions) and walrus. Eared seals of the family Otariidae spend a greater proportion of time on land resting, breeding, giving birth and moulting. They have ear lobes, longer flippers, a more



flexible neck and hind limbs that can be turned forward for terrestrial quadrupedal locomotion (walking on all fours).

Only about 1000 sea lions are found off our west coast and, while they are generally sedentary dwellers, the seasonal travellers that rest on and around Carnac, Little and Seal islands close to Perth do visit our city area from time to time. The animals have been seen in the Swan River opposite the central business district, Matilda Bay, Maylands and on the Canning River at Bull Creek. Arguably, apart from watching dolphins and whales, there is nothing more connecting to nature than the observation of our local suburban sea lions.

There is concern, though, about the constant habit of visitors who generally disturb the wildlife when they land on Carnac Island Nature Reserve,

which is not far from the mouth of the Swan River. People have been seen off-loading their children and picnic baskets to within a few metres of beached sea lions with resultant lunges, bites and many near misses. Recently, a large bull was seen to 'torpedo' in on a family swimming right in front of the resting herd. As he stood up, a confused mother inadvertently held up a frantic, kicking child. Fortunately, the big fellow swam off, but we've seen what serious injury these wild animals have done to intruders on their breeding islands.

If you go to Carnac Island please observe the rule of getting no closer than five to ten metres from the sea lions. Besides, you can see far more from the deck of a boat *and* still go for a swim, leaving the sea lions a safe haven.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sea lions are carnivores and use their powerful swimming and sharp teeth to catch fish, squid, octopus, cuttlefish, small sharks and rock lobsters.

They breed every 18 months, being the only species of seal or sea lion in the world with this unusual breeding cycle.

For more information see *Discovering Penguin Island and Shoalwater Islands Marine Park* published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management.

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