

# urban antics

by John Hunter

## Shadow in the trees

Damned chicken hawk!  
In the good old days when most of our homes had a chook pen down by the back fence, the phrase above was often muttered after any disturbances in the yard. A 'chicken hawk' always got the blame, and so any bird of prey that happened to fly over one's urban air space copped a barrage of sticks and boondies.

Since then, and with the demise of domestic chicken pens, we've learned a lot and grown to appreciate our precious raptors. There are quite a few different species of birds of prey in our urban areas and all deserve to exist with the full protection of our conservation laws within the niches and habitats they share with us.

These days, we are more aware that the probable culprit was (and still is) the brown goshawk (*Accipiter fasciatus*), and not just any kite, harrier, falcon or eagle.

The brown goshawk is the more widespread and most common of three species of goshawks found in WA—the red and grey both being found only in the very north of the State.

The common name goshawk is derived from 'goosehawk', as early falconers used the European goshawk to hunt geese. The local bird is a predator that skulks among the shadows of the trees and secretively works from one inner canopy to another in short flights, behaviour typical of all goshawks.

Able to use a range of hunting techniques to catch prey of various types and sizes, the bird stalks large insects on the ground, tail-chases doves, pigeons and wrens in the air, glides onto reptiles and frogs, surprises mammals up to the size of a rabbit and feeds on roadside carrion. Like a true

stealth fighter, it perches quietly and often concealed, immobile except for the head.

With rounded but longish wings, long featherless legs and long toes, the goshawk is a reckless and persistent hunter. In the first year of life, it pursues prey by crashing through undergrowth at the risk of being injured or trapped in a building, while in tenacious pursuit. It was in these instances that they were sometimes entangled in chook pen wire and unfortunately despatched by householders. Like many of us, I fell for the same old mistake of tempting nature and paid the price. An uncovered cage containing my two old, derelict galahs was placed in the back yard so they could have a bath and enjoy a dig in the lush green lawn.

An hour later I discovered a terrible mess. Caught in the act, a goshawk, with one leg through the bars, had ripped the head off one bird and traumatised the other into a 'feather duster'. I was both fascinated, and angry at myself. After all, I had the knowledge and control to avoid the incident.

The 'feather duster' never did talk, but the other galah was a real mate that must have belonged at some stage to a wharfie. I really miss his vocalisations, especially the phrase: 'What are you doing now you #\*\*@\*%+@!#'.

I guess if the cap fits, wear it. The shadow in the trees is still there and, occasionally, doves, twenty-eights and the like will explode in all directions. It's just the nature of things.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- The goshawk has yellow, piercing eyes surmounted by prominent brows that are thought to afford some protection when crashing through vegetation. They give the bird a menacing look.
- Adults are pale grey above, with cream and horizontally barred chestnut underparts and a dappled brown and grey throat.
- Preferred habitat is wherever groves of trees occur above grasslands or clearings, where mainly solitary birds hunt during early mornings or late afternoons.

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**Prepress** Colourbox Digital.

**Printing** Lamb Print, Western Australia.

© ISSN 0815 4465

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Published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management, 17 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.

