

urban antics

by John Hunter

Who dunnit?

It is thought that dogs have been part of the Australian landscape since Aboriginal travellers introduced dingoes about 4,000 years ago. Then, with the arrival of Europeans some 400 years ago, domestic dogs that became feral and, later still, foxes were added to members of the family Canidae that were at large across the entire continent.


By far the most villainous is the fox. Cunning personified, far larger than any carnivorous marsupial, extremely nimble, nocturnal, rests in a hidden refuge or underground den and is at home in the suburbs probably more so than in the deserts.

First released in southern Victoria for sporting purposes in the 1860s, the fox soon spread to the region west of Kalgoorlie by about 1917. The rabbit plague across Australia at about this time helped the quick dispersal of foxes by providing a ready food source. By about the 1930s, severe predation and extinctions of some mainland native animal species was occurring.

While CALM's Western Shield predator control program is reducing fox numbers and re-establishing some species of native animals in their former ranges throughout country areas of the State, 'brer fox' has been quietly going about 'business' in urban Perth for years.

Astute hunters, able to live on feral rabbits, rodents, small insects and open caged poultry, and quite happy to scavenge rubbish tips and bins, foxes have been observed patrolling the suburbs since about 1935. In his book *A Fortunate Life*, Albert Facey mentions the loss of poultry through foxes at Wanneroo in the late 1940s.

In 1961, some members of the Western Australian Naturalists' Club captured six fox cubs in one



litter in the Swanbourne Beach sand hills, and all had the pizzazz of true cartoon characters. They had already learned to run at full crouch on their tummies and to hide to their eyes behind small objects thinking they couldn't be seen. Because it was, and still is, obligatory by law to eradicate the species, they were handed over to the appropriate authority. It was at about the same time that foxes were also seen walking the open drain north and west from Herdsman Lake through to the Wembley golf course. They were regularly coming and going to where rabbits infested coastal dunes, and were probably picking up the odd domestic chook and someone's pet guinea pig on the way through.

These days, there are many more people in Perth, and with our increased interest in outdoor recreation pursuits we are now starting to notice more wildlife. In recent times there have been sightings and evidence of foxes around Lake Monger, Wembley golf course, Willagee, Kings Park, Bold Park, along the freeway near Woodvale, and even along the railway line between Claremont and Karrakatta. I wouldn't be surprised if there were at least one family of foxes in every suburb of Perth, including the central business district.

Is the fox taking on a higher urban profile? Do we really have an increasing fox problem in the suburbs and is this having an effect on populations of native species there, or does the cat, too, have to take some of the blame for recent domestic pet and wildlife disappearances?

DID YOU KNOW?

- Foxes have highly tuned aural and visual senses. They can hear the sound of a mouse squeak more than 30 metres away and can quickly detect moving objects.
- They often leave a pungent territorial odour from a scent gland on their tail.
- When on the run, a fox's bushy tail is held horizontal and when walking, they tread their back paws neatly into the front paw marks.

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