

urban antics

by John Hunter

Swan spray and osprey

I've been working on Matilda Bay for some 27 years now and, I admit, have been blessed to work in such an environment earning my daily bread and reporting on the comings and goings of all creatures great and small.

There's been a lot said about the Swan River lately, top of the list being algal blooms in areas where, at times, there is little water flow, large amounts of nutrients and plenty of sunlight to enhance the growth of amoeba-like life forms. Some of these can be toxic or simply deplete the water of oxygen which, either way, can kill fish.

While it's obvious that the 'burbs' and population of Perth are now in 'the big league', with thousands of out-of-staters flooding in to sample what was 'our' little Swan River Colony, the resultant protection of the city's greatest icon, the river, must be second to none. Mind you, at the time of writing, mid-November 2005, the water clarity in and around Matilda Bay Reserve is stunningly clear, with dolphins, cormorants and fish species clearly visible in their underwater dashes and clashes. Because of the continuing winter rains, seawater tides and seasonal jellyfish populations have not reached here yet.

The Swan River is actually a marine estuary fed by winter run-off from the Darling Range, and is arguably the second biggest estuarine environment on the south-west coast. It has provided a magnificent stage for human inhabitants for thousands of years and has always had a healthy and diverse wildlife population from equatorial wading birds through to visiting sea-lions.

Perhaps one of the moderately common but rarely seen of the larger animals that live and breed in the environs of the Swan River is the osprey



(*Pandion haliaetus*). While often referred to as a 'fishing eagle', this magnificent bird is a true fishing hawk of the family Accipitridae, which comprises all the diurnal birds of prey except the falcons and kestrels.

Ospreys are found throughout the warmer parts of the world, with the subspecies *cristatus* ranging from the Indonesian Archipelago south-eastwards to Australia. Here, it is found thinly spread around the mainland coastline, except for Tasmania and the south coast of Victoria.

Second only to the white-breasted sea-eagle in majestic plunges to capture surface-visiting fish, the osprey, with its compact plumage and long powerfully built legs, quite often drops from about 30 metres and

temporarily disappears below water in its attack. Within a second, the bird resurfaces and, more often than not, rises powerfully skyward with long razor-like talons deeply embedded in its prey.

Usually found on small islets and islands close offshore and on Rottnest Island, both the Swan and Peel estuaries are lucky to have their resident small populations of ospreys. Now and then, people travelling around the estuaries will glimpse a lone bird either flapping in true hawk style or perched proudly on favourite artificial structures.

In the last few weeks, two adults and a juvenile osprey have together rested atop the Norfolk Island pines outside my office and raised my heartbeat with their incessant, high pitched, quavering whistle. Maybe it's an omen for us all to keep an eye on our grubby human habits around our fabulous waterways. Maybe the tide has turned and the beasts are having their say.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Nest sites are around the area of the confluence of the Swan and Canning rivers and also in the area of Devils Elbow at Mosman Park.
- Ospreys no longer breed in Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales, maybe because of pollutants causing breeding failure and death or through tree clearing removing nest sites.
- Huge nests are added to each year, with sticks, flotsam, seaweed and driftwood being built up to two metres high.

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Prepress and 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.

