

urban antics

by John Hunter

Desert tree frog

Urbanites in our State's northern towns and communities also experience antics and have wild times and unusual stories to tell.

Creatures often drift into town and, like their human counterparts, prefer to coexist in newfound, sophisticated comfort and accommodation.

If there is one wild thing that is tolerated by people, it is that universally admired amphibian, the frog. They don't bite, they don't fight, and they're mostly out at night. They sing and don't sting and, most acceptably, knock off insects like mosquitos. My Mum loves them, so long as she doesn't have to pick them up and that's a bonus for the frog, because soaps and household chemicals on our hands are not good for Freddo's skin.

One of the most common animals found across the mid to northern Australian continent—a place where the majority of our population isn't—is the small, robust and short-legged desert tree frog (*Litoria rubella*).

Before human settlement the frogs were found in a wide range of habitats, from eastern wet forests through central deserts to the arid western coastal scrub of WA. Here they usually hung out with their mates, calling from trees and shrubs beside watercourses or from temporary or permanent swamps and lagoons.

Then came human settlement and all those buildings with protected nooks and crannies, artificial light that attracted insect food, plumbing lines, and the dream accommodation of a cool, smooth, accommodating porcelain toilet bowl with human visitors who 'pull the chain', providing instant tropical flash flooding. A frog Heaven on Earth.

And so started the northern urban antics and local name

change of *L. rubella* to that of the 'northern dunny frog'.

In the late 1970s, the Northern Superintendent of National Parks and the ranger for Millstream National Park (as it was then named) were inspecting a new 'kit' toilet that had just been erected at Crossing Pool. The ranger, a man of considerable size, attended the call of nature, but he had to leave the door open to accommodate his knees and feet. While the facility was being thoroughly put to the test, his boss wandered off to observe corella acrobatics in the nearby paperbark trees. A little while later, the tranquillity was shattered by a horrendous bellow. There was the man-mountain, well outside the privacy of the closet, eyes bulging, hopping around and furiously trying to pull his pants down. He'd pulled up his daks only to experience a cold wriggling object in his nether regions. A tree frog had jumped into his undies while they were down and

was only discovered after a few strides down the track.

There was also the tale of the mining camp silky terrier that loved to hunt tree frogs in the ablution block. The frogs loved the rows of pedestals, hand basins and lips, where they hid in the cavities to gorge on moths attracted by the permanent lighting. Every time someone pressed the flush button, a bunch of frogs would somehow survive going down the gurgler and, while they were 'shooting the rapids', Bimbo would rush past, dive in head first, and give the frogs the 'tom-tits' until his terrier urge was satisfied. Where else could you get such theatre at a loo near you?

Frogs are considered by many as an indicator species to the wellbeing of the environment around us. Let's look after them, they are such wonderful creatures to have around.



DID YOU KNOW?

- *Litoria* is one of the most diverse genus of frogs in the world. Some of the 61 species recognised in Australian habit trees, some are ground dwellers, one burrows and another skips upon the surface of water.
- The little desert tree frog's screaming chorus is like that of a flock of silver gulls. To avoid excessive water loss, while basking in direct sunlight, it changes colour from the typical grey-brown to a bright white.