

urban antics

by John Hunter

Diggers and plungers

Is it ever going to rain?

Here I am in July, still enjoying the autumn-like froth and mist on Floreat Beach, mesmerised by a similar, but never the same, golden sunset over a calm Indian Ocean. Cloudless, endless, restless, who cares less... you wouldn't be dead for quids, would you?

In the distance, strange seabirds plunge from great heights and disappear underwater for some seconds... then, in a reverse splash, the swell gives birth to these creatures that pull vertically, shivering the brine from their plumage while climbing back towards a golden sky.

Australasian gannets (*Sula serrator*) are not usually observed so clearly from this urban beach at this time of year, as the weather is often inclement and they usually stay out a little further, possibly to lessen the risk of being storm-wrecked on land. Obviously, shoaling fish had tempted them further inshore on such a spring-like day.

The birds, while having similar fishing techniques to local terns, but far more spectacular, are quite different physically. They are very large, at around 90 centimetres long, and alternately flap and glide over the sea on barely moving slender wings, which may span up to two metres. Generally white in colour, with black primary, secondary and central tail feathers, a long neck and tail and somewhat penguin-like head, their wings in flight appear more mid-body than a tern.

Gannets migrate to the west coast. Most are usually the non-breeding birds that have travelled from their rookeries on a few islands off southern Victoria and Tasmania, but mainly from around New Zealand. Their usual dispersal at this time of year reaches to about the Tropic



of Capricorn on the west and east coasts of Australia, and from about 0.5 to 80 kilometres offshore. Here, they sleep at sea in complete silence, a huge contrast to the daily cackling crescendo from their dense breeding colonies. By October, they will have returned to the Southern Ocean, some staying and others heading for the rookeries by March.

About now, another wildlife phenomenon is underway on the headlands and islets of Rottnest Island, due west of our city suburbs.

Distinctly different from gannets, the entirely black-brown plumaged wedge-tailed shearwaters (*Puffinus pacificus*) have returned from their tropical climes of the north-west coast and Indian Ocean to their southern nesting colonies. From mid-August until late April, flocks

of mutton birds, as they are commonly known, return to the same nests at night under cover of darkness to dig or renovate burrows some one to two metres long and raise a single chick. The young are left alone in the depths of the burrows while the adult birds spend all day fishing at sea, surface feeding or sometimes diving up to 10 metres for small fish and squid, returning at night to the burrow to feed their young.

By April, the young shearwaters will weigh one-and-a-half times as much as the adults. From then on, the parent birds return less frequently, the fat chicks completing the last of their growth and their moult from downy to juvenile feathers, before leaving the colony to join the rest of the population at sea for the winter.

And so the cycle starts again.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Australasian gannets of the family *Sulidae* have a conical bill with serrate cutting edges and no nostrils. Like a living arrowhead and with air sacs under the skin to cushion impact, they plunge to scoop up pilchards and other shoaling fish.
- Wedge-tailed shearwaters of the family *Procellariidae* are typical of the petrels, with a long, slender, horny-plated bill, which is slightly hooked and tube nosed. They are occasionally found derelict on Perth metropolitan beaches.

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