

urban antics

by John Hunter

The *hīb*

They stood like a cohort of ancient Assyrians, but it wasn't the sheen on their spears that was startling, but rather the metallic purple, green-bronze reflection of the evening sun on their gloss-black wing and back feathers.

Ibis of the black and white, straw-necked variety were again prowling the playground parks among the affluent dwellings of Perth's City Beach not 300 metres from a hostile habitat of barren sand and pounding surf.

For some two years now the birds have made themselves conspicuous among very tolerant ground foraging groups of magpies, crows, galahs and wagtails. If I didn't know better, it appears as though the smaller species all wait for the long-legged interlopers to land and then join in a united front on whatever grubs or insects they can flush from the longer grasses of some parks.

The straw-necked ibis (*Threskiornis spinicollis*) is a large wading waterbird with a naked black head, long downcurved black bill and yellow throat plumes. It stands about 60 centimetres high and while usually found in farmlands and across dry plains and grasslands, is not common to inner suburban playgrounds. It was quite entertaining this summer, therefore, to see human mothers frantically ushering their toddlers away from what appeared to be 'long billed vultures of unknown intentions'.

While highly nomadic, straw-necked ibis normally inhabit the margins of lagoons and swamps and other inundated wetlands. They nest colonially, sometimes with cormorants, in wooded south-western wetlands between Busselton and Carnamah and occasionally in the southern Pilbara and southern Gascoyne areas. They have a penchant for feeding on terrestrial

invertebrates, especially grasshoppers and locusts, which has endowed them with the title of 'the farmer's friend'. The birds have been also known to take frogs, lizards, small snakes, molluscs, centipedes and cockroaches.

Over the long dry summers of the past two years, small groups of ibis have apparently 'discovered' early morning and evening delicacies amid the grasses of our local urban playing fields. They are an exciting addition to the wildlife of our suburbs as nothing else quite resembles their image, plodding gait and group foraging techniques.

It would be a fair assumption that the extensive new wetland ponds, fairway reticulation and forest habitat in the Wembley Golf Precinct now provide a perfect oasis for the night roosting and

summer day loafing of many terrestrial and waterbird species. As the precinct is only a few kilometres west and north of the Herdsman Lake Regional Park wetlands and Perry Lakes, it has probably become an important link to the extensive green belt parks of suburban City Beach. On the other hand, it could simply be just another irruption of ibis, which happens from time to time when perfect conditions for breeding occur and results in many birds appearing in new and unusual places.

Once the bird was rarely, if ever, seen in the Perth area, yet its image (although that of a different species) appeared regularly in the Egyptian hieroglyphics in our school history books. Ibis are special creatures—there is something about them, something mysterious, something sacred,



DID YOU KNOW?

- In 1958, young tagged birds from the Gingin area dispersed some 800km north, to the east of Carnarvon, in just a few weeks and have since indicated their nomadic preference to head northwards and coastally after fledging.
- In flight over long distances the birds tend to prefer to fly in 'V' formation and at times individuals can be seen soaring in thermals.
- The word 'ibis' is from Greek, which was originally borrowed from the ancient Egyptian *hīb*.

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