

# urban antics by John Hunter

## Delicate as ...

The existing large natural swamps and endemic bush areas of metropolitan Perth are prized possessions, for they are the last bastions of biodiversity integrity that once comprised the whole Swan Coastal Plain.

Here, before Europeans, all native animals had evolved for eons, existing within their niche habitats relatively untroubled by Aboriginal hunter-gatherers and living in a balance of predator-prey relationships.

Today, compounding problems of destructive, wholesale land-clearing practices for a burgeoning human population, along with feral animal and weed invasion, will probably see the local extinction of most thornbill, softbill and some other bird species in our suburbs in about 50 years.

Along with a few large tracts of native bush reserve like Kings Park, Star Swamp and Hepburn Conservation Area, we have a surviving strip of coastal dune reserve from Swanbourne north. And how fortunate is it to have, adjacent to that, the Trigg Bushland and Bold Park areas.

My parents chose to settle in Scarborough in the early 1940s. Here, the coastal dune environment, comprising woodlands, wildflowers, wrens, honeyeaters and clouds of black cockies, induced in one small boy and his friends a sense of inquisitive adventure and a feeling of peace, happiness and belonging.

The coastal dune system west of Perth remains a natural area worthy of visiting both for study purposes and relaxation. The environment here is a constantly changing one, influenced by wind, water, temperature, tides and wave action. This complex mobile system contains vegetation which has evolved with the various dune formations and supports an interesting suite of animal life.



In this area, the most spectacular and rarely seen white-winged fairy-wren (*Malurus leuconotus*) goes about life in the knee-deep, treeless shrubland dominated by saltbush, wattles, bluebush and other low scrub as well as coastal spinifex, and other grasses.

To find these most elusive birds, one must listen for the long undulating 'reel' of their vocalisation, then stare in the direction toward the ground where they are more easily seen performing their 'rodent-run' along the shrubland floor.

Most of the year both sexes are brown with a dull blue tail, however, the dominant male of a clan turns a breathtaking cobalt blue with white wing and back

feathers in the spring-summer breeding season—a sight to behold as he flits among his troupe.

A good place to observe these delightful birds is from the City Beach-Floreat dune boardwalk, which enables access to the area and prevents damage to the fragile vegetation and dune environment.

Thanks go to the Town of Cambridge Coastcare Program and its volunteer group who regularly conduct worthwhile environmental projects in their precinct.

Intensive planning for future suburban expansion on the fringes of the current metropolitan area must allow for more bush reserves on a similar scale if we are to maintain the integrity of our urban biodiversity.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- Tramping indiscriminately through vegetation and sand dunes can have catastrophic effect on delicate plants causing wind blowouts and destruction of habitat.
- There are three recognised sub-species of white-winged fairy wren—the other two from Barrow Island and Dirk Hartog Island in the north have black with white varieties.
- Foxes, cats, goannas, kookaburras, crows, cuckoos and human feet are all threats to wrens in the coastal suburban dunes.



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