



urban antics

by John Hunter

A sense of place...

It's still the middle of winter. The sun rises over the Darling Ranges at about 7.20am when there are no clouds and pokes me in the eye while I lay in bed. I'm lucky, in the summer I'll still wake up with the sun just after 5am. Think of all the daylight I'm saving.

At this time of the year the sun's rays highlight bits of dust in the air as they float and cavort above my head... thank goodness they are just specs, or these microscopic tree trunks might do some real damage.

The rain-drenched decking is already starting to waft shafts of steam into the still cold air and in the distance a pole-top kookaburra glares Earthwards... it'll be slim pickings for it this morning. Out in the backyard, the steaming heavily mulched ground under six productive olive trees has inched its way down the slope and both fruit and leaf litter ooze over a sandstone retaining wall. Now I know how ancient ruins end up below ground.

My exotic olive trees are loaded and I've already taken off 20 jars. When the fruits are on the ground, however, crows love them, my shitzu loves them, and even doves eat the 'littlies' and poo ink on my limestone wall. Then at night, the town rats play footy with them in the ceiling... aw, what the heck... such is life.

A flicker catches my eye, there is something watching me,

watching my movement, watching me watching. Through a maze of pale blue-green leaves at eye-level, I see an eye in a white circle. It's too early for games and my peepers are still cobwebbed by a prior night of indulgence. Another movement... huh... I see you now you little twerp, a 'greenie'. Flashes of childhood escapades rage forth. The birds are back, or is it that I have been away doing other things?

These tiny birds of no fixed address are the common nomads of our gardens.

Also known as grey-breasted white-eye (*Zestrops lateralis*) or silvereye... or greenie, they are at times considered a pest to some that have gardens of fruit and flowering shrubs.

While they eat just about all the insects, bugs and small spiders you could name, plus the nectar and fruit of native and cultivated plants, they also enjoy, in relevant areas, a diet of the dreaded potato moth larvae, midges and scale insects.

Beyond backyards, silvereyes mainly frequent scrub, thickets

and heaths especially in coastal dunes and around water. They also frequent eucalypt forest and woodlands with good understorey. Found in greater numbers in the south-west of the State, they travel north each autumn. Some reach as far as their northern boundary of Shark Bay, but move south again in late winter to breed.

I think it must have been the blaspheming of my grandad that made me aware of the greenie in Subiaco during the 1940s. While he was doing his utmost to protect the grapes on his shade-house, I was enjoying an up-close and personal experience, an awakening to nature.

During my adolescence in Scarborough, our street gang of after-school friends would eagerly punish each other with paddy melon fights in a nearby drainage thicket of flowering melaleucas. Then the greenies would arrive. As sad as it wasn't in those days, it was open warfare to see who could bring down a greenie with a paddy melon.

And now as I stand and stare at this little greenie with its white eye-ring and fine olive-green feathers, I can't help wonder... do you recognise me? Thanks for the memories and, by the way, eat all you want.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The silvereye is usually recognised by a persistent contact call of 'psip' and 'peeh, peeh, peeh', and a spirited canary-like song. They also mimic the calls of some swallows, cuckoos, honeyeaters and fantails.
- The silvereyes in WA have a more yellowish colouring in their back feathers, rather than grey like elsewhere.
- Current research is using silvereyes to see whether urban noise pollution affects song development, learning and evolution in native birds.

- 53 Perth's river dolphins
New research is looking into the lifestyles of the bottlenose dolphins of the Swan and Canning rivers in Perth.
- 59 Living fossils at Lake Thetis
New infrastructure enhances the experience for visitors viewing stromatolites at Lake Thetis, near Cervantes.

Regulars

- 3 Contributors and Editor's letter
- 29 Bookmarks
Mawson's Huts: The Birthplace of Australia's Antarctic Heritage
Great Whales
Leaf and branch
- 30 Feature park
Walpole and Nornalup Inlets Marine Park
- 45 Endangered
Rare plant community on massive limestone ridges
- 62 Urban Antics
A sense of place...

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