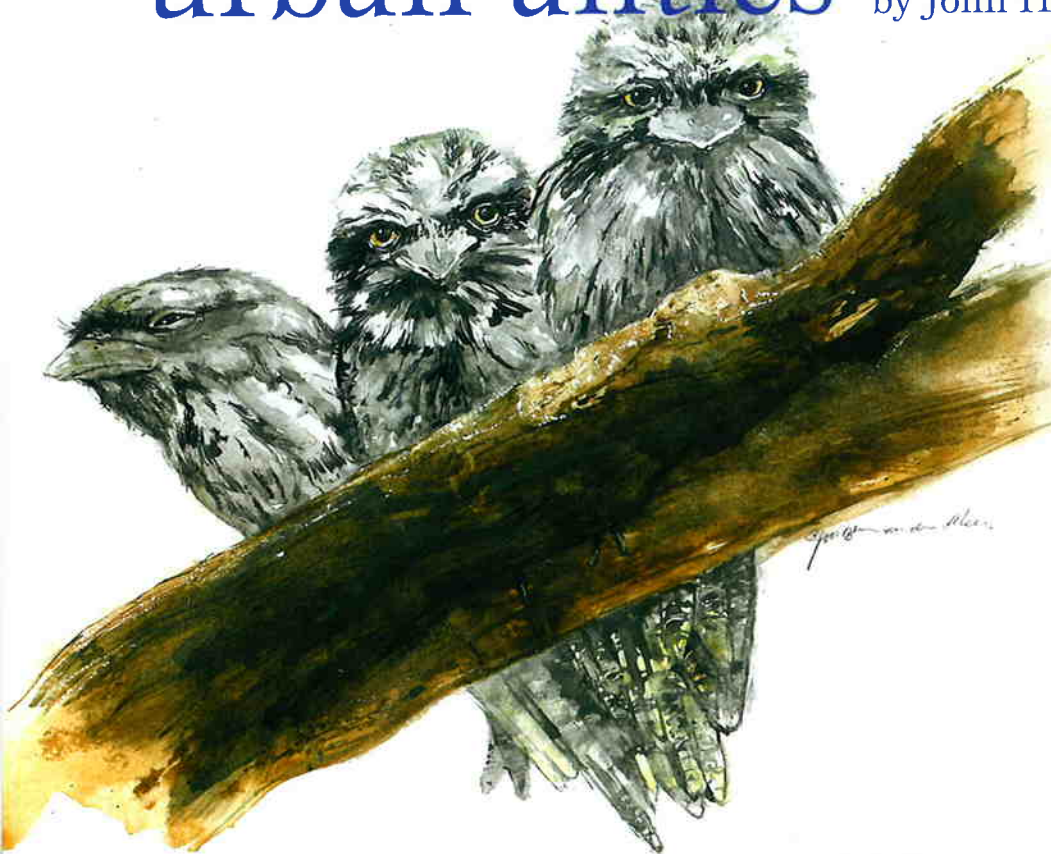


urban antics

by John Hunter



Real muppets

They're gone... thank goodness. I must have spent the best part of an hour every day for the past two months under park trees getting bruised vertebrae and bloodshot eyes, mesmerised beyond reason by a bunch of would be 'muppets'.

Lately it's been a scorcher, over 40°C in the water bottle for three days and, to add, it hadn't rained for two months. Squinting skywards in those conditions to get your kicks has got knobs on it. So, where are those damned birds?

I can smell the heat stress of the surrounding tuarts and other vegetation. My nostrils harbour a strange odour of bush salad with a dash of eucalyptus and a quiver of panic that exudes from all leaf and bark. A deep desire to console the living things around me is excruciating but I dare not hug a trunk or mutter out loud in case someone is watching this madman. There are no pedestrians however, I am safe. "Where are those birds???"

What is it about the very common tawny frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides brachypterus*) that stirs

the soul of many observers and photographers alike?

While owl-like in many ways, the frogmouth is more closely related to the local nightjar and oilbird of northern South America. Members of this special group of birds, also referred to as caprimulgids, have large heads, short wide beaks, weak legs and feet and are crepuscular, meaning they are active in the dim light of dusk or during the night.

The frogmouth's main attraction seems to be its accessibility to observers, in that it regularly uses the same low, near to horizontal roosting perches within a few metres of the ground. It is a bird also very reluctant to fly off when quietly approached by humans and

it goes through an amazing variety of camouflage postures to resemble a bit of the tree on which it roosts. The attraction to me, however, is its golden yellow eyes which, when enticed by a fat hand-held earth worm or moth, are as subtle as regular dinner plates on a doll's house table.

This modern-day descendant of some long gone dinosaur is usually seen, with great difficulty, during summer, sitting in a family group hunched up tight together under a small canopy of leaves on a eucalypt or sheoak branch. At first, you have to find the blob of grey with black streaks and, in my case, three round heads with... one tail? Mum on one side, dad on the other and junior in the middle facing the other way. Here, during the day, they rest and sleep. When approached by humans or other perceived danger, they stiffen with flattened plumage and with skyward pointing beaks, resembling three broken sticks.

It was at night while walking the dog through the local park that I discovered the frogmouths. Through the eerie shafts of streetlight, utterly silent forms fluttered in aerobatic confusion in front of me. I could feel the waft of air displacement on my cheeks and glimpsed a feathered flash. Serious thoughts of a toilet stop flashed through my mind and yes... I would really need to bring a b-i-i-g fly swat next time.

Next morning, there were my giant moths, in the same spot, and on the branch above my head.

Today I am back again for another photo, another bruised vertebra. Where are they, have they gone, or did that bunch of sticks just move?

DID YOU KNOW?

- There are many instances where frogmouths are hit by cars while chasing insects illuminated in the beam of headlights.
- Unlike the owl, which takes prey on the wing with its talons, frogmouths pounce on prey which comes to them and snap it up with their large beaks.
- Feathery bristles around the bill and spreading towards the tip of the beak help in catching insects in the air.

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Prepress and printing GEON, Western Australia.

© ISSN 0815-4465

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Please do not send unsolicited material, but feel free to contact the editors.

Published by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), 17 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.

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