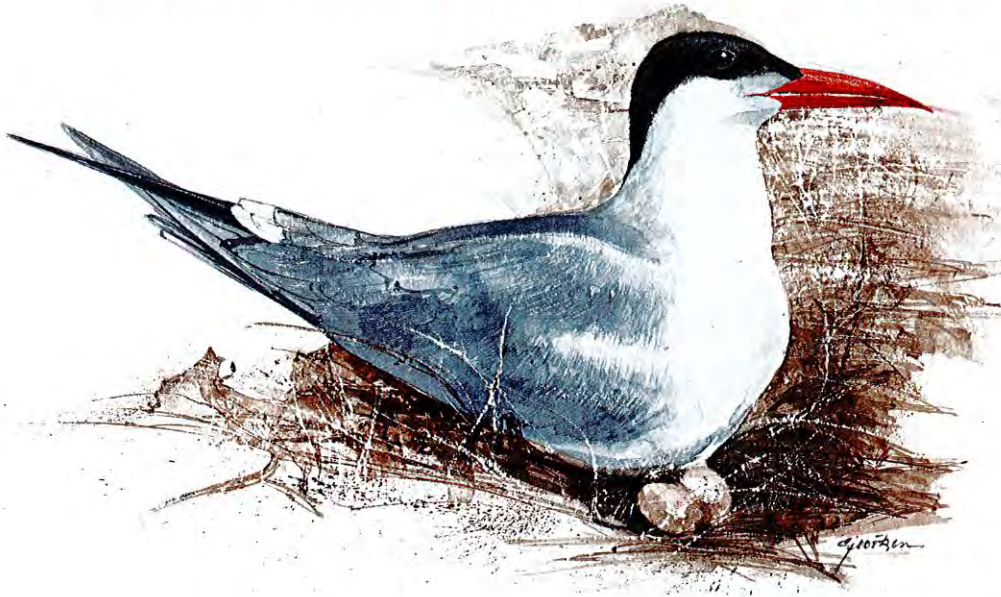


urban antics

by John Hunter



Life's a beach

The summer and autumn beaches of the Perth metro area are second to none. And it could also be said of the Swan and Peel estuaries —rather more muddy and vegetated in places, but fun and places of learning ... to be shared with wild sea birds.

At the crucial learning age of five in the fabulous 1940s, visits to Scarborough beach for a swim and a picnic were a real treat. It was also a place to encounter gulls and terns.

On the footpath outside 'Peters by the Sea', a large silver gull (*Larus novaehollandiae*) hovered over an open-ended newspaper-wrapped fish-n-chips and harassed the living chips out of one poor little boy. Dad thought it hilarious, but the young-un was soon out of there, having dropped a couple of morsels in fright and then, like 'speedy Gonzales', challenged three Austin tourers and a Vauxhall van for rights to the roadway. That was not funny, and even today this old boy can still hear and see that 'pterodactyl' screaming 'kaaa - kaaa - kaaa' in my face ... very clever, but very frightening.

Gulls are naturally aggressive scavengers and are quite big birds with a wingspan of more than 60 centimetres. Hovering in

squawking chaotic numbers, they are capable of harassing children to the point of danger. The birds have learned to congregate in areas where human organic refuse abounds, including sewage ponds, sporting arenas, ephemeral lakes and estuary mud flats. What is of real concern, is when unthinking humans handfeed begging groups of gulls which encourages familiarity, aggression and the build-up of unnatural numbers. This is when salmonella contamination in recreation areas and alfresco cafes is possible.

In times past, as it is today, from shoreline to city, silver gulls are high on the companion list of people, just hanging in there for a free handout. Away from human habitation, however, on offshore islands and remote localities, the birds feed naturally on dead or live

marine and aquatic animals or are happy fossicking in fields for insects and worms.

In lesser numbers at our beaches are the terns. Best described as elegant in flight with long-pointed and rakish wings, they are usually solo aerial hunters of surface fish such as mullet, herring and pilchards. Over ocean or estuary, a bird will cruise at five to 10 metres, head down and eyes searching. When the quarry is spotted, the wings collapse and, like a feathered javelin, it plummets into the water. In a moment, it bursts back into the air, violently shaking its plumage, and, most times, with a fish firmly clasped in its long-pointed beak.

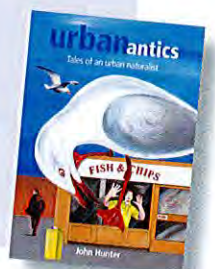
There are three main species of tern that can be seen around our local marine environs during the warmer months. The fairy tern (*Sterna nereis*) is the smallest visitor and can be seen around the Swan estuary nesting on sandspits or joining its larger cousin the crested tern (*S. bergii*) dive bombing the shallows. Occasionally joining them both is the Caspian tern (*S. caspia*), a very large species.

Today, the white sea birds still loaf together in their favourite beach dips between Trigg and Cottesloe. On passing, I nervously look sideways as this human beach-runner still feels somewhat intimidated. All beaks and eyes seem to be pointed my way.

I'm probably dreaming.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The WA Naturally book *Urban Antics* further describes gulls and other urban species. Check it out at your local book store or online at www.dec.wa.gov.au/shop.
- Fairy terns are currently under pressure as their summer metropolitan breeding coincides with human summer activity. Watch out on beaches and sandspits.
- The Caspian tern has a huge scarlet bill and a wingspan of about 1.4 metres. The crested tern with its distinguishing black-crested head and yellow bill is smaller.



- 44 Looking after country
The landscape-scale Kimberley Science and Conservation Strategy is being implemented thanks to a number of important partnerships.
- 52 Life on the edge: intertidal reefs of the Marmion and Shoalwater Islands marine parks
A study is being carried out into algae and invertebrate communities on intertidal reefs in two important Perth marine parks.
- 58 What's in a name?
Aboriginal names feature commonly in the names of south-west plants and animals but that's not the case for south-west birds.

Regulars

- 3 Contributors and Editor's letter
- 15 Bookmarks
The Michael Morcombe eGuide to Australian birds
Australasian nature photography
Deepsea Whale Rescue
- 24 Feature park
Nambung National Park
- 51 Endangered
Rare banksia and eucalypt woodlands of the Swan Coastal Plain
- 62 Urban Antics
Life's a beach

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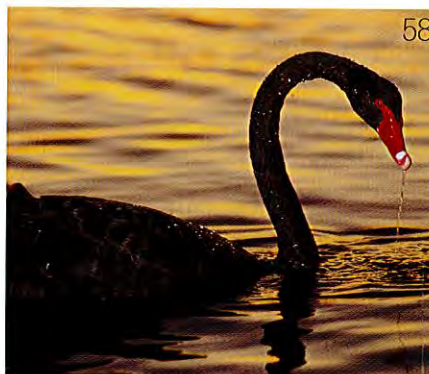
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44



58



32



12