



Pelican Point: a special place

Pelican Point in Crawley has been a treasured gathering place across the ages—for Nyoongar people living and hunting on their traditional lands, for European settlers, for today's local community, for tourists and those pursuing recreational activities, and for migratory birds travelling from far-flung corners of the globe.



by Sue Graham-Taylor

On 27 March 2013, 60 community members gathered on the Swan River foreshore in Crawley to mark the history of this very special place. The occasion chosen by the Swan Estuary Reserves Action Group (SERAG) was the 50th anniversary of a visit by HRH Prince Philip to Pelican Point in 1963.

The Swan River Estuary has changed extensively since European settlement in 1829. Three A-Class nature reserves—Milyu (South Perth), Alfred Cove and Pelican Point—contain most of the remnant salt marsh, sedge banks and fringing forest on the Swan River Estuary and together comprise the Swan Estuary Marine Park. Their sandbanks, mud flats and beaches provide the only remaining significant resting, feeding and nesting areas for birds, both local and migratory, on the estuary. SERAG, a voluntary community group, was formed in 2010 to work to protect these fragile environments.



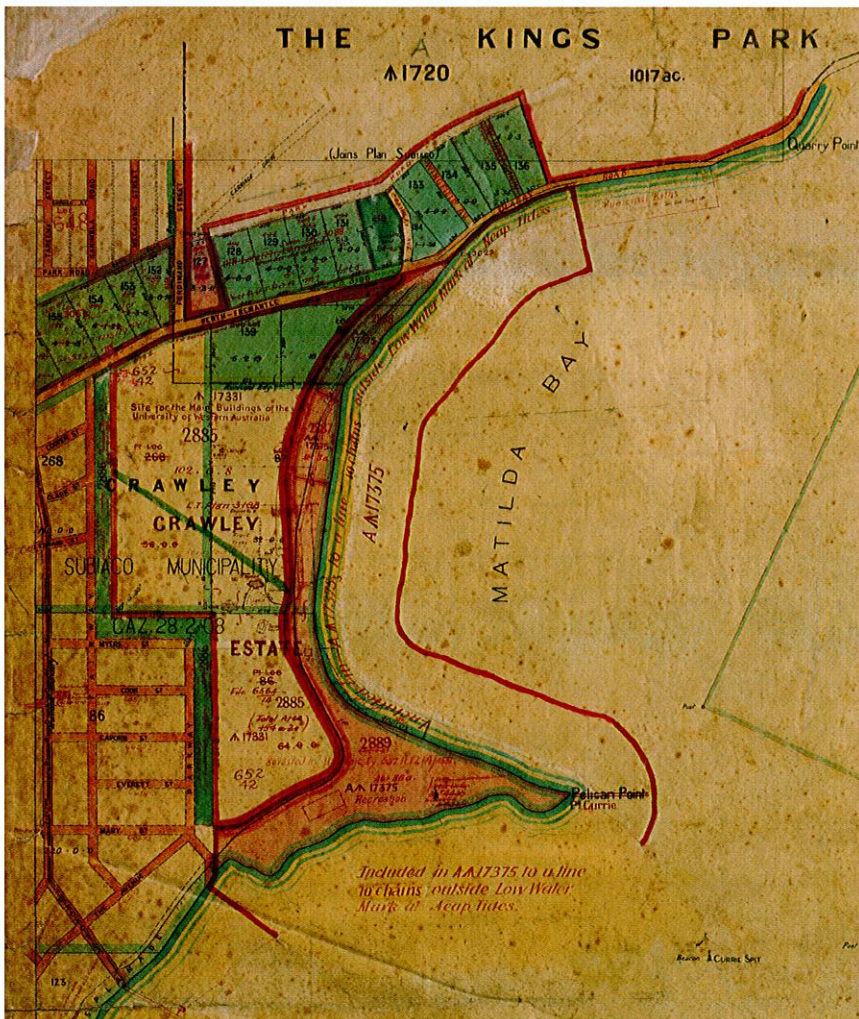
The early days

Pelican Point today remains a vital community asset. The lush country and the waters of the Swan River were home to Nyoongar people for more than 40,000 years before the arrival of Europeans. It was a traditional camping place with freshwater springs and a good source of food. Nyoongar people hunted and fished, moving within their lands according to the six seasons. As part of their spiritual beliefs, they saw themselves as responsible for the protection of the Swan River and its resources.

In 1827 Captain James Stirling and botanist Charles Fraser explored the Swan River to assess its suitability for settlement. Fraser described the abundant fish and the plentiful bird life of the river, commenting on the quantity of black swans, pelicans, ducks, and other aquatic birds. He wrote: "The country from Pelican Point to the entrance of the Moreau [Canning] is diversified into Hill and Dale, magnificently clothed with Trees of the richest green ... To a person accustomed to the Everbrown of the Woods of Port Jackson, the magnificent scene from Pelican Point would be considered a great treat."

Pelican Point was part of what came to be called Crawley Swamp. The point itself was later called Point Currie after Captain Currie, the first harbourmaster at Fremantle who took up 32 acres (13 hectares) in the district in 1829. The land was acquired by the state in 1910 for recreation purposes.

From the early 1900s the foreshore around Matilda Bay to Pelican Point was a popular picnic spot. In 1920 it became an A-Class Reserve and a government-regulated camping site. Some people stayed for a few nights, others camped for the summer. Horse stalls, tea rooms and shade shelters were built, water was provided and food vendors visited. The many trees around the bay were gradually cut down and used for camp fires, bough shed shelters and cooking the plentiful fish catches. A sleeper track and shell path enabled people to walk to the point. Crawley Reserve was easily accessible by tram from the city and campers were joined by up to 20,000 people on a public holiday such as New Year's Day.



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Main Little black cormorants (*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*) at Pelican Point.

Photo - Tim Graham-Taylor

Inset left Aerial view of the Crawley reclamation work, 1930s.

Photo - State Library of WA 022868PD

Inset right Aboriginal camp, circa 1860.

Photo - Freshwater Bay Museum

Left Crawley plan, cancelled 1930.

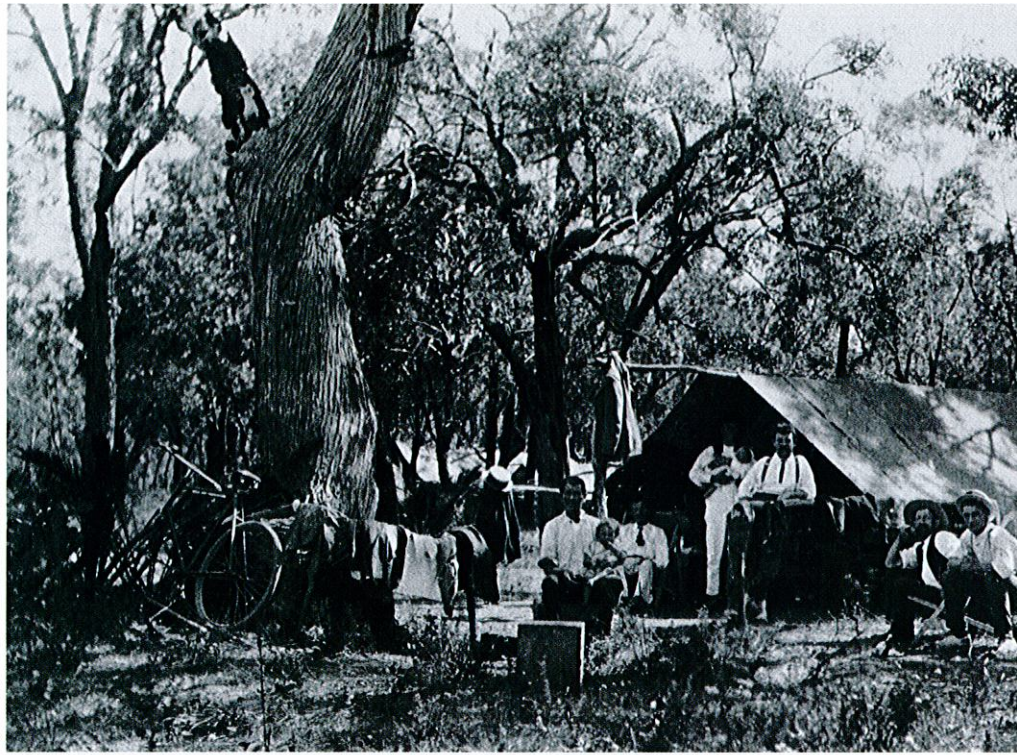
Photo - SROWA



Above Eradicating mosquitoes along the Swan River with a kerosene knapsack spray.
 Photo - *West Australian*, 23 Jan 1928

Above right A camp at Crawley Bay, 1912.
 Photo - *State Library of WA* 8282B

Right Birdwatching knoll.
 Photo - *Tim Graham-Taylor*



Recreational pursuits in Matilda Bay Reserve

Pelican Point is in Matilda Bay Reserve, an area of grassy parkland covering 20.6 hectares of riverside including a café, restaurant, offices, yacht and rowing clubs, and walk and cycle paths. The reserve is highly popular for recreational pursuits ranging from picnics and barbecues to jogging and cycling, while the waters are popular for sailing, kayaking and windsurfing.

Pelican Point and Crawley Reserve was also a significant flying boat base during World War II.

The winged torment

Mosquitoes were a traditional problem along the shores of the Swan and Canning rivers. Local councils blamed each other for the menace but were loath to work together on a solution. In the 1930s, the government took the lead and declared 'war' on mosquitoes. Pelican Point was affected, with the Subiaco Council's chief health inspector declaring in 1934 that "enough mosquitoes are being bred there to torment the whole of the metropolitan area". *The Sunday Times* proclaimed "Crawley visitors have come to the conclusion that the mosquitoes bred down there are the Amazons of the tribe".

In the same year the commissioner for public health sent a circular to local governments suggesting that they stock swamps with small mosquito-larva-

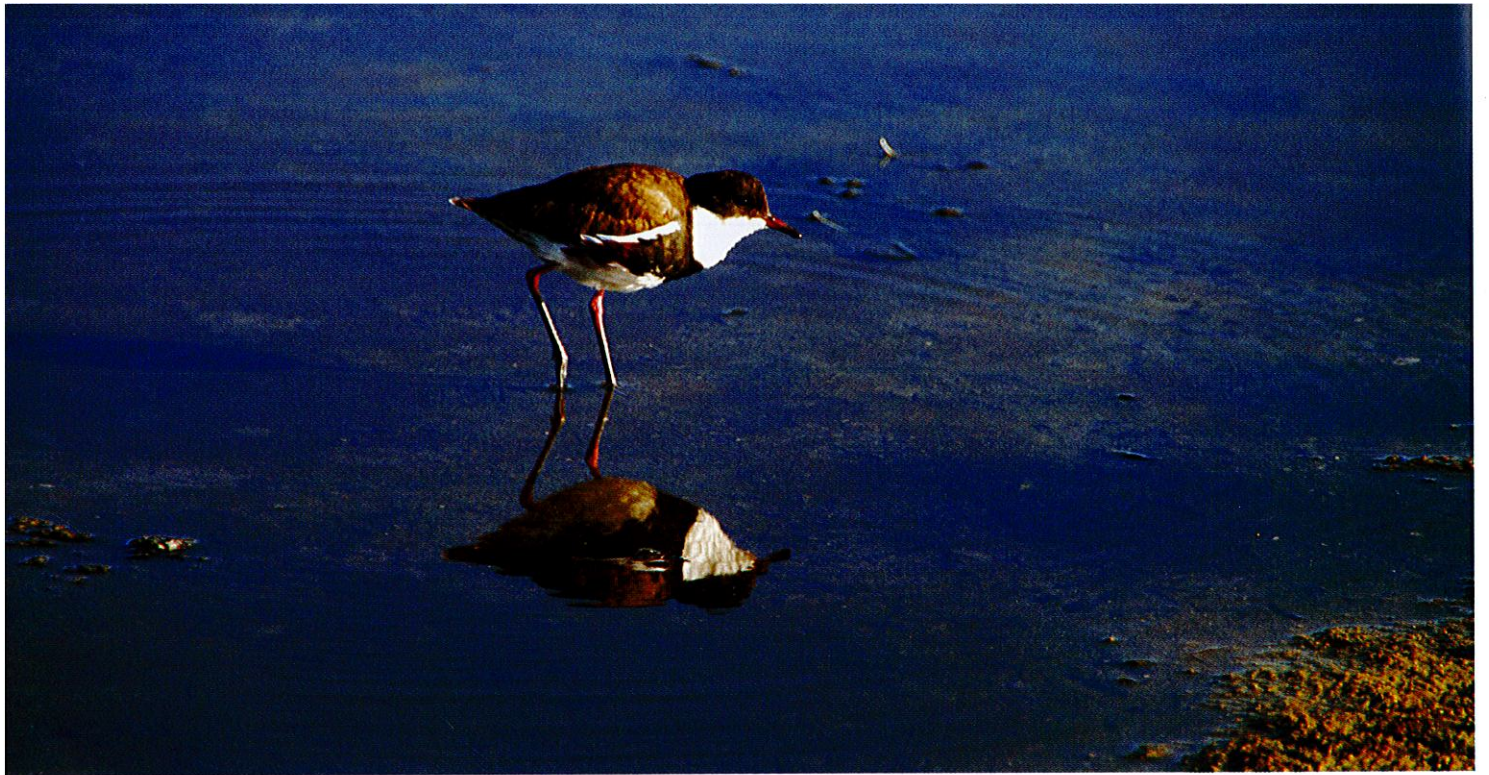


eating fish called *Gambusia* to eradicate the mosquito problem. Kerosene was sprayed in vast quantities and *Gambusia* were introduced in their thousands. However, the 'improvement' of the area by dredging and reclamation of the samphire marshes was seen as the long-term solution. The Crawley Swamp or 'quagmire' with its extensive undergrowth was seen as a particular problem. In March 1936 the dredge

Stirling was called in and about 40 acres (16 hectares) of low-lying land to the west of Crawley Swamp were reclaimed.

A bird haven

In early 1936, the state branch of the Australasian Ornithologists' Union called for a sanctuary at Pelican Point for rare migratory birds. It was claimed that the area "already formed



Above Red-kneed dotterel (*Erythrogonys cinctus*), Pelican Point.
Photo – Tim Graham-Taylor

Volunteers in action

The Swan Estuary Reserves Action Group (SERAG) was formed in 2010 to protect and restore the ecological health of the three Swan River Estuary reserves: Alfred Cove, Milyu and Pelican Point, which together form Swan Estuary Marine Park. Members of SERAG work closely with management authorities including the Department of Parks and Wildlife. Volunteers give their time and expertise for the benefit of native fauna and to ensure that these special places will survive for future generations. For more information visit the website www.swanestuaryreserves.org.au.

an attractive feeding ground for thousands of migrants, including many rare species". The chairman of the State Gardens Board promised that if bird life was affected by the reclamation at Crawley Swamp, he would "certainly see to it" that a sanctuary was provided. He was forced to keep his promise. In late 1936 the end of the sand spit at Pelican Point was declared a bird sanctuary and the public was urged not to use this area and to keep their dogs away.

In 1938, naturalist Dom Serventy deplored the changes taking place around the Swan River. He described Pelican Point as "a noted haunt of waterbirds" and stated that such havens were "rapidly diminishing". He claimed that the filling of a large part of the shallows bordering the marshes had impacted on bird life: "Although there is still an extensive shallow water area alongside the end of the sandspit ... the complete destruction of the samphire has left the birds no shelter, whilst the greater accessibility of the area to the public has resulted in many of the more shy birds either forsaking

the place entirely or becoming much scarcer than they were previously."

Ten years later, Serventy commented that with the re-establishment of samphire marsh and tidal shallows the area "was reverting to the old conditions". However, he added that "although waders and other waterbirds continue to frequent the locality, they apparently find it less attractive, and their numbers are decidedly fewer than before reclamation".

Long-time birdwatcher and local resident Judy Moyes reflected on birdwatching at Pelican Point from the 1960s: "When you went down in mid season, the little migratory waders came in a mob—and when they turned it was like a sheet of silver—hundreds of them. A breathtaking sight!"

Pelican Point remained a haven for many thousands of birds, particularly wading birds. Birdwatchers from other Australian states and from overseas visited and envied their Western Australian colleagues. A Western Australian Naturalists' Club excursion to the site in April 1939 recorded more

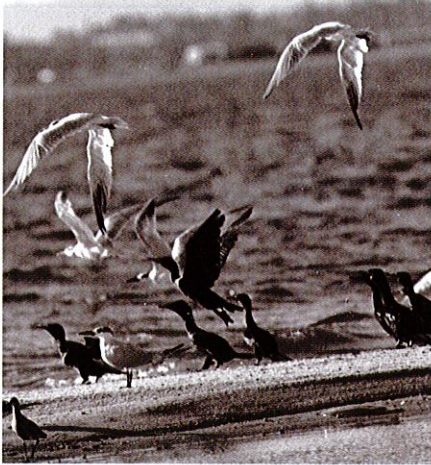
than 2,000 birds including 40 or 50 pelicans. Serventy identified more than 60 different species of both permanent and migratory birds in the sanctuary.

In 1962 landscape architect John Oldham prepared the Pelican Point Landscape Scheme. An essential part of the scheme, along with tree planting, was a 'birdwatching knoll.' This feature was supported by the then Tourist Development Authority, which saw the area becoming a key point on the tourist coach agenda—a place to see wading and migratory birds. In September 1962 a large mound of sand was constructed at the site and faced with limestone. A concrete cap was poured and a fence was erected in 1964 to protect the bird sanctuary.

A royal visitor

At 6am on 27 March 1963, HRH Prince Philip quietly left the royal yacht *Britannia* at Fremantle for a private visit to Pelican Point. An avid birdwatcher, he had been told that this site was the best spot for watching waders and other aquatic birds. For more than two hours he explored the area, taking photos and noting the birds he saw.

His list included Caspian terns, bar-tailed godwits, grey plovers, white-faced herons, many silver



Above A photo of birds at Pelican Point taken by avid birdwatcher the Duke of Edinburgh Prince Philip during a visit in 1963.

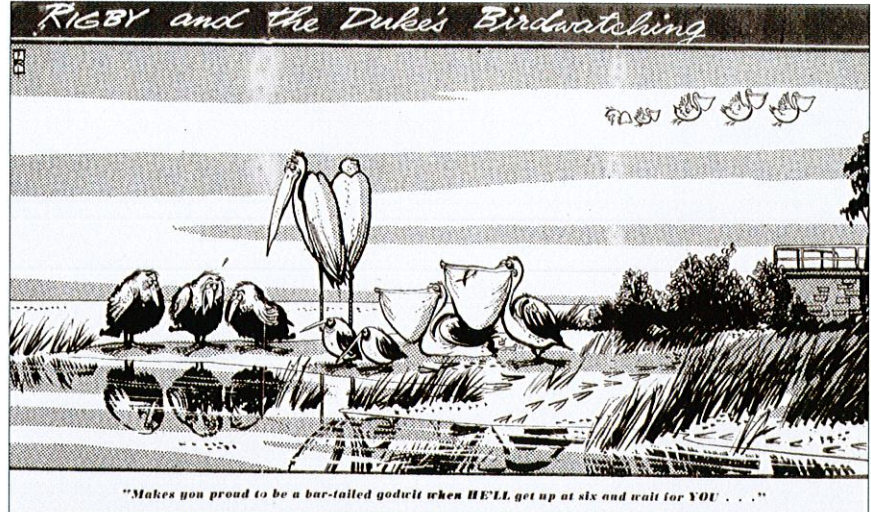
Photo – Buckingham Palace

Above right A cartoon from the *Daily News* commemorates the Duke's visit.

Illustration – Peter Rigby, Rigby Transmedia

Right Red-necked stilts.

Photo – Tim Graham-Taylor



gulls and four of the five species of Australian cormorants feeding in the shallows. Greatly impressed, Prince Philip commented that he hoped that this and other suitable sites would be “preserved as permanent bird sanctuaries.” A plaque now marks his visit.

Fifty years later, SERAG wrote to Buckingham Palace to see if the Duke’s photographs still existed. The Duke of Edinburgh’s archivist replied and sent a number of photographs and a copy of the Paul Rigby cartoon reproduced here.

Since the Duke’s visit in 1963 bird numbers have generally declined. Weekly surveys since 1971 record fewer migratory waders at Pelican Point, indicating problems both outside and within Australia. Local wader numbers have changed little but non-waders—the great cormorant, grey teal, Caspian and crested terns—have declined. As our city grows and further developments take place around the river, areas such as Pelican Point become even more significant.

Our welcome visitors

It is early September 2013 and the little red-necked stint (*Calidris ruficollis*) has arrived at Pelican Point on the Swan River after a journey of about 25,000 kilometres from Siberia and western Alaska. It breeds in the northern summer and feeds in the southern summer when the north is frozen. It will stay until early March or April when it returns to Siberia to breed.

The tiny bird is a migratory wader measuring an average 14 centimetres and weighing about 25 grams. It forages in wet saltmarshes and intertidal mudflats, eating insects and small invertebrates both en-route and while it is here.

Numbers have decreased over recent years so it is all the more important to protect and treasure those areas such as Pelican Point that provide their essential habitat.

Dr Sue Graham-Taylor works as a professional historian and curator. She has researched and written on diverse aspects of Western Australian social, economic and environmental history. Sue has a particular interest in the history of the Swan and Canning rivers. She can be contacted by email (suegrahamtaylor@gmail.com).

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