

urban antics

by John Hunter



Swan song

The black swan (*Cygnus atratus*) is so taken for granted by today's urbanites of the Perth region that it barely raises an eyebrow when viewed on the wetlands and waterways of the city. While common among the ducks and waterfowl throughout the continent, it is acceptable to say that it is uncommon only in central and northern Australia.

While the local Aboriginal people of south-west Australia had lived in concert with black swans for thousands of years, Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh surveyed what is now the Swan River in 1696 and named it after the majestic birds' presence.

Again in 1827, two years before European settlement,

botanist Charles Fraser with Captain James Stirling aboard the HMS *Success* further described for the rest of the world that: "The quantity of black swans, ducks, pelicans and aquatic birds seen on the river was truly astonishing. Without any exaggeration, I have seen a number of black swans, which could not be estimated at less than five hundred rise at once, exhibiting a spectacle which, if the size and colour of the bird be taken into account and the noise and rushing occasioned by the flapping of their wings, previous to their rising, is quite unique in its kind. We frequently had twelve to fifteen of them in the boats, and the crews thought nothing of devouring eight roasted swans in a day."

By 1870 it was quite noticeable that the settlers of the new colony had decimated the stocks of black swans on and around the Swan River and so legislation was enacted to ban the shooting of birds and animals indigenous to the Swan River Colony.

Since early times, the black swan has endeared itself deep into Western Australia's culture with the people of the state fully supporting the protection of this magnificent icon. The black swan was a literary or artistic image long before European settlement and its Australian heraldic role both today and in early colonial history is well documented. The contrast of this antipodean identity to the white swan of Europe has given us a unique icon of 'Australianness'

which features on our flag and coat of arms, as our bird and state emblem, and on the iconography of WA's institutions and commercial industry.

The Swan River Estuary, like the bird and marine life it supports, is not quite as pristine as it once was. Today it labours to cater for some two million people who live in and use the wider Swan-Canning catchment. At times, the sparkling waterway is also under stress from nutrient and marine water intrusion, lack of flushing from low winter rainfall, altered river flow from past dredging and the loss of fringing riverine vegetation. Past river management has been largely shaped by a variety of interests and goals, but it is hoped that with hindsight and understanding, the people of Perth will make more informed decisions for the future of the river and its dependants.

To me, the bugling and hissing of a rampart black swan protecting its fluffy grey cygnets has always been the epitome of extreme character and strength, whether it be on the Swan Estuary, beyond the breakers at Scarborough Beach or in the seclusions of Herdsman Lake.

Some 70 years ago and head-high to a small boy at Matilda Bay, Crawley, an angry swan was as tremendous as the take-off roar of nearby catalina flying boats ... and I can still hear the distant swan song from my workplace at the same location today.

DID YOU KNOW?

- A black swan stands at about 130 centimetres with a wingspan of almost two metres.
- Swans are known to live for up to about 40 years, are monogamous, but have about a seven per cent divorce rate.
- Swans feed primarily on aquatic plants but inland they forage on grain, grasses and crop foods.

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