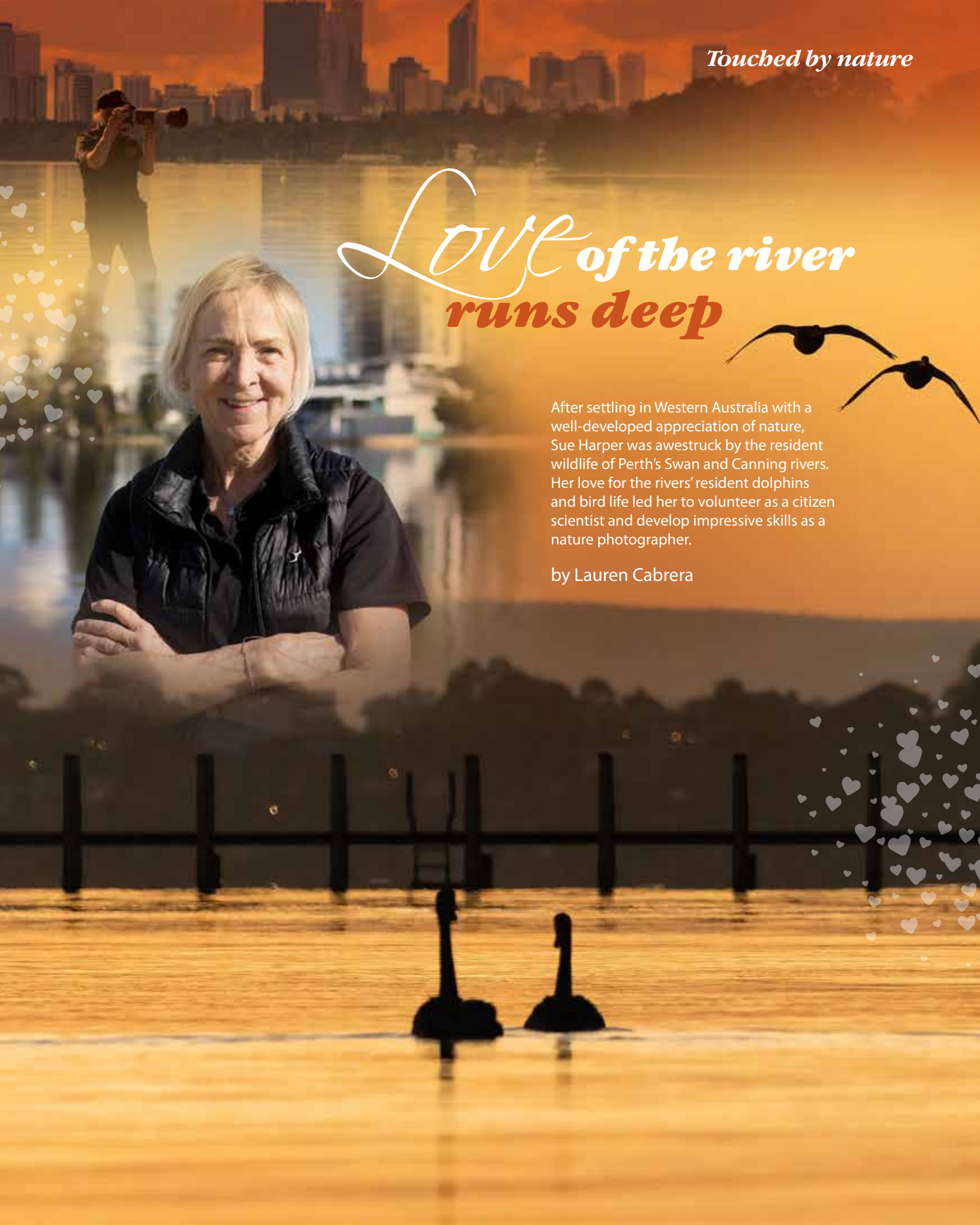


Touched by nature

Love of the river runs deep

After settling in Western Australia with a well-developed appreciation of nature, Sue Harper was awestruck by the resident wildlife of Perth's Swan and Canning rivers. Her love for the rivers' resident dolphins and bird life led her to volunteer as a citizen scientist and develop impressive skills as a nature photographer.

by Lauren Cabrera



Growing up in the rolling countryside of south-west England, Sue Harper's deep connection to nature blossomed from an early age. Weekends were spent exploring ponds and streams, digging up fossils, sketching and painting nature.

She has lived and worked in London, followed by stints in California and Korea before falling in love with Western Australia. Sue and her family eventually migrated to Perth, settling in Mount Pleasant.

"I wanted to live as close to the river as possible as I was enchanted by the sheer size and beauty of the Riverpark. It was far from the hustle and bustle of city life we'd known and with dolphins on our doorstep!" Sue said.

HAND IN HAND

Sue would often walk her dog around the Canning and Mount Henry bridges, always looking out over the river. Sue had enjoyed volunteering over the years in different countries so after reading an article in The West Australian newspaper in 2010 about River Guardians calling for volunteers for their Dolphin Watch program, she thought what better way to put her hours of walking around the river to good use.

"I thought it was the perfect opportunity for me to learn more about our

dolphins and help protect them," Sue said.

Fourteen years later, she is still volunteering and loving it.

"It's just so rewarding, and I've learned so much about Perth's Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin population, our river system and the abundance of wildlife that it supports."

"In the process, I've developed a passion for photography. It goes hand in hand with my love of nature and I really enjoy being able to capture all the beauty that I see."



Sue has won several awards for her volunteering work and her photography and is a self-confessed 'bird nerd'.

"You don't always see dolphins, but you always see birds," Sue said.

Sue attributes her dedication to volunteering to her connection to nature and how being by the river made her feel connected to her new country.

"People gravitate to the river for different reasons and many people deeply care about our rivers. They have a strong

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Top Sue photographing the Swan River.

Photo – Alan Gill/DBCA

Main Black swans (*Cygnus atratus*) on the Swan River at sunrise.

Photo – Sue Harper

Inset Sue Harper.

Photo – Alan Gill/DBCA

Above Resident dolphin in the Canning River.

Photo – Sue Harper

Left Sue in action capturing dolphin fin identities and data, to assist the Dolphin Watch project.

Photo – Alan Gill/DBCA



sense of guardianship to protect this incredible natural resource and ensure it remains a healthy and thriving ecosystem for the wildlife that it supports.”

“When you love something, you want to take care of it.”

Sue has a lot of respect for the cultural values of the Swan and Canning rivers, and strongly feels that sense of place when she is there.

“The Riverpark is a site of great cultural significance and it’s important to recognise that, coming to Australia. The Whadjuk Noongar connection with these waterways goes back more than 40,000 years, which just amazes me.”

GIVING BACK

“Time spent by the river is good for my well-being and good for my fitness, so why not give back to science while I’m out there too. I’m so grateful we have so many community volunteer groups that donate their time to protecting and enhancing the health of the river systems.”

“...many people deeply care about our rivers. They have a strong sense of guardianship to protect this incredible natural resource...”

Dolphin Watch volunteers gather data from what they have observed while in and around the rivers, and input that data into reports via the River Guardians website or smartphone app. The project combines data from research scientists and reports from Dolphin Watch volunteers to help better understand how the Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops aduncus*) use Perth’s rivers and estuary.

“I can’t speak highly enough of the friendly, engaging and committed Dolphin Watch team and volunteers, as well as the researchers from Murdoch and Edith Cowan universities who are experts in their fields. Their enthusiasm is infectious and has resulted in a highly successful citizen science project.”

NATURE’S WAY

Sue not only gathers information on the wildlife that reside in the Riverpark, but also empties fishing line bins dotted along the shoreline as part of the ‘Reel It In’ project.

Above left Often seeing shorebirds, Sue captures Australian pied oystercatchers (*Haematopus longirostris*).

Photo – Sue Harper

Top Recording data into the Marine Fauna sightings app.

Photo – Alan Gill

Above Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops aduncus*) socialising in the river.

Below Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) on the Canning River.

Photos – Sue Harper





How can you help care for the Swan and Canning rivers

- Join River Guardians via riverguardians.com
- Champion a Reel It In bin near you
- Be Dolphin Wise
- Be RiverWise by practicing low-impact gardening techniques and reduce harmful fertilisers going into waterways
- Collect any rubbish you see around the Riverpark
- Fish responsibly and dispose of fishing gear appropriately
- Report sick and injured wildlife to the Wildcare Helpline (08)9474 9055
- Participate in education programs for children and adults



“The devastating impacts that discarded fishing line and entanglements have on our wildlife really concerns me,” Sue said. “It’s one of the worst risks to our dolphin populations, from what I’ve seen.”

“It’s not only about the threats to our dolphins as everyone loves to see pelicans, swans, as well as other shore and migratory birds. Nobody wants any harm to come to them.”

While it’s always wonderful to see a new dolphin calf, Sue knows all too well about the high mortality rate. One resident female dolphin, Akuna, has lost

three calves due to illness, injury and fishing line entanglement, strengthening Sue’s devotion to clearing up hazardous discarded fishing gear.

“As I was the first to photograph Akuna’s new calf in 2018, Super was kindly named after me, an amalgamation of ‘Sue’ and ‘Harper’...Super.”

It was heartbreaking for Sue to witness Super struggle with injury and poor health. She disappeared in January 2022 and was never seen again. In June of that same year, Akuna had another calf, Kaya.

“Thankfully, Kaya seems to be thriving and is a very lively calf,” Sue said.

“The hard moments make you appreciate the good ones. The mortality rate is high so it’s a bit of a fight to survive and always so great to see the calves thrive.”

DOING YOUR BIT

Sue has enjoyed many special moments while she has been observing the rivers. She’s witnessed all kinds of dolphin behaviours including fishing frenzies, tail slapping and tossing jellyfish.



Above Black swans on the Swan River.

Photo – Sue Harper

Inset A Reel It In bin installed as part of the River Guardians project.

Photo – Alan Gill/DBCA

Left Some of the river dolphins that Sue helps to protect.

Photo – Sue Harper



Once she saw a dolphin leap out of the water several times and was able to capture the moment with her camera, which was shared many times on social media.

Whether people are running, walking, riding their bike or picnicking, everyone stops and stares at a dolphin and is so thrilled to see them.

Sue delights in swapping a dolphin story with Riverpark visitors, talking to others and sharing some dolphin facts. She knows how to tell each of the dolphins apart by looking at their distinct dorsal fin

Above left Australian pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*) with fishing tackle tangled on its leg.

Photo – Sue Harper

Above right Sue encourages other river users to help protect the river.

Photo – Alan Gill/DBCA

Right Perth city skyline and the Swan River viewed from Melville Bird Sanctuary.

Photo – Sue Harper

markings. With the help of Finbook, she can take a close look at her photos and get a reliable identification.

“I feel privileged and lucky to live in such a special place and feel a great sense of responsibility to help protect those who can’t protect themselves.”

“There are so many risks for wildlife and river health in general; a lot due to human impact such as rubbish, pollution and entanglements. It’s the wildlife that must cope with everything that ends up in the waterways.”

“To us, our rivers are recreational, but for wildlife, their rivers are home. Their needs should come before ours.”

“I advocate for wildlife in my own small way by reporting my dolphin observations and any wildlife injuries I see. I’m glad my photos can help serve a purpose to showcase the beauty of the river as well as the plight of wildlife so something can be done to ensure its well-being and survival.”

“It’s been a real life-changer for me being a part of an environmental volunteer group. I’ve met so many amazing people and learnt so much, it’s so rewarding.”

“I would encourage anyone who loves dolphins and enjoys the Riverpark

to join a conservation wildlife group like River Guardians or support your local environmental group. There’s so much out there that people can get involved in, even in a small way, that will make a difference in supporting a healthy river system.”



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