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While the difference in the sex-ratio of humpbacks caught this season does not appear to be significant, it is of some interest to note that a slightly higher percentage of males has so far been taken.

The Cheyne Beach Whaling Co., which took its first humpback for this season on June 5, completed its quota of 105 on July 15. This was a great improvement in the rate of catch compared with previous years.

CONSERVATION OF SHORT-NECKED TORTOISE

The following is the text of an address given by the Fauna Protection Officer, Mr H.B. Shugg, on July 20, during Tree Week. Negotiations for the purchase of the land are still proceeding.

"Within 25 miles of where we sit there exists a colony of animals which have lived on this coastal plain for thousands of years, perhaps for hundreds of thousands, or even millions. They have come down to us, relatively unchanged, from Jurassic times some 300 million years ago when reptiles dominated the earth. From time immemorial they have dwelt here yet, within the next few years - perhaps even the next few months - they will be extinct, unless we are prepared to make an effort to save them.

The animal I am talking about is the short-necked tortoise, a creature which is known scientifically as Pseudemydura umbrina. Perhaps you have never seen one, or even heard of it, for it is a retiring creature and never makes a fuss. They first became known to science about 1839 when one turned up in the Vienna Natural History Museum. It bore the cryptic label "Nova Hollandia". It probably came from the colony of which I have mentioned, for in those days Western Australia was commonly referred to as New Holland.

After this one had been collected the tortoise retired into obscurity again for more than a century, when a further specimen came to the knowledge of science. It was discovered on exhibition at the Perth Town Hall in the 1953 Wildlife Show!

The finding of this specimen excited more interest among local enthusiasts but no more specimens were collected until the then recently appointed Director of the Western Australian Museum, Dr W.D.L. Ride, persuaded nature advisory teacher Harry Butler to put his hand down a likely looking hole at Bullsbrook and pulled up the third specimen known to science.

This discovery brought its measure of fame to the hunters and inspired some more detailed searching by naturalists. Up to this time almost nothing was known of the animal's life history. No one knew where to look, or when, to find more. A Mr Philip, of the German Embassy, a keen herpetologist, caught another by sinking tins in the ground. Eventually a tortoise fell into one and naturally couldn't get out. A few more were found before an event occurred from which some keen naturalists have not yet recovered. A young lady on the staff of the Museum led a small party to the spot where she and Dr Ride had found the last two specimens and discovered 8 - more than the total collected by all the experts combined! The young lady was Miss Kay Vollprecht (now Mrs H.H. Thies). She said that the tortoises were found lying in shallow weed-ridden water but examination showed that their stomachs contained no vegetable matter. The short-necked tortoise is, apparently, completely carnivorous.

The collection of this relatively large number of tortoises gave Dr Ride the opportunity of learning something of the habits of the creature in captivity. He reported to the advisory committee on fauna conservation that the animal was a living paradox. It was too inefficient a swimmer to be dependent on fish for its staple diet, it had poor night sight, but disliked being abroad by day, and it seemed to hibernate for extremely long periods. Offered a variety of food in captivity, it showed a marked preference for imported fillets, a diet, which it is doubtful it could have obtained in the wild. Its life history is still shrouded in mystery. The best guess is that it hibernates all summer, in the crab holes which form in the peculiar soil structure of the region. These crab holes are comparatively shallow but some of them remain damp right through summer, when they are protected by the shade of sedge and paper-barks. In this relatively cool, moist atmosphere, the metabolic rate is low and the animals live on their fat.

Perhaps they also obtain a little food in the underground ponds before they dry up.

Comes winter, however, rain falls and forms shallow pools all over the swampy region. These small pools suddenly swarm with life - arthropods, including fresh water crustaceans. This is food for our friend. Lying in the pools he feeds at leisure and then, perhaps, moves on to another pool and cleans it out. Whether he does shift, and how many times he shifts, we do not know so we are not able to say how big an area any one tortoise needs for living space. We must find out and will have to carry out research to ensure that habitat, sufficient for his needs, is set aside to give him a reasonable chance of survival.

Unfortunately, time is running out for this ancient animal. The paddock on which it has been found which appears to be the only place in the world where it occurs, is privately owned. When the abode of the tortoise was pinpointed we approached the owners and explained the situation to them. They proved most co-operative and stopped the clearing which was going on in the block but the land has recently been sold and a subdivision is planned. For a long time we have been seeking finance to purchase the swamps and surrounding land from the owners and recently the Government decided to set £1,000 aside on this year's Estimates to meet part of the cost of the resumption and fencing. Unless we can buy back sufficient land the tortoise is doomed. We have opened a conservation fund and already subscriptions have been received from private sources. A most encouraging response has also been received from approaches to Sir Edward Hallstrom and to wildlife conservation authorities in the Eastern States and overseas. A public appeal will be launched to coincide with this year's Wildlife Show and it is to be hoped that West Australians, with their usual generosity, will contribute freely.

We cannot in this day and age allow any species to become extinct without doing our utmost to preserve it. The short-necked tortoise must be one of Australia's oldest, if not its eldest, living animal. It only occurs, as far as we know, in one paddock near Bullsbrook. To preserve it we must buy the land and fence it.

To buy the land we need money. I beg you, when the appeal is launched, to make your contribution to the conservation and protection of this remarkable animal and tell others about it. This is the first appeal of its kind in this State so keep up your reputation and when the campaign commences - give!"

WILD DUCKS ON THE GOLDFIELDS

Mr N.C. Nelson, of 14 Melba Street, Kalgoorlie, the President of the Eastern Goldfields Gun Club and an honorary warden of fauna, has forwarded a particularly interesting note on the occurrence of ducks in the Kalgoorlie district.

In his letter, which was received on July 3, Mr Nelson said that good bags were secured at Coonana, situated 106 miles from Kalgoorlie on the Trans-Australia Railway Line. This area, he said, had not been shot to the best of his knowledge for at least twenty years, but bags of 146, 154 and 80 ducks were taken during three visits of parties of up to 10 shooters. At the end of January, when the first visit was made there were about 800 ducks on the swamp (known as Coonana Cane Grass) and of these, at least 200 were the rare Speckled or Monkey Duck. This was the first time, Mr Nelson said, that he had seen this species around Kalgoorlie in such large numbers. It was certainly the first time, according to departmental records, that so large a concentration has been reported anywhere. Other shooters reported them in smaller quantities at Rowles Lagoon, north-west of Kalgoorlie and at Lake Emu, north east of Kalgoorlie.

After giving a most informative report on the lake of the Goldfields districts which still held water, Mr Nelson concluded by saying that the size of the Coonana Cane Grass Swamp was about half a mile long by a quarter of a mile wide. During the visits there, the number of ducks on the swamp varied from 800 to 2,000 or 3,000. The freckled duck, which Mr Nelson thought had bred at the swamp the previous year, was then the most prominent, but they appeared to have left the district at the time of his writing.