

# BOTULISM AND STARVATION

At the time of writing it is autumn and the wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain are again diminished in quality and quantity. Although the preceding seasons over the past year have been quite average, it is usual for the deterioration to reach a peak at this time every year.

Numerous requests for food and water for waterbirds at local Perth lakes have again been made in the press and to the Department. The situation however is far better than the drought conditions of the 1977/78 summer. It will be remembered that during that season, many waterfowl died from bacterial and algal poisoning. Although many birds were hand fed at lakes and sick birds rescued and treated, the waterbird populations declined.

Bacterial and algal poisoning and overcrowding on remnant waterways are natural hazards which will always occur somewhere during our dry hot seasons. What is hoped will not happen is a situation where epidemic proportions are experienced.

It is not the Department's role to hinder those people who feel they should tend and treat sick wildlife. Nor is it the role of this Department to become involved in something for which it has no facilities, equipment or staff.

One query from the general public has been the use of lawn clippings in a food crisis situation. The following relevant points have been determined by research officers involved with waterfowl conservation:

1. The nutritive value of lawn clippings is low. The Poultry Branch of the Department of Agriculture considers lawn clippings to have a protein content similar to lucerne which varies from 3 per cent to 6 per cent; by comparison, wheat, bran, pollard and bread have protein values of 10-11 per cent, 14 per cent and 11 per cent respectively.
2. Lawn clippings fed to waterfowl would need to be *freshly cut*. Mouldy lawn clippings would very likely give rise to botulism since the botulism inducing bacterium, *Clostridium botulinum* thrives in anaerobic conditions such as produced by decaying vegetable matter.
3. It has been suggested that waterfowl would find lawn clippings unpalatable.
4. Though some ducks and swans may appear to be "ravenous", most autopsies performed on waterfowl found dead on metropolitan lakes reveal that the cause of death has been botulism, not starvation caused by food shortage.

Since the drought of 1977/78, it has been noticeable at certain lakes in the Perth area, that private individuals, companies and shire councils have been providing bulk food (bread etc.) to supplement natural food stocks.

Unfortunately it is not only providing a "false economy" situation, promoting over population but contributing to bacterial poisoning by left-overs rotting in stagnant summer pools.