

ROSE BANKSIAS AND FRECKLED DUCKS

It is not unusual for a Nature Reserve to harbour a rare plant or animal, indeed some have been set aside specifically for this reason—Two Peoples Bay and the Noisy Scrub-bird is an example.

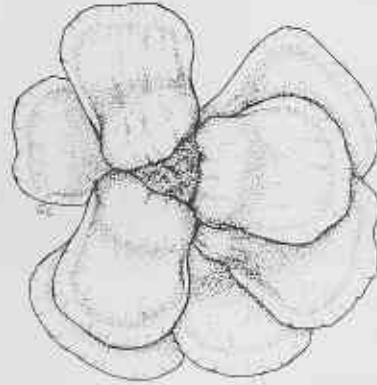
North of Perth in the Dandaragan Shire, 'Namming Lake Nature Reserve' [Reserve No. 28558], was set aside primarily because of its importance as waterfowl habitat. There are six freshwater lakes at the north of the Reserve and many species of waterfowl can be seen there regularly in large numbers—among them the Freckled Duck is often observed.

Although there are records of Freckled Ducks from most parts of Australia, there is no doubt that most of these birds are vagrants. They are only found regularly in a few places in the south-east of the Murray-Darling Basin and in the south-west of Western Australia. Their regular range in Western Australia is very limited and they only breed in a few places.

The Freckled Duck *Stictonetta naevosa* is a rare species of great interest to the scientific community. The duck shows primitive characteristics which link it with geese and swans as well as ducks. For example, it has a windpipe similar to that of a Magpie Goose; it has a voice like that of a swan; feeds, walks, swims and builds its nest like a swan; but it looks like, and has a skeleton like a duck.

Scientists do not agree as to where the bird should be placed in the evolution of waterfowl; but few would deny that the waterfowl family of today passed, in evolution, through duck-like ancestors before differentiating into swans, geese and others. The Freckled Duck is probably the closest living species of waterfowl to that ancestor and is yet another of the several primitive animals which survive only in Australia.

The waterfowl, and in particular the Freckled Duck, gave this relatively large Reserve (about 5 411 hectares) an important place in the chain of Nature Reserves throughout the State. However, the value of the Reserve and surrounding area increased further when Wildlife Officers surveying the Reserve in late 1978 found a rare Banksia—*Banksia laricina* or the



Fruit of the Rose Banksia
(*Banksia laricina*)

Rose Banksia—in small isolated patches just outside the Reserve. This banksia is called the Rose Banksia because of the fruits—thin, wavy and rounded they radiate from the slender axis, each capsule like a rose petal.

These banksias were of interest because this species had not previously been found north of the Moore River. Commercial pickers know of this site and may have known of it for some time. They have been taking flowers and seeds of this banksia for at least two years. It is not known how much pressure of this kind these small populations of banksias can tolerate before their numbers start to dwindle. Fewer seeds will mean fewer shrubs to replace the old ones.



Freckled Duck (*Stictonetta naevosa*)

Down is used to line the nest. Between 5 and 7 eggs are usually laid though larger clutch sizes have been reported. Very little is known of the breeding and nesting behaviour of this species.

Another problem which affects the potential survival of these small populations of Rose Banksias is fire. Frequent wildfires will not only harm the parent shrubs they will kill the young ones. It takes about six years from germination for a Rose Banksia to reach the stage when it can produce seeds. Therefore, over a period of time frequent hot fires could destroy a population of Rose Banksias totally.

Although it was unfortunate that these rare plants occurred outside Nature Reserve No. 28558, it was fortunate that they grew on unvested Crown Land. On the 11th May 1979, two areas of this Crown Land, containing the Rose Banksias were added to the Reserve.

'Namming Lake Nature Reserve' is of great importance to the conservation of Western Australia's wildlife. It contains a wealth of wildfowl, including the Freckled Duck. Many other birds and mammals are also found there. The flora is diverse and is characteristic of the rich flora of the Northern Sandplains. Now the Reserve has been vested in the Western Australian Wildlife Authority it has to be managed carefully to ensure it retains its value in the conservation of some of our unique plants and animals.



Freckled Duck (*Stricktonetta naevosa*)

A dark brownish-black duck with a large, pointed head. It is uniformly freckled with white or buff.