

Spotting creatures involves looking up as well as down, to catch this spoonbill in flight.
Picture: David Ford



Unseen animals

Mysteries

WILD IN THE CITY

Moments from a busy road, the Chapman River Regional Park is a haven for wildlife and a vital link for their survival, as **Jon Solmundson** discovers

Geraldton, like any other city in Australia, was once a country town — and as much as the beautiful beaches and warm locals have stuck around, the close relationship with the bush can be hard to maintain in the artificial glow of inner city cafes and office blocks.

So it was with some surprise that when I asked a friend where he had taken a set of beautiful wildlife

photographs, his response was: “Just around the corner, mate”.

At first I regarded this with some suspicion, assuming he was saying “just around the corner” in the same way someone who lives rurally says it — where the next “corner” is half an hour down the track, gunning it at 120km/h on private farm land.

CONTINUES PAGE 4

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Mysteries Unseen animals

FROM PAGE 3

So again, I was more than a little surprised when we were driving along Chapman Road to find these hidden animals of Geraldton and after three minutes my naturalist guide, David Ford, pointed to a turn-off.

"Just past the Red Rooster, over there," he says.

The back of the fast food outlet does not strike me as a hotspot for native wildlife, at least not for the kind I'm looking for, but I take his directions. David points out another turn or two and, before I know it, we are staring at the entrance to a natural park.

Chapman River Regional Park is something you could almost blink and miss as you drive over the bridge that spans the narrow body of water.

From the outside it looks like a couple of rows of shrubs along the waterway, but from up close this is a small piece of paradise.

David jumps out of the car, already armed with two cameras and a backpack full of water.

"You never go without water," he tells me, in a voice that has learnt from hard experience.

Later he will recount a time he was stung by a swarm of bees and became delirious and dehydrated as he drove to hospital. It's a stark reminder that even this close to the city the bush is a wild place.

We walk for a couple of minutes before David calls me to a stop.

"Just here," he points down at the ground. There's a small rock and a clearing in the shrubbery. "This is my

rock. It doesn't mean much to anyone else, but I know it because I put it here. This is where we're going to start."

And he plunges into the bush.

David is a lifelong walker. His boots are tied tight. His strides are confident but noiseless. It's a stark contrast to my bumbling behind him — white canvas hipster shoes steadily filling with dirt.

David does this almost every day.

"I drive a bus all day and I just have to sit there when I'm driving," he says. "It's nice to get out in the fresh air and use my legs a bit. It's a good change of pace."

I ask him how long he has done this. He says his love of nature goes back to when he lived in Chile, before his father brought him and his nine siblings to Australia.

"I used to walk with my brothers all the time," he says. "Chile is a beautiful country. Australia is not like that. It's also a beautiful country, but it's a different kind of beautiful. It's all red and sand — a kind of ugly beautiful, you know?"

David holds this conversation while ducking under trees, climbing over rocks and avoiding spider webs I barely see.

"Look at that, beautiful!" he exclaims as we stop 10cm away from a spider the size of my hand.

As hairy as the spider may be, he has a point. The web glistens in the sun as the sounds of gently moving water and birdsong fill the air.

David pulls me to a stop throughout our walk with sudden discoveries such as this. A tortoise here, a kingfisher there. Whenever I

A bird of prey.
Pictures: David Ford

it is a place swarming with wildlife.

The Chapman River parkland running through Geraldton is called a "wildlife corridor", linking one patch of bushland to another and allowing the animals safe passage under the speeding cars on the bridges above.

Curtin University's Associate Professor Grant Wardell-Johnson explains that the corridors are intended to link one piece of bushland to another, but can become habitats in their own right.

"In an urban context, you'll find that any kind of natural or semi-natural vegetation will be a habitat for some kind of organism," he says.

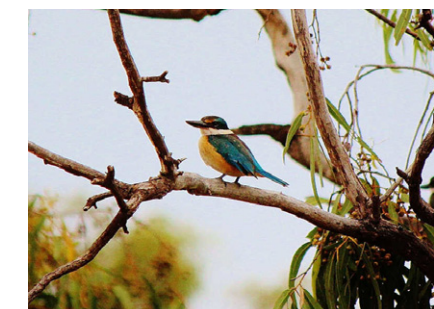
"This can have negative aspects. Some predatory animals will be able to use those corridors as sites they can hunt along — and if it's a narrow corridor, the predators might get more advantage out of it than the organisms you want to conserve."

I ask Dr Wardell-Johnson about the number of freight trucks in the area because of the port, and he agrees the corridors could help conserve

CONTINUES PAGE 6

Unseen animals Mysteries

Egrets love our waterways.



Kingfishers hunt by the river.

"Sometimes I wait for half an hour and still miss the shot. It's not a problem, I just love it out here."

DAVID FORD

Bee-eaters add a splash of colour.



Ducks don't mind the murky waters.



The prickly pear is not good eating.



A bush spider, about 15cm across.



A river tortoise sunbathes on a log.

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A bittern in flight.

FROM PAGE 4

native animals by keeping them off the road.

"But in my view one of the main reasons for having wildlife corridors and patches of bush in an urban landscape is to help people reach greater appreciation for the biodiversity usually lacking in our cities," he says

There is certainly plenty of biodiversity here. Even the plants are sprouting bright colours.

David offers another piece of surprising advice: "Don't eat the prickly pears, though, they're not like the prickly pears in Chile, beautiful, sweet fruits — no, these taste bad and are just purple all the way through."

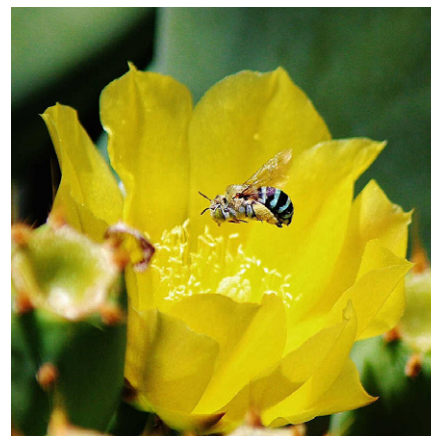
I hadn't considered eating the random wild fruit growing in the park, but David seems to be a bit more of an outdoorsman.

After a couple of hours, David and I walk past a familiar-looking tree. I realise we must be getting close to the end of our circuit.

David pulls me up to a halt again. "There!" he says, pointing at a shrub a couple of metres from us.

"Oh, yes!" I say. I'm not sure what is so remarkable about the shrub, but follow his enthusiasm to be sociable. "You see the lizard?" He continues to point to the shrub.

It takes me 30 seconds of solid



Native blue-banded bees thrive.

staring before I make out the shape of a blue-tongue lying in the shade, underneath the shrub.

Here I realise finding Geraldton's hidden animals has two important components.

The first is one David can teach me easily, to find the corridors and bushlands buried in our suburbs. The second is something that takes much longer to learn — a kind of patience and keen-eyed awareness that lets you see the native critters tucked away in their hidey-holes.

As our walk comes to an end, David stops by a bend in the river. Fish swim in the stream, popping up to the surface every now and then and opening their mouths wide.

"They do that because the water is so still," David says. "There's no



Swallows can often be seen in pairs.

oxygen in it, so they have to come up top to breathe."

I ask him how he knows this, and he tells me he reads a lot.

"I just love nature," he says.

"I could just sit here for an hour or two. If you want to see the animals, that's what you have to do — sit here with the camera, watching and waiting. Sometimes I wait for half an hour and still miss the shot. It's not a problem, I just love it out here."

He drinks in the sight of fish a little more, pointing out which of the fish are native, and which are introduced.

"But it's much more beautiful in winter. You should come back with me again then," he says, and confidently strides off towards the car park.



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