

WILDLIFE Australia magazine

SPRING 2011 Vol. 48 No. 3

\$10⁹⁵ inc gst

ASK A WILD DOLPHIN

PAGE 12

RAINFOREST MAMMAL CONNECTIONS

PAGE 16

SPIDERS: EXQUISITELY CAPTIVATING

PAGE 24

MOVEMENT

Follow the action to the heart of the story



COVER PHOTO

Photo © Tony Bartram

BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN

(*Tursiops truncatus*)

From beggar to partner: this dolphin is now in the identification catalogue for a program based on the Kangaroo Island Dolphin Watch model. See pp 12-17 for more.

WILDLIFE Australia

www.wildlife-australia.org

SPRING 2011 VOLUME 48 NO. 3

WILDLIFE Australia is published by the community conservation group Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland as a major environmental awareness and educational initiative.

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Printer Kingswood Press

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ISSN 0043-5481



CONTENTS Spring 2011



REGULARS

EDITORIAL

by Saren Starbridge 2

WPSQ IN ACTION

Spreading the word..... 5

SPRING SKIES

An animated universe
with Mark T. Rigby 6

NATUREWATCH

How and where to see wildlife
around Australia
with Martin Cohen..... 7

SCRATCHINGS & RUSTLINGS

Long trips, shrinking world
with Greg Czechura 40

CITYANIMAL

Rats race but crows rule
with Darryl Jones 41

SIX SPECIES

Australian burrowers
with Lee K. Curtis..... 42

CYBERJUNGLE

with Stephen Goodwin..... 44

CONSIDERING

In time
with Ilka Blue Nelson 45

IN OUR HANDS: WILDLIFE ARTISTS

Island inspired
featuring Fred Peters 48

WILDLIFE CROSSWORD

by Sarah Martin 49

FEATURES

12

16



WALKING WITH DOLPHINS: KANGAROO ISLAND DOLPHIN WATCH

By Phyll and Tony Bartram

In a sea of data, volunteers explore the wild, unknown world of common bottlenoses.



EAT UP AND BE COUNTED: RESEARCHING RAINFOREST CONNECTIVITY

By Katrien Geurts

What do you get when you apply a dab of peanut butter to a patch of rainforest?

SPRIKE



STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KAY GRIFFITHS

HOPE, TRUTH AND PROCESS

A REAL-LIFE CHICK-LIT TALE, of dreams, drama and a plucky youngster.

On a lovely, sunny September morning at our home in the hills east of Perth, we listened to the noisy 'creee-creee' of forest red-tailed black-cockatoos (*Calyptorhynchus banksii naso*). The sound was familiar but this year, the behaviour was different.

While a male looked on, a female with juvenile in tow was intent on inserting herself into the upright end of a broken branch, chewing the edges of what was an obviously much-too-small space. The pair returned several times over the next month, perhaps hoping the space had enlarged.

We had heard about a shortage of suitable nesting hollows for endangered black-cockatoos such as the forest red-tailed and two species of white-tailed black-cockatoos, Baudin's (*C. baudinii*) and Carnaby's (*C. latirostris*) – but this was the first time we had seen it. As well as local native species, new competitors – feral bees and aggressive parrot species not historically found in this area, such as galahs and corellas – scramble for the hollows typically found in 'stag' trees more than a hundred years old. To help in the short term, we found and ordered a 'Cockatube' and our friend Rod, tree-

surgeon and cockatoo sympathiser, created the 'Taj Mahal' of nestboxes from local jarrah wood. We installed both in visible locations: the Cockatube on the south side of a living tree and the Taj Mahal high in a large, dead jarrah. Installing the Taj Mahal was particularly challenging, as it weighed about 65kg.

Check it out

Our Landcare group warned us not to expect nesting for two years, as cockatoos are wary of new things in their environment, but our hopes rose immediately when all three black-cockatoo species investigated the box. Alas, it was not to be. We documented many inspections and fights, both interspecies and intraspecies, over the Taj Mahal – including five pairs of Baudin's in a feather-flying fight – and some interest but no fights over the Cockatube.

Nearly three years later, in mid-2010 a pair of Carnaby's became very serious about nesting in the Taj Mahal, staying in the box for extended periods and making modifications to the decor. A pair of forest red-tailed black cockatoos had the same idea, and the tenancy war was on. Each time the

Photo © Kay Griffiths



Photo © Kay Griffiths

(A)

... OUR HOPES ROSE IMMEDIATELY WHEN ALL THREE BLACK-COCKATOO SPECIES INVESTIGATED THE BOX.



Photo © Kay Griffiths

(B)



Photo © Kay Griffiths

(C)

Left: Will they or won't they? Spike awaits a return to the nestbox in the hope his parents will resume caring for him.

A: After lowering Spike for a regular top-up of food and water, Rod carefully raises him back up to the Taj Mahal to continue the wait.

B: No matter how hard she tries, this female can't quite make this small space work as a nesting hollow, prompting the author and friends to install nestboxes. **C:** Baudin's black-cockatoos battle over the nestbox.

Carnaby's pair departed, the red-taileds would fly in and make their own modifications. They usually left before the Carnaby's returned, but there were a few tense stand-offs between the hopeful home-owners. We were nervous, knowing that cockies competing for boxes sometimes destroy their rivals' eggs, but eventually the red-taileds gave up.

By spring we were fairly sure the Carnaby's had eggs. Mornings and evenings, the male would fly to the box, calling from a distance. The waiting female would fly out to meet him and both birds would be away for some time, presumably feeding. This seemed odd, as we understood that females stayed in the nest at all times to brood the eggs, with the male feeding her. Several times we did see the male beak-feeding the female close to the box.

Drama

After about four weeks, the female began to stay away for extended periods. The pair would return regularly, with the male entering the box for about 15 to 20 minutes before the female took her turn. Often the birds would regurgitate the

food on top of the box in preparation for feeding. Clearly a chick had hatched. We decide to record events as best we could with photographs, and often set the camera and tripod up in an inconspicuous spot before the parents were due to return.

One day after the morning feed, when we knew the parents would be away for several hours, Rod climbed the tree with a camera, carefully peered over the edge of the Taj Mahal – and gave us a huge grin and thumbs-up. We guessed the chick – small, pink, prickly and wobbling its head to receive the meal it hoped was coming – would be about two weeks old. We planned to check its progress in another two weeks and, when Rod dropped in, up the tree he went.

This time there was a long silence – then Rob muttered, 'It doesn't look good.'

The chick had hooked itself on the weld-mesh ladder, but was still alive. The Taj Mahal was more than a meter deep, putting the chick out of reach. Rod had come without his usual equipment, but we managed to lower the extremely heavy edifice to the ground, cut a doorway into the side and,



WE HAD TO KNOW FOR SURE WHETHER SPIKE'S PARENTS HAD RETURNED OR ABANDONED HIM.

D

Photo © Kay Griffiths



E

Photo © Kay Griffiths



F

Photo © Kay Griffiths



G

Photo © Kay Griffiths

D: A pair of forest red-tailed black cockatoos court and preen. This species has also shown an interest in the nestbox.

E: Can the 65kg Taj Mahal be repaired and re-installed before Spike's parents return?

F: For some reason, the Cockatube has received less interest than the Taj Mahal, but some modifications may make a difference.

G: We'll take it! A pair of Carnaby's claim the Taj Mahal and begin nesting.

with small bolt cutters, disentangle the chick from the mesh.

Despite its ordeal, the chick drank readily and seemed eager to feed, but it looked skinny and had some damage to its beak. We hoped to return it to its parents, but decided to seek professional help first, and took it to Glenn and Bill Dewhurst at the Kaarakin Black-Cockatoo Rehabilitation Centre. Bill carefully fed the weak and exhausted chick, but didn't like its chances.

But the chick was plucky. He survived the night in his heated box and, after a feed, went to the Perth Zoo for veterinary care, a course of antibiotics, and a name: Spike.

Planning a reunion

The Carnaby's parents spent a frantic weekend. Their chick was gone and their nestbox was on the ground. Spike, meanwhile, was looking stronger and attracting plenty of interest, including – as an endangered species – the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). The recommendation

was for Spike to be raised by his parents. This meant repairing and modifying the Taj Mahal and getting it back up the tree on Monday before the parents arrived for their usual 7.15pm feed. We nearly made it. However, it was an overcast day. The birds returned early, saw Rod up the tree with their nestbox and veered away.

What to do? We waited. When it was too dark to expect the parents to return, Rod climbed up by torchlight and brought Spike down for another night of food and warmth at Kaarakin.

By the time he was returned at 6.30am Tuesday, Spike's support group included four adults and four children. Rod put Spike back up in the Taj Mahal and we settled back with binoculars to wait. And wait. We had to know for sure whether Spike's parents had returned or abandoned him. Every few hours, Rod went up the tree, brought Spike down for a feed and took him back.

To everyone's eye-watering relief, towards dusk, his parents returned. The male approached the nestbox – then stopped. The female waited quietly, high in the tree. The male approached within a metre of the box, raising his crest and bobbing his head – possibly in confusion. He had seen the box on the ground, seen a person near the box, experienced the absence of his chick. Spike, not knowing his parents were near, remained silent. The female called sharply and flew off. The male followed. They never returned. Spike was an orphan. Rod climbed the tree in darkness for Spike's final descent and return to Kaarakin.

New digs

A fortnight later, we visited Spike at his new home. The centre, once the Cahuna Wildlife Park and still home to a large group of kangaroos and some dingoes, occupies a large property east of Perth. Ducks and geese come and go from the lake and rivers constructed on the property and a revolving building, formerly a restaurant, offers great views of Perth. Renovations since the Cahuna days include large aviaries for black-cockatoos, with more under construction. Due to security concerns, the centre is not open to the public.

Our first stop, of course, was Spike. He looked great, had doubled his body weight, and took evident delight in Bill's grooming of his adult feathers breaking out of their sheaths. His damaged beak had healed, though it still needed cleaning after a feed, and his intelligent, cheeky and trusting personality captivated everyone. He even made a brief appearance on Channel Nine news.

General manager Chris Phillips took us to see the other residents: a mix of red-tailed and white-tailed black-cockatoos hit by cars or shot, immatures needing a helping hand to attain independence or underweight adults lacking the energy to get off the ground. Several had been rescued from illegal

KAY GRIFFITHS and her husband offer their sincere thanks to Bill, Glenn and Andrea Dewhurst, Chris Phillips and the volunteers at Kaarakin for their considerable efforts to care for Spike. For more information on Kaarakin Black-cockatoo Rehabilitation Centre, visit www.blackcockatoorecovery.com

Visit us this spring on Facebook (www.wildlife.org.au/wamfacebook) for updates on any Taj Mahal tenants.



Photo © Kay Griffiths

Although his story is short, Spike may have a long legacy as the first known Carnaby's chick to be hatched in any of the artificial nestboxes in the Perth area.

captivity and had never eaten real cocky food. Those that make a good recovery are released back to the area where they were found. Others, too damaged to fly or too attached to humans, would remain in the aviaries and be encouraged to breed so their young could be released.

We planned to visit Spike again in a few weeks but, sadly, it was not to be. One day he went off his food and died shortly afterwards. An autopsy showed he had inhaled food into his lungs.

New tales

This is the end of Spike's tale. But there will be new stories soon. A week after Spike's departure, red-taileds and Baudin's were again investigating the Taj Mahal with great interest.

We don't know why the Taj Mahal generated so much interest while the Cockatube was largely ignored, but Rod decided to try increasing the plastic Cockatube's appeal by removing the ends of the weld-mesh ladder and cladding the outside in wood with an insulating air gap. We hope that it, too, will become a valued nest box.

Caught up in Spike's drama, we hadn't realised that he and the Taj Mahal had made history. Of 86 artificial boxes placed in the Perth metropolitan area by DEC and other agencies, none showed evidence of use, as reported by DEC in 'Artificial hollows for Carnaby's black-cockatoo' (www.dec.wa.gov.au/content/view/6333/2361). The Taj Mahal and Spike were the first. If forest red-taileds or Baudin's nest in the Taj Mahal, history will be made again, as neither species has ever been recorded nesting in an artificial nest box, anywhere.

It should be an interesting spring.