

# THE SWAN

## big city river magic

: ALEX V J STEFFE



Denison's Nudibranch



Blue swimmer crab feeding on a black mussel shell

I'm embellishing a bit, but the general outline of the story does in fact happen on a regular basis along Perth's Swan River foreshore. (but I lied about the well-trained children). The fact is, Perth's Swan River is a recreational playground attracting a large variety of watersports including scuba diving and as a Western Australian, I think I'm very lucky to be able to dive in a river system that's clean and abundant in aquatic life, located on the doorstep of a capital city.

The Swan River is regularly dived for prawns, fish, crabs, scallops and mussels, but as a photographer I find the diversity and abundance of colourful subjects is its

greatest asset. The river itself may be perceived as dull and bland by many, however one needs to stop and look closer to appreciate the colour and diversity. A camouflaged flathead lying on the riverbed is easily overlooked – but have you ever noticed its stunning opal blue eyes!

For 25 years the Swan has amazed me with its interesting biodiversity and colour. Sure, at times the visibility could be better, but like any dive, planning to the correct weather and tidal information has a lot to do with having five metres or 20 metres of visibility. Even with poor visibility the Swan can be interesting, especially if you dive it on twilight or after

† IMAGINE BASKING BY COOL TRANQUIL RIVER WATERS DURING A HOT SUMMER'S EVENING, AFTER A STRESSFUL WEEK AT WORK. THE FAMILY'S GATHERED AROUND THE BBQ ON THE FORESHORE. THE ESKY IS FULL OF ICE-COLD BEER, THE WIFE IS GIVING THE CHARDONNAY A NUDGE AND THE KIDS ARE HAPPILY SPLASHING AROUND THE WATERS EDGE. YOU SLOWLY DON YOUR DIVE GEAR AND WADE INTO THE MURKY DEPTHS WITH A SCOOP-NET IN ONE HAND AND A DIVE TORCH IN THE OTHER. AN HOUR LATER YOU EMERGE TRIUMPHANT WITH A FEED OF FRESH PRAWNS, CRABS AND SCALLOPS. AS YOU MAKE YOUR WAY UP THE BEACH THE FAMILY GATHERS IN ANTICIPATION FOR THE SEAFOOD BANQUET YOU'RE ABOUT TO PREPARE ON THE NOW-SIZZLING HOT PLATE. YOU STRETCH OUT A SOGGY HAND AND YOUR WELL-TRAINED CHILDREN ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR PRIMAL GESTURE AND FETCH AN ICE-COLD BEER FROM THE ESKY.

dark – this is when a lot of the colourful and interesting subject matter comes to life.

As it's an estuarine river system, the Swan River is also home to many juvenile fish species such as pink snapper, red gurnard, and even the occasional boarfish. Cephalopods, such as squid, octopus and cuttlefish are also seen in the lower reaches of the river, as well as the occasional stingray. Interesting photographic subjects such as the fingered dragonet *Dactylopus dactylopus* with its finger-like pectoral fins and stunningly colourful dorsal fin display is always an exciting find, as is the slender sea moth *Pegasus volitans*, which resembles a creature from an old Godzilla movie, with

Most people don't associate the Swan River with colourful critters, but at night around certain habitats, the critters come out to play.

its hard outer body and tubular mouth. Bubble shells, mantis shrimp, nudibranchs, pebble and decorator crabs, holothurians, anemone's and assorted starfish are also fantastic subjects to photograph.

My highlight of every dive in the Swan is the resident Western Australian seahorse *Hippocampus elongatus*. I find these creatures captivating and have often spent the vast majority of my dive searching for and photographing them. Though most of the seahorses in the river are a bland brown colour, there are also bright colour variations such as yellow, white, purple, pink and red.

The most interesting aspect of diving and photographing river creatures here is that different species of aquatic life are found in different habitats. Once you learn where each species lives, you can almost guarantee you'll find what you're looking for on every dive. For example, seahorses are usually found around old boat moorings, as they use their tails to grasp onto the ropes and mooring chains. Pebble crabs on the other hand are found in four to eight metres of water where the bottom sediment is mainly shell and sand. Once you go deeper into the silt and mud your chances of spotting this type of crab diminish. I usually concentrate around four to 12 metres where shell rubble, small limestone reefs, boat wrecks and moorings along with mussel beds provide a large diversity of habitat and variety of subject matter. Night dives during neap tides at slack high water usually provide the best visibility.

Another advantage of observing fish life and their habitats in this way is that it educates you as to where and when to look for certain species. This has a two-fold advantage. Firstly every dive becomes a learning experience and secondly as you start finding new things, you begin to enjoy the dive more. So whether you are a hunter killer, or a photographer, this method of diving the river will be of advantage to you.

As you've guessed by now, observation is a key element in diving the Swan, but I guess it also has a lot to do with photography, which is why I find it more interesting to hunt down a subject with a camera in my hands. Mind you, when the prawns are running and I'm out of film, I've been known to go back for a second dive and get a feed for the family!

A strange and interesting thing you may notice when you first dive the Swan River, is a grunting sound resembling a horn sounding-off in the distance. This weird phenomenon is actually made by a large fish called a mulloway, which I'm told, grinds its gill rakers at the back of its throat thus producing the strange sound. The sound is quite loud and can even be heard through the hull of a boat at anchor. The first time I heard this grunting noise was about 20 years ago. That turned into the world's shortest dive, as the grunting reminded me of the *Jaws* movie theme (which I'd seen a few weeks earlier). I've since conquered my fear of scary movie themes!

I have noticed over the years that at different times of the year you see distinct changes in the aquatic life. Whether it has to do with the time of the year or the moon phase, I'm still not sure, but the river definitely goes through stages, where certain species become more active, or their behaviour changes in some way. For example, on several occasions I've noticed the difference in a single week, as concentrations of holothurians (sea cucumbers) tripled and for the first time, they all seemed to be feeding at once. At the same time a large diversity of starfish species was also seen. I've kept my eyes open during these times to see if the holothurians or the starfish were about to spawn, but it wasn't so. I did manage however to photograph one starfish species eating another, which I thought was cool!

Most people don't associate the Swan River with colourful critters, but at night

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around certain habitats like boat wrecks or moorings, the critters come out to play. Nudibranchs, decorator crabs, holothurians, starfish and the seahorses all add a lot of colour over a small area. Mantis shrimp, dragonets, bubble shells, sponges, anemones and cuttlefish are also common at night and add to the diversity of colour.

Another great advantage of diving the Swan is its easy access and many sheltered dive locations. There's numerous car parks, BBQ facilities, parks, jetties and beaches on both sides of the river. Places like The Coombe, Bicton Baths and Point Walter are great examples of some of the popular dive sites with a car park and easy beach access. Some dive sites are so well protected you can even dive them during a southerly winter squall, which I actually attempted one cold evening about six years ago. The dive was fun and the underwater vis was good, but the problem arose when I got out of the water and tried to strip my wetsuit off during a 45 knot wind gust. Yup, "Men really do have nipples!"

I guess not everyone is interested in finding cute seahorses or colourful nudibranch's

like I am, but then again not everyone is keen on catching prawns and crabs either. However, the one thing I am sure most of us would agree on, is that the Swan River is a diverse and interesting place that offers so much more than just a place to cast a line or go for a sail. Are you one of the many whose only interest in the river has been feeding the family? Take five minutes for a closer look next time and you'll be amazed at what wonderful colour and diversity we have on Perth's doorstep.



Perth is a modern compact city on the banks of the Swan River, characterised by its waterways and parks. Domestic and international flights arrive in Perth daily, however most travellers arrive via the eastern states. Regional flights around Western Australia leave daily from Perth. If you don't want to fly, bus services run daily to regional areas. There is heaps of accommodation in a variety of forms and price range. For more information on travelling to, from and in Perth, as well as the whole of Western Australia, visit [www.westernaustralia.com](http://www.westernaustralia.com)

A diver enters the water at sunset with prawn scoop in hand near Bicton Baths



The rarely seen Pigmy leatherjacket



WA seahorse



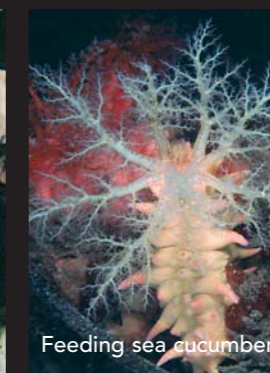
Bubble shell



Starfish



The octopus is a regular of the Swan River



Feeding sea cucumber



Pineapplefish found under a reef ledge