

## **SNAKEBIRD: Mysterious Waugal Sightings near Deep Dark Water**

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*"You know the old people didn't like to talk about things that they had no control over."  
(Hayward-Jackson 2021).*

*'I can remember my childhood feelings of being cautious and even afraid around deep rocky outcrops along the lower Swan River and the vegetated banks with fallen logs near deep pools in the Upper Swan. My Teachers/Elders have all helped me to understand how Nyungar culture had its own built-in systems of protection.'* (Hayward-Jackson 2021)



The "snakebird" or *karbanga* inhabits fresh and brackish water environments. Sketch by Ken Macintyre 2021.

The Waugal is a mythological being in Nyungar culture that has Creative and Destructive supernatural powers attributed to it. It is represented in the form of a large carpet snake and nowadays often referred to as the Rainbow Serpent. It is culturally perceived as the Creator and Guardian of Fresh Water sources and is also seen as responsible for creating topographic features of the land, such as hills, valleys and rocky cliffs and outcrops. Its preferred habitat or 'camp' is in deep dark freshwater or brackish pools, swamps, lakes and permanent springs fringed by rushes and deep water sources along rivers flanked by eroded limestone outcrops, cliffs and caves.

*Winnaitch* (or *wannitch*, *wonnitch*) means spiritually dangerous or forbidden. *Waugal winnaitch* areas were considered dangerous. If customary Laws were breached or protocols not followed, there was always the risk that the Waugal would get angry and unleash its anger, either on an individual (disease, sickness) or community (floods) as the Waugal is also associated with rain. Many deep dark freshwater or brackish water places, even to this day, are regarded with great caution and rituals are sometimes performed by the Elders to announce their presence so as not to upset or disturb the spirit of the Waugal.

## **Aboriginal accounts of Waugal sightings in deep dark waters**

Mysterious and unexplained Waugal sightings by Nyungar people, as recounted to us over the years, have mostly occurred in or near deep, dark, silent river pools around dusk or twilight (*nallaburrang*) when everything becomes shadowy and ill-defined. It is in this watery environment that the Waugal's head was reported to have appeared, as if from nowhere, and to stare fixedly at its victim, as if about to attack.

These anecdotal accounts of *Waugal* sightings typically involved adolescent boys and girls who were walking alone (or in a small group) late afternoon or at dusk in the vicinity of a deep dark river or swamp fringed with rushes and paperbark trees. These sightings (usually they were second or third hand) either occurred in dark cloudy weather or towards twilight when visibility was poor. None of the informants that we spoke to could provide us with a description of what the Waugal looked like, because as the story goes, as soon as it appeared, the onlookers would panic and run for their lives. When they got home and told their parents or grandparents about their frightful experience, they were admonished for being in a *winnaitch* place yet their stories seemed to verify a tradition of past encounters with the dreaded Waugal.

When these anecdotal accounts are analysed from a scientific and psychological perspective, it is more than probable that these young people did see a snake-like head emerging from the depths of the dark still water - this being the serpent-like head and neck of the elusive darter (*Anhinga novaehollandiae*) or snakebird.

We are not proposing in any way that the Waugal is a snakebird. What we are suggesting is that Waugal sightings that are set around deep river pools and swamps may be logically and scientifically explained. They typically take place near dark water bodies, usually late afternoon or early dusk when darkness is descending and it is difficult for the brain to recognise things clearly. In such a setting of poor visibility and the anticipation of danger, the brain struggles to make sense of hazy, incomplete images and strives to formulate a recognisable picture shaped by the cautionary narratives passed down by elderly relatives. The individual's own imagination fills in the rest. It is easy to understand how the brain assembles the close encounter with the dreaded Waugal in retrospect.

George Fletcher Moore (1842), early colonial settler, Advocate General and diarist, describes how the "Waugal" (also spelt Wagyl, Wagyle, Wakkal, Woggal, Wackul) was viewed by his Nyungar informants as 'a huge winged serpent':

'An imaginary aquatic monster residing in deep dark waters and endowed with supernatural powers which enable it to overpower and consume the natives... Its supposed shape is that of a huge winged serpent. It may be the lingering remnant of the tradition of the old Serpent or evil Spirit.' (Moore 1842: 75).

Was Moore's informant describing to him the snake-like head, long slender neck and bedraggled body of a darter suddenly emerging from the deep dark silent water, as if out of nowhere?

According to ornithological observations the highly aquatic darter or "snakebird" has the uncanny ability to appear suddenly and then vanish without a trace:

'The bird possesses the ability to submerge without diving and when in the water may be seen to sink slowly like a submarine, with, perhaps, only the head remaining above the surface (C.F.H. Jenkins).'  
(Serventy and Whittell 1976: 118)

'... glides silently through the water then it disappears without leaving a ripple.' (Fleay 1937)

Is it possible that the snakebird, suddenly emerging from deep dark water, was one of the physical manifestations of the culturally perceived and much-feared Waugal? Daisy Bates' informant (in Bates 1992:16) provides a description of the Waugal as having 'long hair on its neck, and wing-like flaps along its side.' Could this fit the image of a bedraggled darter?



The darter with wings outstretched, preening itself while waiting for its water-soaked feathers to dry out before it can take flight. South Perth Foreshore. Photo by Barb Dobson, Dec 2021.



A pair of darters. South Perth Foreshore. Photo by Barb Dobson 2021



The "*karbanga*" warming up in the sun while drying its feathers. South Perth Foreshore. Photo by Barb Dobson 2021.

## Ornithological observations of the Darter

The name 'darter' alludes to the bird's swift, almost lightning underwater movements that are facilitated by its long, slender, twisting snake-like neck. Being a solitary fisher in calm water, it pursues its prey by stealth and, using an accelerated leg-propelled darting movement, and straightening its long neck, it suddenly strikes and impales its victims.

'The Darter appears to be a more expert fisher than the cormorants, being able to capture fish not ordinarily taken by the latter. The Darter catches its prey by first spearing it with its pointed beak, afterwards shaking it off and then swallowing it. Fish remains examined in stomach contents usually show these puncture marks.' (Serventy and Whittell 1962: 114)

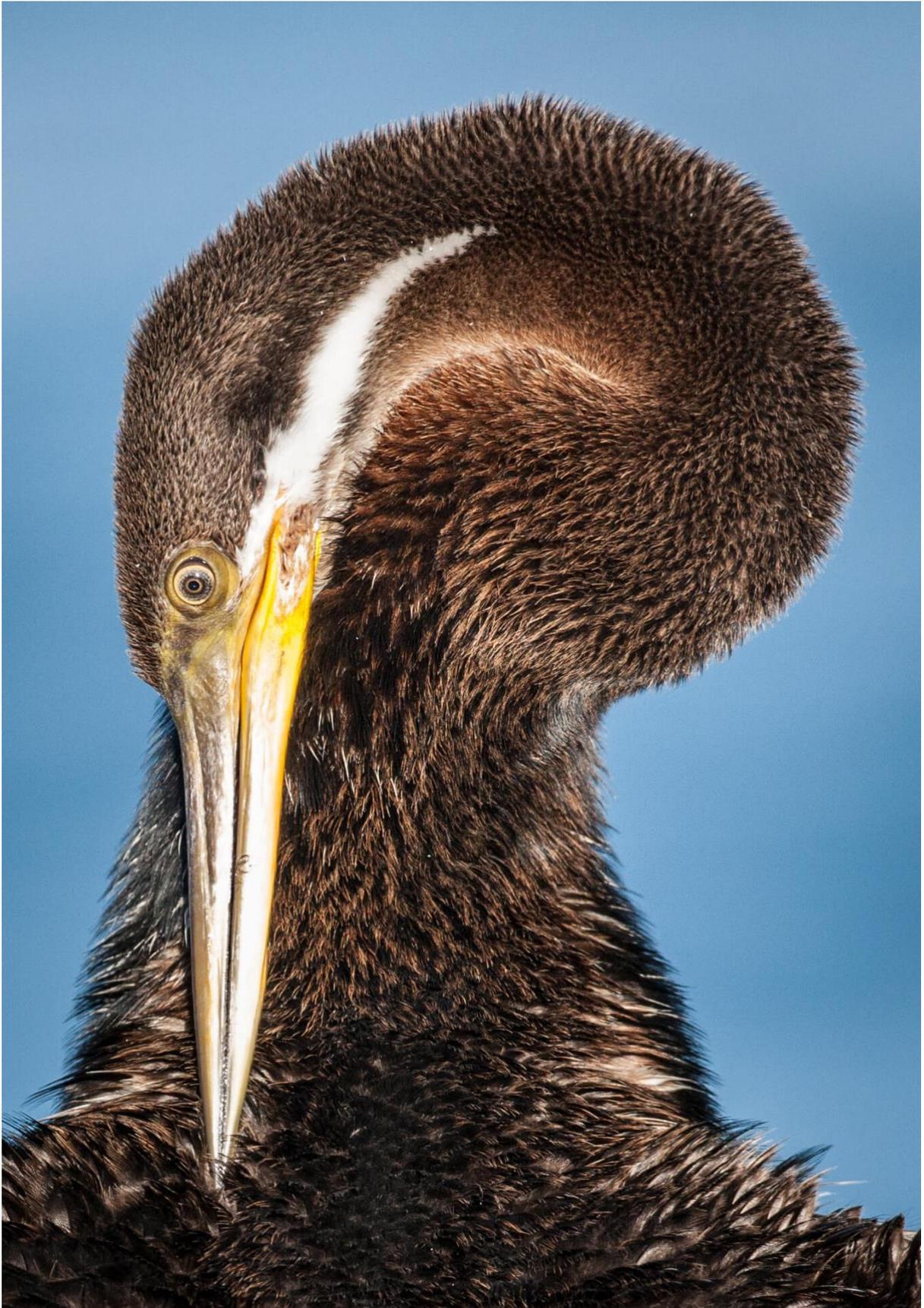
McGill (1945: 223) describes with reference to Eastern Australia the illusory reptilian appearance of the darter:

'Often when really alarmed this bird will submerge the whole of its body, except the long snaky neck, and will swim rapidly like that, giving one the impression of a black snake crossing the water. It swims so low in the water that its small head and long slender neck give it a definite reptilian appearance; even its call note, a rather sinister 'hiss' adds to the general impression.' (McGill 1945:233).

The Australian darter taking the guise of a hissing serpent-like creature is acknowledged in newspaper accounts of the time. McGill's (1945) personal observations of its snake-like appearance are as follows:

'...I was watching a Dusky Moorhen (*Gallinula tenebrosa*), which was quietly resting on the fallen branch of a tree that extended approximately a foot above the thick growth of water-lilies covering a large portion of the swamp. It was only a few yards from where I was standing on the bank, and I momentarily wondered as to the cause of its call of alarm and its hurried departure, but, soon observed beneath the branch a long, slender swaying object, that to all appearances could only be associated with some species of water-frequenting snake. However, it very soon struggled free of the thick growth to occupy the perch vacated by the Moorhen, thereby revealing itself as a very wet and dishevelled female Darter. In the manner characteristic of cormorants it immediately spread its wings to dry, but soon became restless, evidently because of my presence nearby. Only a few minutes elapsed before it fluttered off, struggled with difficulty over a few yards of the swampy growth, then quickly submerged below the vegetation and was lost to view.' (McGill 1945:234).

Over the years when we have interviewed Nyungar Elders about reported Waugal sightings, they have generally expressed the same views: that most sightings were on cloudy days or late afternoon or at dusk when clear imaging was difficult. When they were young they were told stories about avoiding *winnaitch* (or *wannitch*) meaning "spiritually dangerous" or forbidden areas. They said when passing through deep dark parts of rivers and lakes the Waugal was on their minds. It was almost as if they were half-expecting the Waugal to appear before them because they were always anxious going places that maybe they shouldn't have been.



The Australasian Darter (*Anhinga novaehollandiae*) showing its flexible, serpentine-like neck and long, spear pointed bill. Photo by Georgina Steytler. Copyright image.

## ***Karbanga* - spear shag ("needle beak shag")**

The bird's Nyungar name *karbanga* calls to attention its long-pointed beak used for spearfishing.<sup>1</sup> Local ornithologists Serventy and Whittell (1976: 118) call it the 'needle beak shag' because of its straight, stiletto-like bill. This feature distinguishes it from its close relative the cormorant which has a recurved hook at the tip of its bill.

George Fletcher Moore (1842:39) records *garbanga* (1842:39) as 'large black cormorant' but this is more likely a descriptor describing the pointed bill used by the darter for skewering its prey. The male darter is also large and black (in fact larger than the Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*) and shares many cormorant-like features and behaviours.

Nyungar people did not follow the Western-derived Linnaean system of bird species classification but evolved over many thousands of years their own culturally appropriate, logical and functional ornitho-classificatory system. They used descriptors to describe unusual or distinguishing aspects of a bird or animal's physical features, character, behaviour, food preferences, calling sounds, typical habitat or aspects of their spiritual or totemic significance that enabled them to be identified. The Nyungar name *karbanga* is one such example, denoting the bird's distinctive sharp pointed spearfishing bill.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> *Garbang* = “spear, to point or scrape” (Bindon and Chadwick 1992: 55). Moore (1842:39) lists *Garbang*, verb as “To scrape a spear; to point by scraping.”

<sup>2</sup> Serventy and Whittell (1976: 118) have attributed the Nyungar name “*mimmel*” to the Australian darter of southwestern Australia based on G.F. Moore’s (1842) somewhat vague listing of “*mimmel*” as ‘a species of shag or diver.’ In Nyungar nomenclature a bird may have more than one descriptor name.

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