

Wedge-tailed eagles – the diet of a skilful hunter

By Simon Cherriman

WEDGE-TAILED eagles (*Aquila audax*) are captivating when observed soaring hundreds of metres above the earth on majestic, upswept wings. They are the largest bird of prey (raptor) in Australia, and were once persecuted for being supposed sheep-killers. Today these eagles are respected and seen as valuable assets to our unique country.

Mature adult eagles are almost entirely black, with a golden wing-band, chestnut nape (neck) feathers, and a wingspan of up to two-and-a-half metres. Younger birds are generally golden in colour.

Breeding habits

Wedge-tailed eagle pairs occupy a large home range, which can include cleared areas as well as natural bush. They require at least 10 square km of undisturbed bushland in which to breed, and with the rapidly growing development of the Swan Coastal Plain there are very few of these areas remaining.

Breeding pairs build a massive nest of branches, often more than two metres deep, in a large tree with a commanding view of the surrounding landscape. The female usually lays two eggs, which are incubated mostly by her for about 45 days.

Young chicks are vulnerable in their first few weeks of development, and during this time it is common for one to kill its weaker sibling. Although it may seem cruel, this is nature's way of ensuring the strongest bird survives. As the eaglet develops,

it becomes more active on the nest, and after several weeks can pick at food by itself. It remains on the nest for about 90 days and, after its transformation from a tiny, white eaglet, the powerful, immature wedge-tail is ready to make its first flight.

Studying raptor diet

The most common and effective method to determine what raptors eat is to collect the remains of prey animals from their nest. Young eagles develop rapidly and



A wedge-tailed eaglet (*Aquila audax*) aged about three weeks, with two predated emu chick carcasses on the nest.

must be fed every day, and a large number of animals are brought to the nest for food throughout the nesting season. The remains of these prey animals, such as bones, fur and feathers, accumulate under the nest and can be collected and identified to determine the type of prey eaten.

The predator

Across much of Australia, the introduced rabbit has replaced native mammals in the wedge-tailed eagles' diet, and in some areas it is the only prey animal taken. In the Perth area, 'wedgies' feed mainly on rabbits, young kangaroos and birds such as ducks, ravens and galahs. On occasions they

also take reptiles such as the bobtail skink and Gould's monitor.

One eagle pair has a nest at Karakamia Wildlife Sanctuary, a bush block in the Perth Hills managed by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy – a private, not-for-profit organisation. At Karakamia, many

native marsupials that have become locally extinct were reintroduced and now thrive in a 280-hectare area enclosed by a fox-and-cat-proof fence. 'Wedgies' here enjoy a more natural diet of brush-tailed bettongs (woylies), bandicoots and tammar wallabies. This predation has not stopped the endangered marsupials from maintaining stable populations, and represents a predator-prey relationship that would have been natural and sustainable before European settlement and introduction of the rabbit.

During the 1900s thousands of 'wedgies' were shot and bounties paid for their scalps. After many years of research, it is thought that in most cases, eagles accused of killing sheep in the past were eating sheep that had died of other causes.

Further information

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A juvenile still on the nest, aged about 11 weeks. Photos – Simon Cherriman

Simon Cherriman has been studying wedge-tailed eagles in the Perth region for six years. He is completing an honours project on their diet at Curtin University. Simon can be contacted by email on simon@australianwildlife.org.