

Eagles



Parks and Wildlife Service Tasmania

DEPARTMENT of TOURISM, PARKS
HERITAGE and the ARTS

Tasmania is home to two of Australia's most spectacular birds of prey. One, the wedge-tailed eagle, is found in a wide variety of habitats. It is almost black when mature, has feathered legs and a long wedge-shaped tail. The other, the white-bellied sea eagle, mainly inhabits coastal areas. It has a white head and belly, bare scaly legs and a short tail.

Both are massive birds and can weigh up to 5 kg, with wing spans of up to 2.2 m or just over 7 feet.

They are now wholly protected by law in all states, this means they cannot be disturbed or harmed in any way unless special permission is granted by the Parks and Wildlife Service.

Although the following notes concentrate on the wedge-tailed eagle, comments relating to roles, values and management apply to both species.

Roles and values

Predators such as eagles are important in nature. They:

- promote survival of the fittest by selectively preying on deformed, weak or sick animals, thus they are important in the process of evolution.
- help maintain bush hygiene by eating carrion.
- help control numbers of their prey. Without such predators, prey are controlled by starvation and disease and their numbers fluctuate wildly.
- are good indicators of environmental health because of their position at the top of the food chain. For example they accumulate certain agricultural chemicals from their food, and can act as an early warning system to pollution levels.
- provide enjoyment for many people who like to see them and find them a source of pleasure and inspiration.
- like all native species, have the right to exist.

Diet of the wedge-tailed eagle

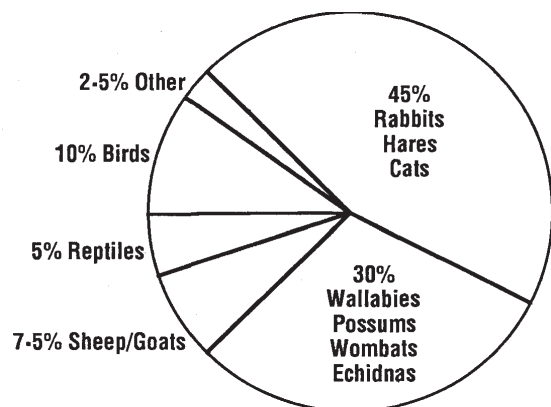
Like many other birds of prey, wedge-tailed eagles vary their diet by adapting to whatever is available. Studies in Tasmania show that in sheep grazing areas, rabbits, hares, brushtail possums and wallabies are the most important prey (see diagram).

However, a great variety of animals are eaten dead or alive, from cormorants and echidnas to snakes. When breeding, eagles prefer to kill their own prey but at other times carrion is readily eaten. Their sparse facial feathering helps to keep them clean when feeding on messy carcasses.

Eagles on the farm

Ever since Europeans settled in Australia, wedge-tailed eagles have been accused of attacking and killing almost anything from horses to honey-eaters. In some states bounties were paid for their destruction

The diet of wedge-tailed eagles in rural areas of Tasmania



and a total of about 20 000 were slaughtered per year in the mid 1960s.

Problems

Lambing and kidding

In 1970 the CSIRO published an analysis of the cause of death of over 12,000 lambs in several states. Although up to 34% of dead lambs had been at least partly eaten, only 2% of lambs born had been actually killed by predators such as eagles. More importantly, only 2.7% of dead lambs would have survived if a predator had not attacked. Exposure to bad weather and mis-mothering were the most important causes of death.

With rare exceptions eagles simply do not create an economic problem.

When a farmer suspects livestock has been killed by an eagle, wherever possible, we organise post mortems. We have found that 85% of seemingly healthy lambs killed by eagles were already sick with lumpy kidney and/or pneumonia and may have died anyway. If a post mortem is not possible you can see if an eagle has attacked the lamb by skinning back the head and shoulders and examining the presence and degree of bruising. If the lamb was alive and active there should be considerable bruising where the claws penetrated. No bruising means it was dead anyway; little bruising means it was near death.

Free range poultry

Again, please be realistic. One can hardly expect to have free range poultry well protected.

Solutions

- Make a realistic assessment of the possible damage. Is it really as great as first envisaged?
- Submit carcasses to the Department of Agriculture or the Parks and Wildlife Service for examination.
- Eagles are easily scared off by humans. If possible, move stock closer to people. Goats especially benefit from this and provide some shelter for their kids. Scarecrows can work well if backed up by shooting to scare for which you must have a permit from the Parks and Wildlife Service, so you cannot be accused of shooting at the birds.
- Notify the Parks and Wildlife Service. We can help.
- If serious stock losses persist we can trap the offender(s). Usually they are young birds not holding territories and they can be moved. However, in several decades of managing this problem we have only had to capture a few eagles.
- Keep poultry near habitation and provide shelter. If they are truly valuable they shouldn't be free range in risky areas.

Why is there concern for the eagles' survival?

There are a number of problems facing eagles in Tasmania. One is habitat destruction through forestry operations and land clearing which is removing the type of forest eagles

need for nesting. Needless persecution, mainly by vandals, is also a problem as is accidental collisions and electrocution by power lines.

Should foxes become established in Tasmania they will compete with our native eagles for food and would place these species at great risk.

There are only about 100 pairs of wedge-tailed eagles successfully breeding each year in Tasmania. They use very traditional nests almost always in very large eucalypts sheltered from the wind. They are very shy nesters and will often desert their nests if disturbed by land clearing, particularly early on in the breeding season, which is August to December. Breeding eagles need over 10 ha of surrounding forest especially uphill of a nest tree. Try and leave this amount, try to postpone development until the breeding season is over and follow Forestry Tasmania's 'Forest Practices code'.

Shooting, poisoning and trapping are also serious threats. About 8% of adult eagles are illegally killed each year. This is critical considering that the **total** adult mortality should be only 5%. The illegal poisoning of scavengers can easily kill eagles and other wildlife. Fortunately, eagles are quite resistant to 1080 poisoning and should not be harmed if the prescribed mixing procedures are followed during legal poisoning operations.

In Tasmania about 40% of pairs are on private land, 40% in State Forest and only about 20% on reserved or Crown land. Obviously a large proportion of the population are at risk from the threats mentioned.

Another reason for concern is that our wedge-tailed eagles have been isolated for 10,000 years from their mainland counterparts and have become a separate subspecies. With naturally low

numbers they have little genetic insurance and continued pressure means they have been declared endangered.

Identification of eagles from the ground



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