



EAGLES

By "BELVEDERE"

THE wedgetailed eagle has been described as Australia's most noble bird, yet today the controversy rages, "should we or should we not include this eagle on our protection lists."

In 1938 Western Australia paid bounties of 2/6 per head on 4,200 wedgetailed eagles. Today the wedgetail is the only eagle unprotected in Victoria while in Tasmania the eagle has been included on the protection lists for the past two years. In New South Wales it is not an uncommon sight to see dead wedgetailed eagles spread out on fences as a warning to other potential marauders.

Often wrongly called the Eagle Hawk the wedgetail is the largest species of eagle in the world—greater even than the famous golden eagle of America. The average wing span ranges between seven and eight feet with occasional specimens in excess of ten feet.

Pastoralists throughout the Commonwealth are divided for and against the eagle while a scientific census has revealed that, apart from aesthetic reasons, we need the eagle for economic reasons alone. The census shows that wedgetails do take lambs. In some instances the giant birds have been seen attacking a lambing ewe and tearing to pieces both ewe and lamb. However, all evidence proves that depredations on sheep is confined to times of drought when other prey is scarce.

Mr. Stanley Smith from the Coonamble district told me that some years ago, during severe droughts, he saw wedgetails carrying off newly born lambs and attacking and killing sickly sheep weakened by the drought. Eagles were even known to prey on bright moonlight nights. The local station owners declared war on the birds, shooting them at every opportunity until, like the crows, they developed a sagacity and cunning that kept them well out of gunshot. The numbers were then checked by poisoning sheep carcasses or by baiting rabbit traps with meat. It was not unusual to see an eagle with a leg or toes missing; having lost the members in a powerful rabbit trap. When the drought broke, sheep-killing ceased and the eagles turned their attentions to rabbits.

The wedgetail's food consists mainly of rabbits, other small animals, reptiles and carrion.

A striking eagle is an object lesson in speed and

tenacity of purpose. The deserts of Central Australia are ideal for observing the giant birds in action. A tiny black speck hovers high in the glaring sky, gradually circling lower until it can be distinguished as a hovering eagle wings outstretched. Lower it circles until it is about eighty feet from the ground. A rabbit hops cautiously from its sandy burrow and nibbles at a saltbush. There is a sudden swoosh and a brown shape drops from the sky as though shot. The rabbit freezes, ears flattened, then runs. A few feet from the ground and the eagle's wings spread to stop the fall. Hooked talons strike swiftly, sinking into the rabbit's back. The rabbit's squeals fade in the sky as the eagle flaps back to the nest.

The twig nests, sometimes lined with green leaves and bark, are gigantic structures up to eight feet across and as deep. The nests are usually built on the highest tree in the district commanding an entire view of the surrounding country. The remains of rabbits are heaped around the base of the nesting tree.

Top left: Mixed bag of foxes, crows and an eagle taken with Hornet Rifle and 'scope by C. S. Lee in the Coonamble District.

Below: Young fork-tailed kite that had fallen from its nest.



RE PESTS— SOMETIMES

In the Mallee, the wedgetail has been known to nest in gums as low as fifteen feet from the ground, while in captivity they have been known to nest on the ground.

David Fleay, ex-director of the Sir Colin MacKenzie Sanctuary, Healesville, Victoria, actually



The Fork-tailed Kite, a useful scavenger, is well known in the Northern Territory.

trained a wedgetail to falconry—a sport known in China as far back as nine thousand years ago and rapidly regaining popularity in Europe since guns for sporting purposes were prohibited by the occupation forces.

Another large eagle is the white breasted sea eagle which has a wide coastal and inland distribution in Australia and has also been found as far as India and China. At Mataranka, Northern Territory, I have seen these whitish eagles attacking camps of flying foxes.

Over 170 years ago, Captain Cook named Eagle Island, a densely vegetated sand bay seventy miles north of Cooktown. The island was and still is, the haunt of thousands of white-breasted sea eagles. Eagle Island is covered with stick nests almost three feet high and up to twenty six feet in circumference which are used year after year. Around the nests are piled skeletons of sea snakes, fish and



This Sea Eagle's nest reached gigantic proportions before it was abandoned. Location: Weewani Hill, South Australia.

crabs. Between July and October the cackling cries of these nesting birds are almost deafening.

The red-backed sea eagle is another brilliantly plumaged bird also occurring in India. This sea eagle usually builds among the mangroves.

Once at Sampan Creek, east of Darwin, I climbed a mangrove tree and attempted to photograph a red-backed sea eagle feeding its single chick in the nest. While I lashed and focussed the camera the female bird continually attacked, beating me with her wings until I regained the ground.

I had only a few hours in which to photograph the birds and during this time, while I stood at the base of the mangrove holding the string attached to the camera shutter, the eagle attacked the camera, beating with its wings and refusing to rejoin its young on the nest. Finally I again climbed the mangrove, warded off the eagle's attack and got a shot of the fluffy grey chick alone.

While eagles are generally considered in the terms of how many lambs they take, the smaller hawks seem to be usually considered as potential chicken thieves. Despite the few chickens taken, ornithologists estimate that each hawk saves the man on the land an average of five pounds sterling per annum in the number of insects, rabbits, rats, mice and carrion eaten. The effective disposal of carrion is a big step towards the control of the blow-fly pest.

Among these valuable birds are the brown fork-tailed kites, that wheel in shrilly screaming flocks around homesteads, thoroughly cleaning up carrion and even catching scraps of food thrown into the air. Harriers, Falcons, Goshawks, and even, the tiny Kestrels, are doing their part towards the eradication or, at least control, of our numerous insect and animal pests.

It is now up to the hunter to study his birds, and also his seasons before he shoots. The death of a pair of breeding eagles or hawks in the wrong season could possibly be the beginning of a plague of mice or rabbits in the course of a year.