

Book Review



Australasian Eagles and Eagle-like Birds

Debus, S. 2017. CSIRO Publishing. Paperback 167 pp., colour illustrations. ISBN: 9781486306923. RRP \$49.95.

Stephen Debus and I share a common, life-long interest in raptors, although it was the smaller hawks and falcons that took my fancy from an early age; J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine*

was a powerful source of inspiration for me. Our common interest dates to a time when the prevailing wisdom amongst birders was that "You don't find birds of prey, they find you". Nevertheless, patience, passion and not a little stubbornness led to the many amazing and unforgettable encounters that Stephen so well describes in the Preface.

Australasian Eagles and Eagle-like Birds is the culmination of the author's fascination with the larger Australasian raptors. Ten species of eagle and 'eagle-like' raptor are described, with accompanying photographs. In addition, there is an excellent preface and additional material in the introduction and at the conclusion of the book. The former includes an invaluable taxonomic overview of eagles and a list of eagle and eagle-like raptors of Australasia and immediate neighbouring areas.

The species accounts are clear, concise, well laid out and easy to navigate. Each account is divided into the following sections: Field Identification, Habitat, Population, Movements, Food, Social Organisation, Social Behaviour, Breeding, Measurements, Weights, Sexing and a Commentary. The text is not only easy to read, but it also enables the reader to extract key information quickly. The book will be a delight to specialists, ornithological book collectors, trivia hunters and anyone in need a quick fact check.

The photographs are well chosen and well-reproduced. I am very pleased to see that the book features a good number of images taken by Chris Field, who collaborated with me on the Queensland Museum Pocket Guide *Raptors of Southern Queensland* in 2007.

The book's obvious 'selling points' are the accounts and photos of four particularly important Australasian raptors: Sandford's Sea-Eagle, New Guinea Harpy Eagle, Gurney's Eagle and the Pygmy Eagle. The latter, which was formerly regarded as a subspecies of the Little Eagle, has recently been elevated to full species status. It seems rather incongruous that the Little Eagle is closely related to both the Pygmy Eagle of New Guinea and the, now extinct, gigantic Haast's Eagle *Harpagornis moorei* of New Zealand.

The inclusion of the four important species mentioned above, along with the more familiar Australian species, serves to draw attention to Australasia as a key area of raptor diversification. Unfortunately, the fossil record of raptors in our region has not been studied in detail, so it is not possible to provide any real perspective on the evolution of the Australasian raptor fauna. However, indications are that eagles and eagle-like hawks may have been a significant part of a more diverse raptor fauna, at least during the megafauna period.

I must confess that I have not combed through the text for minor errors, but there is one area of the book where I do have an issue. This relates to the inclusion/exclusion of certain species in the book and, I admit, that this is where 'eagle-like' is a matter of interpretation. The Red Goshawk (a 'hawk-eagle' analogue rather than a 'goshawk' *per se*) and Black-breasted Buzzard (a 'serpent eagle' analogue) need no justification for their inclusion. However, does the Square-tailed Kite really qualify as being a 'sufficiently eagle-like' species? For example, that short beak, those short legs and tiny feet are not particularly eagle-like, whilst it is something of a 'tree-top harrier' in its behaviour.

My other concern is that the Chestnut-shouldered Goshawk *Erythrotriorchis buergeri* is entirely ignored, other than being mentioned as the Red Goshawk's 'congener'. It is also missing from the list of eagle and eagle-like raptors of Australasia. Even though this species is very poorly known, at least one photograph exists (Internet Bird Collection) and it shows a bird not far removed from a Red Goshawk in appearance, stance and 'imperiousness'. I have viewed skins of this species and can confirm that it is as well appointed as a predator as its Australian congener, albeit with the much shorter wings that characterise a rainforest predator. Admittedly, it may well be a matter of definition: is the Chestnut-shouldered Goshawk a 'rainforest hawk-eagle' or a 'mega-goshawk'?

There is another reason for including the Chestnut-shouldered Goshawk, and this harks back to my early days as a novice 'hawkwatcher'. Two of the greatest challenges during 1960s and 1970s were finding the then almost mythical Red Goshawk and the only slightly less mysterious Square-tailed Kite. Information about both species was scant and often contradictory. Nevertheless, there were individuals, many of whom are acknowledged in Debus' Preface, who were prepared to undertake the challenge of uncovering the secrets of the two species. Consequently, both species have emerged from obscurity. Perhaps the inclusion of even a brief account of the Chestnut-shouldered Goshawk might have inspired someone to unravel the natural history of this equally enigmatic species.

In conclusion, *Australasian Eagles and Eagle-like Birds* is a splendid contribution to the natural history of Australasian raptors and deserves to stand alongside Jack and Lindsay Cupper's *Hawks in Focus*, David Holland's *Eagles, Hawks and Falcons of Australia* and Penny Olsen's *Australian Birds of Prey* on our bookshelves. My verdict – highly recommended!

Greg Czechura
Publications & Photography
Queensland Museum & Science Centre