

## BOOK REVIEW

### Wedge-tailed Eagle

Penny Olsen, 2005. Australian Natural History Series, CSIRO Publishing. Paperback, 120 pp, colour photos plus drafted illustrations.

ISBN 0643091653. \$39.95 plus postage

The book *Wedge-tailed Eagle* is written by one of Australia's, and indeed the world's, foremost authorities on raptors, Dr Penny Olsen. Having actively been involved in raptor research for more than 30 years, as well as a carer for sick and injured birds of prey, Dr Olsen was ideally positioned to compile this book, which adds to the impressive Australian Natural History Series. This concise book provides a sound overview of the Wedge-tailed Eagle *Aquila audax*, Australia's largest eagle, which occupies an important ecological role as one of the country's largest predators and scavengers.

The text begins with 'Musings', a personal account of the Wedge-tailed Eagle, which provides an insight into the author's rapport with the subject. The next chapter is a short piece titled 'Eagles and Aborigines' which considers the role of the Wedge-tailed Eagle in Aboriginal culture. Such a topic is not a standard inclusion in comparable books on natural history in Australia and its inclusion here is refreshing and informative. Following this is a short chapter ('Early records and names') providing an interesting historical perspective with some early accounts of the Wedge-tailed Eagle that capture the conflicting views on this species, which have persisted through time.

The book then systematically deals with the current knowledge on the taxonomy, life history traits, morphology and ecology of the Wedge-tailed Eagle. First, the taxonomy of the Wedge-tailed Eagle and its close taxonomic relatives, particularly the genus *Aquila*, is detailed ('Eagles and their relatives'). Following this are chapters on distribution, habitat and movements ('The eagle's country') and identification and morphology ('Eagle specifics'). The next chapter describes the flight capabilities, and some limitations of the eagle, as well as its sight and aural capabilities ('Flight and sight'). Next is a detailed chapter on aspects of breeding in Wedge-tailed Eagles ('Reproduction') that includes discussion on territory and nest density, courtship, mate choice, the nest, timing of breeding and reproductive success. The following chapter details the development of these birds from the laying of eggs, through incubation, hatching, fledging and into adulthood ('From egg to adult'). The chapter 'Hunting and prey' summarizes the findings from a number of dietary studies across Australia. The hunting and feeding behaviour of eagles is described here also. The concluding chapter ('Threats') identifies some of the threats faced by this species, including continuing persecution by humans, before ending on a more optimistic note with a section on conservation, which briefly mentions some of the positive steps being taken to conserve this species, particularly in Tasmania.

Following the chaptered section of the book is a list of scientific names of species mentioned in the text, a comprehensive bibliography and index. Citations for referenced material are not presented in the text despite a thorough consideration of the literature and previous studies being obvious. It is assumed that this is to increase its readability to a wide audience. To overcome the lack of citations it would have been beneficial to list the bibliography under broad headings, either based on chapters or ecological and biological features (e.g. distribution, habitat, food, etc.), to assist readers wishing to follow up further information.

A feature of this book is the drafted illustrations (by Humphrey Price-Jones) that are generously spread throughout. These illustrations are raw yet exquisitely detailed and depict key aspects of the Wedge-tailed Eagle's biology and behaviour including skull anatomy, chick development, flying and hunting. These complement the excellent colour photographs depicting activities undertaken by eagles in their natural environment such as chick-feeding and feeding at a kill. A notable image is one showing the devastating result of human persecution of the Wedge-tailed Eagle (p. 64), a scenario that could not be so poignantly described with text.

It is unfortunate that there are a number of errors in the text. These appear to be mostly typographical errors and editorial oversights. One of these errors (last sentence, p. 85) results in an unfortunate statement that is misleading and misrepresents the true thoughts of the author. It is worth noting that this error has already been identified by the publisher (see the book's description on the CSIRO Publishing website) and this sentence should read 'Certainly, the number of lambs taken rarely justifies the removal of eagles.' A statement that leapt to my attention was the description of the tail length of the Wedge-tailed Eagle as '85–100 centimetres long from root to tip'. This appeared to be excessive and a check of HANZAB (Vol. 2) showed tail length to be approximately 35–48 centimetres. An unfortunate error is the misspelling of the author's name on the book spine. Such errors are disappointing and it is frustrating that some blatant ones have survived the editorial process, but these do not detract from the value of the book's content.

The book is thorough and the information is well presented. It is a very good account of this iconic Australian bird that will appeal to a very wide audience from keen ornithologists or those with an interest in natural history to those with a more general interest, perhaps triggered by an encounter with a Wedge-tailed Eagle as it soared through or above the landscape. There is something about Wedge-tailed Eagles that makes them such a typical part of an Australian landscape and Dr Olsen has captured the essence of this superbly in this book.

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