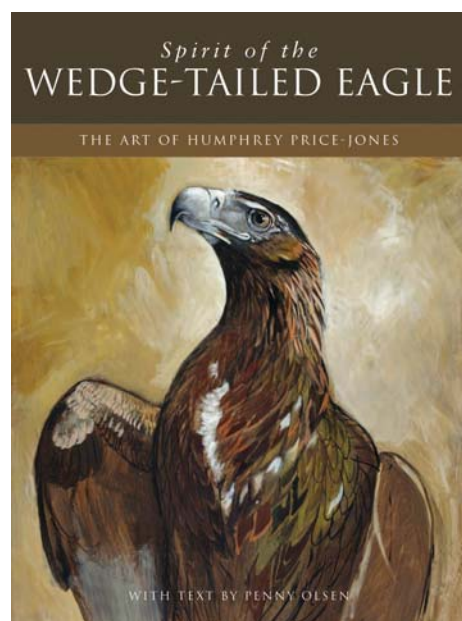


## BOOK REVIEW



### **Spirit of the Wedge-tailed Eagle: The Art of Humphrey Price-Jones**

Penny Olsen and Humphrey Price-Jones, 2007. CSIRO Publishing. Hardback, 96 pages, colour illustrations. ISBN 9780643094338. RRP \$49.95.

*Spirit of the Wedge-tailed Eagle* is the latest in the growing list of CSIRO Publications' books on Australian bird species, however whilst the dust jacket itself follows the familiar design of other publications in the series, the similarity ends here. This is fundamentally a large-format, coffee table-style book that, as the artist Humphrey Price-Jones himself states, "is an attempt to pay homage to this most magnificent of bird species". In this respect *Spirit of the Wedge-tailed Eagle* succeeds, for the extensive gallery of his eagle paintings reproduced here clearly conveys his long-term love for this largest of Australian raptors, and the artistic ability enabling him to balance ornithological accuracy with a creative sense of life in his subjects is most certainly to be envied. It should be noted that not all the paintings are of Wedge-tailed Eagles, for there is also an early chapter simply titled 'Eagles' that contains paintings of several others from the *Aquila* genus, as well as the two other species of eagle found in Australia.

My understanding is that this artwork was originally to accompany the comprehensive yet accessible text of author Penny Olsen's very fine *Wedge-tailed Eagle* (CSIRO Publishing 2005), but unfortunately they were unable to secure a publisher at the time. Nevertheless, Price-Jones was still able to contribute a series of lively sketches to Olsen's smaller-format publication, and the collaboration has been reciprocated in *Spirit of the Wedge-tailed Eagle*. As an accompaniment to the paintings and sketches, Olsen has provided a brief text that relates directly to the behavioural characteristics of the eagles as illustrated by Price-Jones. She has also drawn upon the field observations of a range of notable naturalists including John Gould, David W. Gaukrodger, Alfred North, David Fleay and Graham Pizzey, and to my mind it is these brief historical snippets of wedge-tail

observations that bring an extra, and very worthwhile, dimension to this pictorial volume. There are some absolute anecdotal gems here!

The artwork showcases Price-Jones' extensive knowledge of Wedge-tailed Eagles, and he is most fortunate to have a captive pair of them (that cannot be released to the wild) providing an inexhaustible supply of inspirational reference for his works. The plates are a combination of his paintings (the originals are life size) and pencil sketches, and in many cases the reader is provided an insight into the artist's working methods with the preliminary sketch juxtaposed against the final, fully-worked painting. It is in the sketches from life that Price-Jones' true artistry is perhaps best demonstrated, for whilst the accomplished draughtsmanship is obvious, it is the tantalising qualities of the eagles' regal power and strength that shine through, beautifully captured in an economy of line. The paintings are typically of a portrait in style, with only a few having any background detail that could provide an environmental context. But to the artist himself, I suspect that background detail is an irrelevance to the motivations for these paintings, as you can clearly see the love he has for these birds resplendent in the fiercely-rendered eyes of his subjects. In particular, the extensive number of head studies depicted are, quite simply, gloriously wild.

Whilst the vast majority of the plates are produced to a high standard, there are unfortunately a few oversights in the production. For example, the stunning cover image has also been reproduced inside, but in reversed fashion (p. 27). Additionally, some of the plates appear somewhat dark in the printing, in comparison to the originals I viewed last year, and the White-bellied Sea-Eagle image (p. 15) is a little soft in focus.

As a fellow artist, I also found it a little frustrating that the *Details of Artworks* page contains neither the painting titles, nor documents the actual years in which they were created. This particular omission denies the reader the opportunity to observe how Price-Jones' individual style has developed over the four decades he has studied these eagles, surely a worthwhile consideration in a book of this type. Strangely, details of the head study of the young eagle chick on page 77, in a style reminiscent of the acclaimed Scottish artist Keith Brockie, has not been included.

Overall, this is still a superb body of work by one of Australia's foremost bird painters, a visual delight for bird lovers and wildlife art enthusiasts in general, and for raptor fanatics in particular. It is also a very worthy companion to Penny Olsen's *Wedge-tailed Eagle*, which contains the most contemporary of literature on the species. I have to admit that I am in total agreement with Humphrey Price-Jones when he describes the magnificent 'wedgie' as the species that, for him, stands alone in its majesty. A lifetime's labour of love, he and CSIRO Publishing has done them proud.

Olsen, P. (2005). 'Wedge-tailed Eagle'. (CSIRO Publishing: Canberra)

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