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OBSERVATIONS OF PREDATION ON NESTLING EGRETS

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On 5 January, 1987 observations were made of an attack by an adult Wedge-tailed Eagle *Aquila audax* on nesting Cattle Egrets *Ardeola ibis*. The incident occurred on a mixed breeding colony of egrets at the Shortland Wetlands Centre, Shortland, New South Wales. (32°51'S., 151°42'E.). This colony contains four species: Great Egret *Egretta alba*, Intermediate Egret *E. intermedia*, Little Egret *E. garzetta*, and Cattle Egret.

At 10:22 hours a large disturbance of adult birds on the north-eastern side of the heronry attracted my attention. Large numbers of adults had taken flight and had begun to call loudly. The source of the disturbance was an adult Wedge-tailed Eagle which swooped down rapidly into a Cattle Egret nest occupied by an adult and at least two nestlings. The nest was approximately 14 m from the ground in a Broad-leaved Paper Bark

Melaleuca quinquenervia, which was itself approximately 25 m high. The nest was in an exposed situation on the northern side of the tree. Other Cattle Egret nests were scattered through the tree higher and lower than this nest. All the adults in this and surrounding trees which had not previously taken flight immediately did so. The young attempted to escape by running and hopping to branches out of the eagle's reach. Large numbers of other young egrets fled their nests and took refuge in the small upper branches of trees.

The eagle quickly caught the two nestlings and killed or disabled them, then vigorously chased other nestlings through the foliage, as well as its bulk would allow. The eagle rested several times and then returned to the chase. During this period the eagle was ineffectually mobbed by adult Cattle Egrets and Little Egrets, which were nest-

ing nearby. Mobbing was undertaken by one or two birds at a time and produced no reaction from the eagle.

After approximately 15 minutes the eagle returned to the original Cattle Egret nest and fed on both nestlings at its leisure. During this phase many adults returned to their nests and the colony quietened considerably. Two adult Cattle Egrets, presumed to be the parents of the captured prey, remained extremely agitated and perched in a neighbouring tree on a limb overlooking their nest. They periodically mobbed the eagle and continually called. The eagle ceased feeding and left the nest at 10:56 hours, leaving the carcasses behind. The adults quickly returned to the nest, examined the carcasses, then moved to the centre of the nest where they quietened and took no further interest in the remains of their offspring. However, I have not seen any birds in the nest since the attack. Other adults quickly returned to their nests but nestlings remained on their perches for some time and many had not returned when I left the colony at 11:12 hours.

White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, Whistling Kites *Haliastur sphenurus*, Black-shouldered Kites *Elanus notatus* and Brown Goshawks *Accipiter fasciatus* have been noted on several occasions at the Shortland Wetlands Centre. Over the past five seasons a single Wedge-tailed Eagle has also been seen. I observed a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

chasing adult Cattle and Great Egrets on the wing on 6 February, 1987, but there have been no previous records of attacks on egrets in the nest.

In addition, during the 1986-1987 breeding season when the breeding area was dry, Australian Ravens *Corvus coronoides* were observed on several occasions preying on nestling egrets. One or two ravens selected a single nestling which had moved out of its nest, but which was still too young to fly. The young egret was mobbed by the ravens forcing it sequentially to lower branches in the nesting tree. Once on the ground a group of up to eight ravens pecked the nestling as it tried to escape. Eventually the egret was overcome and eaten immediately by the group of ravens.

During wetter seasons when water covers the floor of the swamp this mode of attack is not open to ravens.

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