ABOUT WEDGE-TAILED EAGLES

Wedge-tailed Eagles are an iconic Australian bird and a pleasure to watch. The females are larger than the males The males have a wingspan of about 1.9m and females about 2.3m. Eagles form a pair bond for life, only changing partners when one of the pair dies.[5]

Populations of eagles are naturally self-regulatory, based on the availability of food. Wedge-tailed Eagles usually breed once a year but only when their prey is abundant. Studies have found that where rabbits were in very low numbers eagles failed to breed.[2] Breeding occurs in late winter and eggs hatch during September/October. Although Wedge-tailed Eagles lay two eggs, usually only one chick survives to fledge. Fledglings leave the nest in late November and remain with their parents until late autumn.

As with most raptors, many juveniles do not survive to maturity. These are long lived birds, living to over 30 years of age (over 40 years in captivity).

Most territories have several nests within a few hundred metres but one is favoured for breeding. The density of active nests depends on the abundance of prey and other resources. There are reports of nests being used for over a century.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Learn about Wedge-tailed Eagles and how you can live with them on your property.
- Protect nesting sites from disturbance, especially during the breeding season.
- Be careful and conservative when using farm chemicals.
- If you allow shooters on your property, make sure they are aware of the legal protection of all birds of prey.
- Report dead or injured eagles to your local Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources office.

Wedge-tailed Eagles are fully protected by the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*. It is illegal to kill, trap or poison them.

References

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All photos courtesy N. Birks

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Wedge-tailed Eagles in Agricultural Areas

FACT SHEET | SEPTEMBER 2012

LIVING WITH EAGLES

Many of the remaining Wedge-tailed Eagles in South Australia occur within our agricultural landscapes and these areas are vital to their future survival.

In the past the Wedge-tailed Eagle was the most persecuted of all birds of prey worldwide. A bounty system in some states encouraged the slaughter of tens of thousands of eagles annually.[1, 2] The practice has ceased since it was realised that eagles usually attack only sick, dying or dead lambs and rarely create an economic problem to farmers.[1, 2, 3]

Farmers play an important role in the future survival of this Australian icon.

The importance of eagles

Eagles play an important role in our ecosystem.

- Eagles help to control numbers of rabbits and hares.
- Eagles are one of the few predators that kill feral cats. In doing so eagles help control the exotic disease Toxoplasmosis carried by feral cats.
- Eagles are indicators of environmental health because of their position at the top of the food chain.
- Eagles help maintain bush and farm hygiene by feeding on sick or weak animals and carrion. They promote survival of the fittest.

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CULPRITS OR CLEANERS?

Eagles are still sometimes blamed for lamb losses but an analysis of the cause of death of over 12,000 lambs by the CSIRO showed that with rare exception eagles were not to blame.[4]

Although up to 34% of the dead lambs examined had been at least partly eaten, only 2% of the lambs born had actually been killed by predators.[4] Moreover, only a small proportion of these would have survived anyway.

Ten years of studies into the Wedge-tailed Eagle has shown that eagles accounted for much less than 1% of lambs eaten in a sheep farming area.[1, 3]

An average of 20% of lamb deaths were shown to be caused by illness or mis-mothering.[3]

The studies show that:

- With rare exceptions eagles do not create an economic problem.
- Exposure to bad weather and mis-mothering are the most important causes of lamb loss.
- In South Australia foxes are more responsible for lamb predation.
- Eagles can play an important role in helping to dispose of dead animals.
- Eagles are an excellent natural means of controlling pest animals.

WEDGE-TAILED EAGLE BEHAVIOUR

Eagles are sometimes observed following or even harassing large animals in the hope that prey will be flushed when the animal moves. Young eagles are also very inquisitive and may closely examine objects or animals new to them.

Wedge-tailed Eagles may hunt singly, in pairs or in larger groups. Working together, a group of eagles can attack and kill animals as large as adult kangaroos. This explains the scientific name of the Wedge-tailed Eagle, which means 'bold eagle'.

WEDGE-TAILED EAGLES' DIET

Wedge-tailed Eagles eat both live prey and carrion. Their diet reflects the available prey, but the most important live items are generally rabbits and hares. Rabbits usually make up about 30-70% of the diet, but may be up to 92%.[2] Other food items include lizards, birds (weighing over 100g) and mammals (usually weighing over 500g). This can include foxes, feral cats, young kangaroos and wallabies. Birds such as crows are also a common prey of eagles in some areas.

Carrion is also a major food source, with road kills and other carcasses readily eaten. Many reports of Wedge-tailed Eagles preying on lambs result from birds scavenging already dead animals. Dead or dying stock as carrion can account for up to 9% of an eagle's diet in areas where sheep grazing is widespread.[2] Eagles that live in agricultural areas will also eat afterbirth.

CAUSES OF LAMB LOSS

Mis-mothering or lack of bonding between the lamb and its mother is the major cause of lamb loss.[6] In general British breeds are much better mothers than Merinos.

Losses to predators are often associated with animal health problems and weakened stock.

Exposure can also cause stock losses. Cold wet weather increases lamb mortality substantially, particularly those lambs that have a low live weight.[6]

During severe drought and in times of limited food availability, eagles have been observed killing lambs, but rarely does this amount to significant economic damage.

More significant impact can be caused by foxes which can have a dramatic effect on lamb survival. An effective management strategy is to establish a coordinated fox baiting program with your neighbours to minimise predation by foxes.

DETERMINING CAUSE OF DEATH

Look for evidence to determine the cause of lamb death.

The best evidence of lamb-killing comes from carcass inspections. Various signs indicate what has killed a lamb. Skin the carcass from the top of the neck and look for the fatal bite wounds.

- Wounds administered by fox or dingo are characterised by regularly-spaced canine puncture marks. They are found in pairs on either side of the body part that was bitten.
- Eagles kill with their talons either by a strike to the head or more usually by the crushing grip of the talons on the neck and upper back. If the eagle was the culprit you will find irregularly-spaced punctures to the skin and maybe the skull.

You can determine if a lamb was alive when taken by examining the presence and degree of bruising. If alive and active there should be considerable bruising where the claws penetrated. If there is no bruising it means the lamb was dead already; little bruising means it was near death.

REDUCE THE RISK

There are a number of things you can do to reduce problems with predators.

Hygiene

If practical, remove offal either for destruction or dumping some distance away. Remove sick and weak stock from unprotected sites as they will also attract predators.

Scare them off

Predators are wary of people. If possible move vulnerable stock closer to people while lambing, i.e. near a house. Provide shelter for lambs. If an eagle is persistent, chase it and make lots of noise.

Provide shelter

Provide adequate shelter for lambs. Shelter can help to protect stock from bad weather as well as from predators.

Coordination

If possible time your lambing to coincide with neighbours to spread the attention of local predators.

Protecting local Wedge-tailed Eagles

Resident adult eagles will defend their territory against other vagrant eagles who are usually the troublemakers. Removing a resident eagle creates an open territory and will result in an increased number of eagles while the territory is sorted out. Protect existing nests and breeding sites.

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