



# White-Bellied Sea-Eagle

## *Haliaeetus leucogaster*

The edges of Macquarie Harbour, Freycinet Peninsula and Maria Island National Park are typical habitats for one of Tasmania's most spectacular birds of prey, the white-bellied sea-eagle.

### Description

Adults are black and white under, and grey over the wings, with a white head and tail. They have a wing span of 2 m and weigh up to 4.5 kg. Immatures are mottled pale brown and take five years to reach adult plumage. The bare legs and feet are heavily scaled as armour and the soles have tiny spikes to aid in grasping slippery prey. Powerful talons, a large hooked beak and hazel eyes complete the picture. Their eye sight is extremely acute. Sea eagles flap slowly and soar or glide with their wings held in a shallow V.

Sea eagles are not actually true eagles (which have feathered legs) but giant kites. The only species an adult sea eagle could be confused with is the smaller osprey, which does not occur in Tasmania. A juvenile sea-eagle can be confused with a wedge-tailed eagle but look for the sea-eagles short, white tail and strongly patterned underwing.

Their call is a repeated, goose-like honking.

### Distribution

The species is distributed from India to Australia. Mainly coastal, it is also found in many large rivers and lakes. Tasmania's coastline with its many rivers, bays and islands is ideal.

### Territories and home range

Adults are largely sedentary and defend an area of about 3 km<sup>2</sup> (the territory) around the nest against other adults. A larger area, up to 150 km<sup>2</sup> (the home range), is also used for hunting but is not defended and is shared with other hunting eagles. Pairs nest at least 2 - 3 km apart, much further where there is little food.

### Hunting and food

Almost all hunting is done by a gliding attack from a prominent perch. Sea-eagles find it very hard to take off from the water so when hunting fish, eels or penguins

they snatch them from the surface. Objects up to about half the weight of the eagle can be carried in flight. Many types of fish are eaten, including porcupine fish which are deadly to humans. Birds, such as penguins, coots, gulls and shearwaters are also caught. Waterfowl crippled by hunters may be eaten, sometimes leading to lead poisoning. Blue-tongued lizards are preyed on as are mammals as varied as water rats and young wombats. Carrion is also an important food, particularly for young, inexperienced eagles. Thus, when scavenging in lambing paddocks, eagles are sometimes wrongly blamed for taking healthy lambs. Piracy by eagles is common and they may pursue gannets until a fish is regurgitated. Sea-eagles will often scavenge around inshore fishing boats.

### Breeding

On mainland Tasmania nests are made in large eucalypts. On small islands where there are less ground predators, rocky outcrops or cliffs may be used. Each season nests are repaired and added to and old nests may be up to 4.5 m (14 ft) deep and 2.5 m (8 ft) wide! Nests serve as breeding, feeding and sleeping platforms and act as territorial flags. In areas where nesting habitat is scarce, sea-eagles compete fiercely with wedge-tailed eagles. Pairs usually mate for life although if one dies it is usually quickly replaced. Courtship never really stops but peaks in early spring. Two eggs are usually laid during September in a nest lined with green leaves, mainly for hygiene. Hatching takes 40 - 44 days, but often the first to hatch kills the other. Nestling life is about 95 days after which the fledglings are dependent on their parents for another few months. Once independent, mortality is high but if the young eagles survive to breed they might live for 30 years.

### Status and conservation

There are less than 200 pairs in Tasmania. On average each pair will produce less than one young per year (some have none, some two). The species has some security, due to its diverse breeding and feeding habits and because 20% of pairs live in reserves. In addition, the species (like all birds of prey in Tasmania) is **protected by law** and we are lucky, so far, that contamination by pollution is generally low. However, there are local

threats of shooting and poisoning, tree felling, accidents at fish farms and excessive disturbance of breeding from residential development and recreational activities. Buffers of at least 250 m should be left around nests. The species may soon be listed as threatened.

The Nature Conservation Branch and the private Australian Raptor Association cooperate in the survey and study of these magnificent birds.

## Contact

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