

Observation of a White-bellied Sea-Eagle taking submerged seabird prey

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A White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* was observed taking a live Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna pacifica* that was completely submerged as the sea-eagle approached. Although sea-eagles are known to hunt seabirds, there appears to be no published evidence of them taking a seabird that is submerged in Australia. A sequence of images illustrates the scenario.

The White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* is a large raptor species distributed around the perimeter of the Australian coastline (including Tasmania) as well as from the Bismarck Archipelago west to the Indian subcontinent. It also extends inland in Australia along major rivers and around large inland water bodies.

White-bellied Sea-Eagles are opportunistic hunters and feed on a variety of prey such as fish, birds, reptiles, mammals, crustaceans and carrion (Marchant & Higgins 1993). Amongst some of the many prey items known to be taken are seabirds such as shearwaters and seabirds as large as Australasian Gannets *Morus serrator* (Debus 2012; Marchant & Higgins 1993).

Pelagic birdwatching trips have been run out of Port Stephens on a semi-regular basis since January 2010 and upon return to port in the late afternoon it is common for one, or sometimes two, White-bellied Sea-Eagles to fly out and soar above the feeding seabirds attending the food scraps in the wake of the boat. On two occasions (10 October 2010 and 28 April 2013) a sea-eagle has successfully taken a shearwater from behind the boat. The latter of these two successful hunting pursuits was noteworthy because the shearwater was almost completely submerged at the time of the capture.

At around 4:15pm on 28 April 2013 an adult White-bellied Sea-Eagle approached the boat approximately 3 nautical miles from the heads of Port Stephens (32° 43' 37" S, 152° 13' 31" E). The bird circled for a short period over the wake of the boat where a number of shearwaters (Wedge-tailed, Short-tailed and Flesh-footed) as well as Silver Gulls were feeding on food scraps. The sea-eagle approached from the east and after circling

high for a minute or so, made an initial swoop that ended several metres above the birds. It then made another swoop, dropping altitude at a sudden rate. The sea-eagle stooped at high speed such that the momentum enabled it to rapidly approach the wake of the vessel at a shallow angle. Moments later, the sea-eagle emerged from the stoop with a Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna pacifica* in its talons.

The hunt and kill took place very quickly and it was not until later when digital photographs were scrutinised that it was realised that the shearwater was completely submerged as the sea-eagle made the final part of the approach (**Photo 1**). The images also reveal that the shearwater was mostly submerged as the sea-eagle made the capture (**Photos 2 & 3**).



Photo 1 shows the sea-eagle making the final part of the approach to the wake of the boat. One Wedge-tailed Shearwater is visible, with its back to the sea-eagle, presumably feeding on scraps on the water surface. The prey is not visible in this image.



Photo 2 shows the outstretched talons of the sea-eagle, only seconds before making the capture. Some feathers of the prey can be seen protruding from the water about a metre in front of the sea-eagle. The other shearwater remains seemingly oblivious to the sea-eagle's approach.



Photo 3 shows the sea-eagle immediately after taking the shearwater. The water draining off the shearwater indicates that the bird was still submerged as the capture was made. The second shearwater again appears unaware of the sea-eagle's presence.

To the author's knowledge, a sea-eagle taking a submerged seabird (apart from Little Penguins *Eudyptula minor*) has not been documented and is considered noteworthy behaviour (S. Debus pers. comm.).

Whilst shearwaters commonly feed on submerged food by diving, what is not known is if the shearwater was aware that the sea-eagle was approaching and was attempting to conceal itself from the raptor, or if it was oblivious to the presence of the sea-eagle. Considering that the second shearwater, which was feeding by floating on the water surface, appears to have been completely unaware of the threat posed by the sea-eagle, it is probable that the bird taken was not aware of the sea-eagle either. It is also probable that a shearwater alerted to an approaching raptor would take flight, rather than dive.

REFERENCES

- Debus, S.J.S. (2012). 'Birds of Prey of Australia: a Field Guide' (2nd Ed). (CSIRO Publishing: Collingwood, Victoria.)
- Marchant, S. and Higgins, P.J. (Eds) (1993). 'Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds Volume 2: Raptors to Lapwings'. (Oxford University Press: Melbourne.)