

Wedge-tailed Eagle

Aquila audax

January 2026



Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



An adult Wedge-tailed Eagle (photo: Marg Clarke)

General Comments

This is Australia's largest eagle, some 10-20% larger than its closest rival amongst local raptors – the White-bellied Sea Eagle – and one of the world's largest "true" eagles i.e. excluding sea eagles. Wedge-tailed Eagles are about the same size as the Bald Eagle of North America – individuals of either species can be a bit smaller or a bit larger than birds of the other species although Bald Eagles usually are a bit heavier. Both species are considered iconic – the Bald Eagle is the USA's national bird, while the Wedge-tailed Eagle holds the same position in the Northern Territory.

The Wedge-tailed Eagle is culturally important for many indigenous Australian groups too, including locally. For example, it is Biraban for the Awabakal people and Kawal for the Wonnarua - in both cases, it is a significant spirit who watches and protects people and country.

Male and female adult Wedge-tailed Eagles look similar, although the females are larger. Both are large dark birds which soar (often quite high) on upswept feathered wings and with a distinctively-shaped tail, looking somewhat like a wedge (note the comments in the About The Name section). Juveniles (birds less than two years old) have a golden to rufous-brown nape, in immatures (birds 2-4 years old) it is rufous-brown, reddish-brown in 5-7-year-old birds and blackish-brown in adults from about 8 years old. Juveniles also have pale to golden median coverts and a pale rump band. Old adults develop white panels in their outer wings.

There is a Tasmanian subspecies, *fleayi*, classified as Endangered, which is slightly larger and slightly paler than mainland birds. In mainland Australia the nominate subspecies *audax* (which also occurs in New Guinea) is classified as Least Concern – a welcome improvement given that for a long time they were heavily persecuted.

Wedge-tailed Eagles are long-lived; a study in arid WA found that about a third of the local population of eagles were 7+ years of age. They are monogamous, and they mate for life.



A Wedge-tailed Eagle in flight, showing its characteristically shaped tail (photo: Kim Pryor)

Regional Status

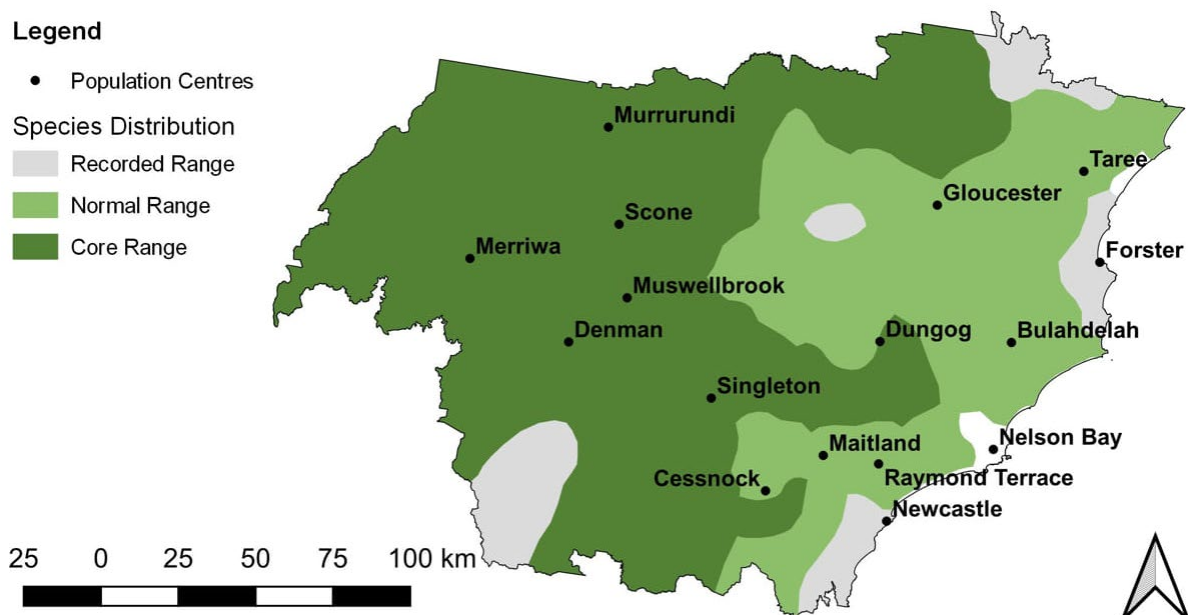
The Wedge-tailed Eagle is a breeding resident of our region. Although it is more often encountered at inland locations, it has a widespread distribution and there are regular year-round coastal or near-coastal records.

Legend

- Population Centres

Species Distribution

- Recorded Range
- Normal Range
- Core Range



Distribution of the Wedge-tailed Eagle in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

Is your dog safe?

For a long time, Wedge-tailed Eagles have had a reputation as predators of

non-native wildlife, although often undeserved. Early settlers believed that they killed lambs (mostly incorrect – usually they were taking either carcasses or dying lambs) but that spawned hysterical reactions including mass poisonings and often the hanging of Wedge-tailed Eagle carcasses from fences “as a deterrent” (as if the eagles would understand!). Wedge-tailed Eagles eat a mix of live prey and carrion; the latter including a lot of road-kill on inland roads. That feeding behaviour is a frequent cause of eagle mortality – associated with their long/slow take-off requirements after feeding on a road-kill. It also exposes them to risks from secondary poisoning.

Wedge-tailed Eagles regularly take small native mammals as prey, including Dingo pups, and there are many reports of them taking cats (especially feral cats). There also are several reports of them taking small dogs and/or puppies – anything weighing less than 4kg is vulnerable to attack although an eagle would struggle to lift as much as that. The most recent instance was in Canberra in 2024 when an eagle flew off with a Chihuahua puppy.



A juvenile Wedge-tailed Eagle, eating an ex-feral cat near Boulia (photo: Alwyn Simple)

About the name

Wedge-tailed Eagle

“Eagle” derives from the Latin name for an eagle, *aquila*, via the French word *eagle*. Our bird has a large tail, which is quite distinctive in flight. Although the

tail is almost diamond-shaped, John Gould decided that it was wedge-shaped, and his name has stuck.

Aquila audax

As above, *aquila* was the Latin word for their local bird of prey. The species name derives from the Latin word *audax*, bold or audacious. Australian raptor expert Stephen Debus has written that it is “a misnomer for this normally shy and wary bird”, and it is a mystery as to why the scientific name was bestowed; presumably it was through ignorance or a misunderstanding.

Design by Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460

Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from:

- HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series
- Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds.

<https://hazab.birdlife.org.au/species>

[Text before updates sourced from: Marchant, S. et al (eds) 1990-2006]

- Volumes 1-3 of the NSW Field Atlasers' Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT
- Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series)
- Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide.
- Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names . A Complete Guide.

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