

White-bellied Sea Eagle

Ichthyophaga leucogaster

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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An adult White-bellied Sea Eagle – note its grey and white appearance and its pale bare tarsi (photo: Rob Palazzi)

General Comments

Adult males and females look similar although the females are larger (for example, they weigh 20-30% more than males). When perched, the grey upperparts and white underparts of adult birds are unmistakable, as are the bare pale tarsi below feathered upper legs. When soaring, which they do with stiff upswept wings, the under-view is of a distinctly marked dark-grey and

white bird with a short tail (in relation to the bird's overall size) and long "fingers". From above, it is a dark grey bird with a white head and a broad white tail band.

The nest, a large stick structure, is usually in a tall eucalypt in dry sclerophyll forest, but close to water. Both males and females incubate.

Young Sea Eagles pass through a series of moults, as described below, before attaining full adult plumage in the fourth or fifth year. Some birds in captivity have been noted to retain some brown plumage until at least 10 years old.

White-bellied Sea Eagles are widely distributed throughout coastal Asia and Australia, plus all the islands between. They are carnivorous, mostly feeding on fish and other marine life but also, opportunistically, birds, reptiles and carrion. They have been reported to follow cane harvesters, and also dolphins, in both cases looking for opportunistic meals.

They are sedentary, forming long-term pairs at established territories. However, dispersing young birds have been shown sometimes to travel long distances, and adult birds at inland lakes leave and return in response to changing water levels.

Ageing younger birds

Young Sea Eagles pass through three main plumage stages – juvenile, first immature and second immature (which is sometimes called the sub-adult plumage). It should be noted that their moults into these plumage types are transitional i.e. mid-moult they can look to be a bit of both.

Juveniles, when seen from above, are brown birds except for a pale/buff head and face and a white tail (which has a black terminal band). They also have a dark line through their eye. From below, they are a brown-and-white bird, notably with large white panels in their wings, rather like a Black-breasted Buzzard (which has not been recorded in our region and which has no white in the tail).

The moult to first immature is complete at about twelve months. From above, first immature birds are brown but they have a white head and tail (that no longer has a terminal black band). From below, the dark areas of the body and

fore-wings are paler than for juveniles but they retain the prominent white wing panels.

Birds moult into sub-adult plumage at about two years of age. Sub-adult birds still have prominent white wing panels but their breast, belly, throat and head usually by now are completely white (however, this is a bit variable). Over the next 2-3 years, birds progressively moult into full adult plumage.



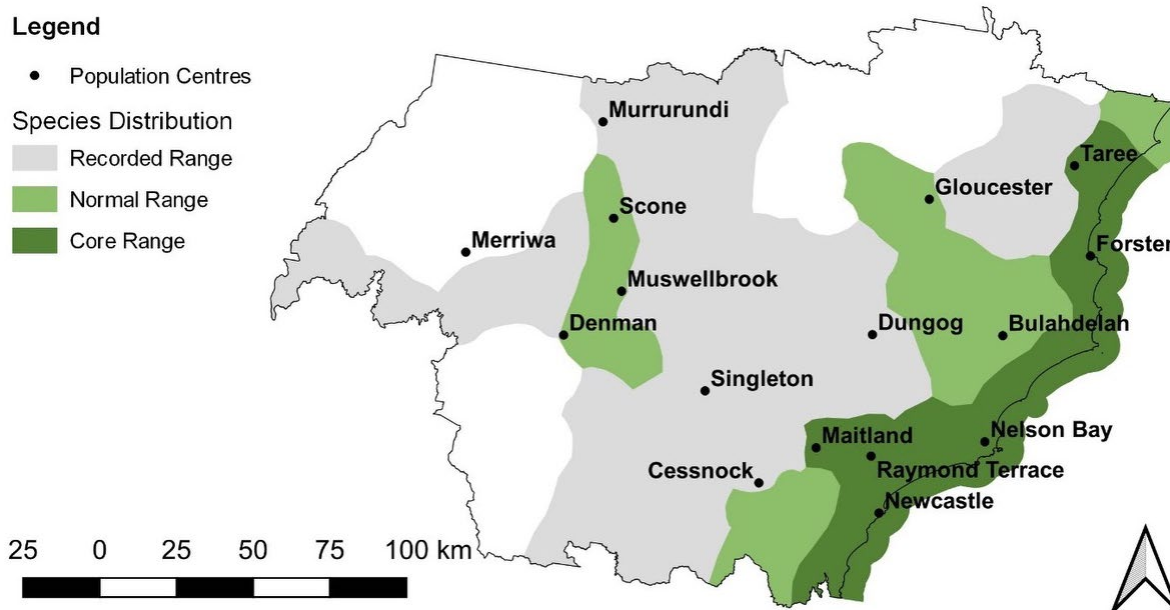
A juvenile White-bellied Sea Eagle – it is mainly brown below, with white wing panels and a dark line through its eye. This bird has started to lose its dark terminal tail band (photo: Kim Pryor)

Regional Status

The White-bellied Sea Eagle is mainly a bird of our coastline and estuaries but it also is found upstream along the major river systems, and at large lakes and dams (e.g. Lake Liddell). It is resident, with regular breeding records.

The species is classified as vulnerable in NSW (also Tasmania and Victoria) because of loss of habitat, especially breeding habitat, and also because of its sensitivity to disturbance near the nest site. Kim Pryor's 2022 article in [*The*](#)

Whistler has examples of the consequences of nest site disturbance. In general though, the Hunter Region can be considered a stronghold. For example, the twice-yearly Port Stephens surveys usually find 20-30 birds, mostly adults, which suggests at least ten pairs breed around that estuary.



Distribution of the White-bellied Sea Eagle in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

About the name

White-bellied Sea Eagle

“White-bellied” is descriptive. “Eagle” (originally spelt “egle”) can be traced back to the 14th Century; it comes from the Old French version of the Latin word *aquila*, which was what they used for the iconic Golden Eagle. The modern spelling first appeared in the 16th Century. “Eagle” is used for many large diurnal raptors, especially those with feathery “trousers” over their legs. Sea Eagles and the closely related Fish Eagles are mainly associated with marine habitats and large inland waterbodies.

Ichthyophaga leucogaster

The scientific name translates as “white-bellied fish-eater” from the Greek words *ikhthos*, fish, *phagos*, eating, *leuco*, white, and *gaster*, stomach. The genus is a new one, and it comprises several southern hemisphere sea eagles that recently have been split from the long-established sea eagle genus *Haliaeetus* based on DNA studies.



A sub-adult White-bellied Sea Eagle, with white wing panels and mostly white underparts but note its brown throat and some buff patches (photo: Rebecca Citroni)



An adult White-bellied Sea Eagle in flight (photo: Kim Pryor)

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Volumes 1-7 of BirdLife Australia's HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • 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 • James Jobling (2010). The Helm Dictionary of Scientific Names. Christopher Helm, London.

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