

White-bellied Sea-Eagle

Haliaeetus leucogaster



Above: Adult White-bellied Sea-Eagle. Photo: Chris Field

The White-bellied Sea-Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) is found along the Murray River and its associated lakes and creek systems and other large wetlands.

Identification

The White-bellied Sea-Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, is a large white bird of prey with greyish wings and short rounded tail (length 75-85 cm, wingspan 180-220 cm). Adults have a white head, breast and abdomen, and the tail is grey with a broad white tip. The juveniles are speckled slate

grey/brown with a pale face. They become increasingly whiter until their fourth year when they acquire their full adult plumage. Females are larger than males. Males range from 2.5 kg - 3.7 kg and females range from 2.8 kg - 4.2 kg.

Similar species

Juveniles and immature birds may be sometimes confused with Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax*. However the Wedge-tailed Eagle is mostly brown, with a clearly defined long wedge-shaped tail. On the other hand young White-bellied Sea-Eagles differ in having a short pale tail and more steeply upswept wings when soaring. The voice of White-bellied Sea-Eagle is very distinctive: often adults will make a 'loud deep goose-like honking or cackling; whereas begging juveniles will give a more prolonged yelping or wailing'.

Where it lives

White-bellied Sea-Eagles are a common sight in coastal and near coastal areas of Australia. In addition the species is found in New Guinea, Indonesia, China, south-east Asia and India. In the Mallee CMA region, White-bellied Sea-Eagles are generally confined to the Murray River and its associated tributaries and lakes including Lake Walla Walla (Murray Sunset National Park), Hattah Lakes (Hattah Kulkyn National Park), and Lakes Carpul and Powell Wildlife Reserve at Toltol.

Ecology

The White-bellied Sea-Eagle is a protected species. They are opportunistic carnivores, feeding on birds, mammals, fish, reptiles and carrion. While hunting they may hover low and dive close to the water to catch prey. Pairs may hunt together and they are known to harass other bird species (such as terns) and either steal prey or have them regurgitate it. They build large stick nests, which are often used for many seasons in succession. The nest can be located in a tree up to 30m above the ground. Nests are usually near water, in tall live or dead trees. Typically in the Mallee CMA region White-bellied Sea-Eagle nests occur in River Red Gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*.



At a glance

Characteristics:

- large bird of prey with a short rounded tail;
- white head, breast and abdomen, greyish wings and grey tail with a white tip;
- juveniles are speckled slate grey/brown with a pale face.



Above: Juvenile White'bellied Sea-Eagle. Photo: Neil Fifer.

At the start of the breeding season roughly between April to August, ending as late as October, the nest is lined with fresh green leaves and twigs. The female carries out most of the incubation of one or two yellowish white eggs, but the male performs this duty from time to time.

A matter of survival

The White-bellied Sea-Eagle is considered to be rare in Victoria and is listed under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 as a threatened species and is also protected under the Wildlife Act 1975. It is listed as vulnerable to extinction under the advisory list of threatened vertebrate in Victoria - 2007.

A number of threats to White-bellied Sea-Eagle have been identified and include:

- Habitat destruction by clearing for logging, agriculture and urban expansion;
- Reduced fish populations due to commercial exploitation, pollution, and lack of flooding;
- Entanglement in rubbish;
- Sensitivity to disturbance by humans,

particularly during the breeding season and can desert nests and young.

Other threats to the species may include direct and indirect poisoning during control programs for foxes and rabbits, deliberate shooting, eggshell thinning because of the accumulation of chemical residue, and food chain contamination by heavy metals.

How we can help?

The Mallee CMA encourages feedback regarding recent and past sightings of the White-bellied Sea-Eagle and possible nest sites. This information will assist us to gain an understanding of the species distribution within the Mallee CMA region and more importantly may enable future research to be conducted.

You can also help the White-bellied Sea-Eagle to recover by:

- Retaining and restoring habitat on public and private land around waterways;
- Keep a distance from nest trees during the breeding season;
- Be mindful in the amount of woody debris that is utilised at the River and

associated watercourses for fire wood as this is an important item for nest construction;

- Ensure 1080 poisoning programs are carried out in according to DSE guidelines so threat to them is minimised;
- Dispose of all fishing line and tackle to eliminate the chances of them become entangled;
- Supporting the flows to wetlands.

White-bellied Sea-Eagles are an important part of biodiversity in the region. They can also be useful in controlling vermin, particularly rabbits and carp, and play a major role in devouring carrion.

Find out more

For further information about the White-bellied Sea-Eagle contact the Mallee CMA on 03 5051 4377. Or visit the website at: www.malleecma.vic.gov.au

References

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