



# How can I help White-bellied Sea Eagles on private land?

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## White-bellied Sea-Eagles on private land

Very few properties in Victoria can boast that they are home to the White-bellied Sea-Eagle, one of our truly majestic wildlife species. Those that do have a unique and valuable attraction.

Since about half the nest sites in Victoria occur on private land, private landholders can make a significant contribution to the protection of the White-bellied Sea-Eagle. This Note provides a brief overview of the species, its habitat requirements and threats to its survival.

## About the White-bellied Sea-Eagle

The White-bellied Sea-Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) is one of Victoria's largest and most distinctive birds. It is a bird of prey with a white body, around 800 mm long (females are slightly larger than males), broad greyish wings and a short pale wedge-shaped tail with a white tip. Juveniles are speckled in appearance. A detailed description of the appearance of birds from juvenile plumage to adulthood is provided in Marchant and Higgins (1993). Juvenile and immature White-bellied Sea-Eagles can be confused with Wedge-tailed Eagles (*Aquila audax*). Full adult plumage is acquired at three and a half years.

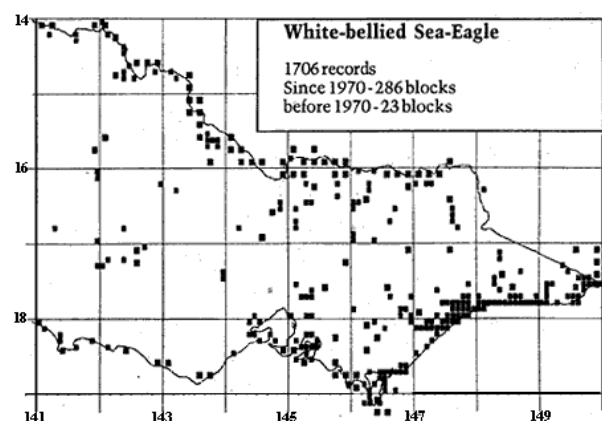
White-bellied Sea-Eagles are generally seen alone or in pairs, although they may occasionally congregate where food is abundant. The species is an opportunistic carnivore feeding on birds, mammals, fish, reptiles and carrion. Birds often have favoured roosts on prominent trees and soar in large circles with wings upswept during flight. When hunting, they may hover and dive close to the water. Pairs may hunt together and often harass other bird species to steal their food.

Sea-Eagles usually form pairs for life and once a home range has been established, will remain in this general area. Although we don't know how long they live, some large raptor species (of similar size to White-bellied Sea-Eagles) can survive up to 25 years in the wild.

This poses a particular problem. A long-lived species may continue to appear plentiful long after its production of offspring has declined. Thus, monitoring the success of clutches is important to determine how well White-bellied Sea-Eagles are surviving changes to their environment.

## Where do they live?

These magnificent birds occur along the coastline of Australia and also range inland over large rivers and wetlands. In Victoria, they are most common between Gabo Island, in far East Gippsland, and Wilson's Promontory. Populations also exist along the Murray and Goulburn Rivers, and there are scattered records across the State. Inland records are usually associated with impoundments (dams) that have plenty of large trees in surrounding country. Birds favour forested coasts and forested margins of inland waterways.



Distribution of the White-bellied Sea-Eagle in Victoria.

Source: Atlas of Victorian Wildlife, CNR.

Breeding areas are traditional and several nests may be used in one area. Nests are usually found near water, in tall live or dead trees or on remote coastal cliffs. River

Red Gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, Forest Red Gum *E. tereticornis* and Southern Mahogany *E. botryoides* are commonly used as nest trees. On islands free of predators, nests may be close to the ground in shrubs or rocky platforms. These birds rarely use artificial structures as nest sites.

Like the Wedge-tailed Eagle, the White-bellied Sea-Eagle builds very large nests. Nests can be very conspicuous being made of sticks lined with leaves and, as new material is added, can become very large. They can be used for years in succession. One or two whitish-yellow eggs are produced usually between April and August, but the timing of breeding can vary.



The White-bellied Sea-Eagle fishing.

### Are they in trouble?

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*. The total Victorian population may be only 100 breeding pairs, with about 25 pairs around the Gippsland Lakes, 25 pairs around Corner Inlet and a further 50 pairs scattered across the State. It is likely that the species has never occurred in large numbers.

Habitat destruction is probably the most significant threat to the White-bellied Sea-Eagle, resulting in the loss of nesting sites and causing birds to nest in less suitable areas. Decline of the species over much of its coastal range could be presumed because of the widespread clearing of coastal forests for agriculture and urban expansion.

Reduced fish populations due to commercial exploitation and pollution may have had an effect on Sea-Eagle numbers.

Birds are very sensitive to disturbance by humans, particularly during the breeding season and can desert nests and young.

Although the significance of other threats to the species is unknown, they may include direct or indirect poisoning during control programs for foxes and rabbits, deliberate shooting, eggshell thinning because of the past use of DDT, and food chain contamination by heavy metals. Current 1080 baiting operations undertaken by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (CNR) and other land managers attempt to minimise risks to non-target species, and since raptors are not highly susceptible to 1080 poison, this threat may not be high. Contamination of food sources by poisons, such as mercury, needs investigation since this has been found to cause declines in other species of Sea-Eagle overseas.

Historically, this species, like other large birds of prey, such as Wedge-tailed Eagles, has been viewed in some rural areas as a predator of livestock. The species has also been viewed unfavourably by some fishers. It is very unlikely that the species could be considered a significant predator to either livestock or fish due to its low numbers. Shooting of White-bellied Sea-Eagles is both illegal and unjustified.

### What can you do?

Retaining and restoring habitat on your land will not only benefit the White-bellied Sea-Eagle, but many other species of flora and fauna, as well as your property. Fencing-off trees will protect them from stock damage and also encourage regeneration. Protecting and enhancing vegetation can also provide shelter for stock and reverse problems such as soil erosion and salinity. Riparian habitat along rivers is an important refuge for many species of flora and fauna. Fencing off trees along rivers can not only protect many species of birds, mammals, fish, amphibians and invertebrates, but also improve the condition of waterways and quality of water in them. Many *Land for Wildlife Notes* (available free from CNR offices) outline ways to protect and enhance wildlife habitat.

By keeping your distance from nest trees during the breeding season, you can give the birds the best chance for successful breeding. These beautiful birds are also more likely to keep returning to your property to breed, year after year.

Sticks are used in nest construction and it is important that a supply is available in the general area.

By carrying out 1080 poisoning programs according to CNR guidelines (available from CNR offices at the time of collecting baits) and using chemicals responsibly, the possible threat to species such as the White-bellied Sea-Eagle can be minimised.

### Studying White-bellied Sea-Eagles

There have been few studies carried out on the White-bellied Sea-Eagle in Victoria. We need to gain a better understanding of whether birds are breeding successfully, what their habitat needs are and what activities threaten them. As private landholders, your help could be invaluable. By recording details about where nests are found, whether the birds breed successfully each year as well as any interesting historical, ecological and behavioural details, we will improve our understanding of how this majestic bird is faring. You can also help to identify threats and their importance to the species' survival. This improved knowledge will aid in identifying the best ways to protect birds and their nests.

If you know of any nest sites, either on your property or elsewhere, please contact flora and fauna staff at your local CNR office. This information can be recorded permanently on databases and be collated each year to identify trends in the species' status.

### White-bellied Sea-Eagle Record Sheet

The attached record sheet indicates what sort of information is needed. Clearly the more information we have, the better our understanding of how to protect the White-bellied Sea-Eagle.

Please note that your local Flora and Fauna Officer can help work out the exact location of a site in terms of grid reference details.

#### Contact details

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Sighting details

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of birds seen, and whether juveniles, immatures or adults: \_\_\_\_\_

Are the birds nesting?: \_\_\_\_\_

Distance and direction to nearest landmark (e.g. hill, stream crossing) or town: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Grid Reference

Map name: \_\_\_\_\_ Map no. \_\_\_\_\_

Easting: .. \_\_\_\_\_ Northing: \_\_\_\_\_

Altitude: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Habitat details

Nest tree species: \_\_\_\_\_

Tree height: \_\_\_\_\_

Height of nest above ground: \_\_\_\_\_

Description of surrounding habitat (e.g. single tree in paddock, along a river bank): \_\_\_\_\_

Other Information (e.g. historical, behavioural) \_\_\_\_\_

Send to:

Science Officer (Pam Clunie),  
 Flora and Fauna Branch,  
 Department of Natural Resources and Environment,  
 4/250 Victoria Parade,  
 East Melbourne, 3002.

### References and further reading

Blakers, M., Davies, S.J.J.F. and Reilly, P.N., (1984). *The Atlas of Australian Birds*. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

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