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BREEDING OF A LITTLE EAGLE IN THE DARLING RANGE

By JOHN DELL, Kalamunda, W.A.

The Little Eagle, *Hieraaetus morphnoides*, was not admitted as a local species by W. B. Alexander (*Emu*, 20, 1921:149) in his review of the birds of the Swan River district. Serventy (*Emu*, 47, 1948:270) in his later account of the birds of the same area regarded the Little Eagle as rare in the Perth metropolitan area although "the species occurs eastward in the Darling Range country to within 40 miles of Perth." More recently, Serventy and Whittell (*Birds of Western Australia*, 4th Edition, 1967, p. 161) state that it is frequently seen at Gooseberry Hill but still conclude that "it is more a denizen of the drier areas than of the forested South-West country."

My observations since 1963 in the Jarrah, *Eucalyptus marginata*, and Marri, *E. calophylla*, forest between Mundaring Weir and the western edge of the Darling Scarp show that the Little Eagle is the most frequently recorded large raptore, breeds, and is present throughout the year.

The Little Eagle is fairly adept at hunting in the Jarrah forest. Birds soar about 50-80 m. above the tree-tops and after sighting their prey drop, usually by several stages, almost vertically. Plummeting aerial displays accompanied by loud calling are often recorded between September and December.

On October 18, 1963, I heard a Little Eagle calling on a heavily forested ridge north of Hackett Gully creek and about 3 km. north-east of Bickley. Investigating, I discovered a large nest of twigs 20 m. above ground in a leaning Marri. An adult bird was feeding young on the nest. There was no trace of bones beneath the nest and the only evidence on the ground of the nest above were splashes of white excreta. The nesting tree was only 200 m. west of the nearest house, which was occupied only occasionally at weekends. A horizontal branch 7 m. long and 2 m. from the ground used as a food preparation platform was 60 m. east of the nesting tree. Tufts of rabbit fur were adhering to the branch and many more had been scattered by the wind.

On October 30 I arrived at the nest at 0715 hr. and occupied a hide beneath the tree. No adult birds were noticed.

- 0740 Young altering position on nest.
0840 *Female* on Tree A, flew off and circled above nest until 0900. Tree A was a dead Marri 28 m. high, 120 m. north of the nest tree.
0900 *Male* circling above nest.
0910 *F.* circling low near nest.
0914 Young moving on nest; *M.* still circling above nest.
0915 *F.* with rabbit perched on tree B 10 m. from nesting tree; flew away when circling *M.* came close. Raven harassed circling *M.*
0925 *F.* arrived at nest with rabbit, alighted on branch C above nest, fluttered to nest where she commenced tearing prey. *M.* still circling until 0930.
0945 *F.* left nest.
1015 *F.* circling above nest until 1021.
1045 A Dugite, *Demansia affinis*, entered my hide and remained in a crack in the soil. I constructed another hide of branches nearby, during which I think the eagles saw me.
1110 *F.* flew fast over nest then began circling.
1116 Circling *F.* harassed by magpie.
1117 *F.* arrived and perched on branch C.
1156 *F.* left.
1245 *F.* settled on branch C; *M.* perched on tree A.
1252 Two downy young clearly visible on nest moving about.
1317 *F.* flew away. *M.* on tree A remained perched.
1343 *M.* flew from tree A.
1345 *M.* arrived on branch C.
1357 *M.* left.
1409 *M.* returned to branch C, left almost immediately.
1413 *F.* arrived at nest with unknown prey. Left immediately.
1425 *M.* arrived with prey, possibly young duckling. This prey was draped over a limb out of reach of the young.
1430 *M.* left with remains of rabbit. Young tried to reach prey on limb which remained there for the remainder of the day.
1432 *M.* arrived with young rabbit.
1436 *M.* left.
1503 *M.* flew past nest and perched on tree D, 50 m. from nest.
1519 *M.* left.
1529 *M.* and *F.* circling until 1537.
1542 *M.* perched on tree A.
1544 *M.* left tree A.
1552 *M.* and *F.* circling, both harassed by magpies.
1558 *F.* arrived on branch C.
1610 A few drops of rain began to fall. *F.* still present.
1644 *F.* flew from branch C to nest.
1646 *F.* flew with remains of rabbit.
1657 *M.* arrived with prey, possibly large rat or small bandicoot, *Isodon obesulus*.
1658 *F.* arrived with young rabbit, *M.* left. *F.* then began tearing at rabbit and feeding herself.
1726 *F.* discontinued feeding and began brooding young. The rain increased and I departed.

During the ten hours that I observed the nest prey was brought six times, three of the items being rabbits, which were plentiful along the creeks. At the nest the female was dominant, remaining there to prepare the prey for the young. The male assisted in tearing the prey when the female was absent.

The larger bird with dark rufous underparts I assumed to be the female. The considerably smaller male was a pale phase bird, the breast being whitish with only darker feather shafts.



Dell, John. 1971. "Breeding of a Little Eagle in the Darling Range." *The Western Australian Naturalist* 11(8), 186–187.

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