

Nesting of the Wedge-Tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus audax*)
in 1937, etc.

By T. Brandon, Wilmington.

When this country was first taken up the Wedge-tailed Eagle nested in several places along the Willochra Creek, which runs parallel with the Flinders Range several miles east out on the plain between Melrose and Wilson, etc., but now with civilization the Eagle is only found nesting in the Flinders Range, and even there only a few pairs are to be found. On 20th June, 1937, a trip was made to examine some old nests in order to find out whether the birds had commenced preparations for this year's nesting. One bird was seen soaring fairly high up while we were going through Horrocks's Pass. At the head of a steep gully an Eagle was seen to fly away from a clump of Red Gums

(*Eucalyptus rostrata*), where an old nest was known to be, and on inspection this nest was found to contain two eggs. The nest was in a large Red Gum growing on the side of a steep gully, and was built in a broken-off fork 40 feet from the ground. The nest was not very old-looking, perhaps ten years. This year a thin layer of sticks had been added and then a lining of gum leaves and sheoak (*Casuarina*) fronds, which were nearly dry. The nest was five feet deep by six feet wide across the top externally, and the egg-cavity was nine inches deep by fourteen inches wide. The eggs were white, with reddish brown dots and blotches fairly evenly distributed over one egg, and a little thicker on the larger end of the second egg. The incubation was ten to fourteen days. The two Eagles soared around while the nest was being visited, but never came very near.

On 28th/29th June, 1937, a trip (over 113 miles) was made to see whether any nests could be found along the Flinders Range north of the Pichi Richi Pass, near Quorn. No nests were seen, but five birds were observed soaring over the head of South Creek about 20 miles north of Port Augusta. The hills there are very steep and rough, being of pure rock in some places. Not meeting with any success there, it was decided to try further south, and while walking up a gully into the hills near Horrocks's Pass, two pairs of Eagles were seen. One pair did not appear to have any particular interest in that part, but the others were closely watching a nest in a Red Gumtree. The nest was climbed to and was found to be lined with gum leaves and it looked as if eggs had already been taken. Half a rabbit was lying on the edge of the nest. Two birds soared around fairly closely.

On 7th July, 1937, a visit was paid to several other old nests west of Wilmington. We walked all day and visited all nests known, and none of these was found to be in use. When almost back to the road, and while sitting under a tree having lunch, an Eagle was seen to glide down from a height and settle in a tree up near the top of the battery or cliffs facing out over Spencer's Gulf. A walk up the hill was at once commenced, and on approaching the tree it was found to contain a nest, but no bird could be seen. When 75 yards from the tree it took two shouts to flush the bird. The first shout brought the head up, the beak being plainly visible as it glistened in the setting sun. The nest was 45 feet up in a Sugar Gum (*Eucalyptus cladocalyx*) leaning out over the gully, and gave a clear view for 50 miles or more to the north, south, and west. The nest was almost entirely new, and built on a very old one, constructed of gum sticks and yacka (*Xanthorrhoea*) stalks, and lined with

gum leaves; external measurements four feet wide by three feet deep, egg-cavity nine inches wide by six inches deep. The nest contained two eggs of a white colour, one lightly marked with reddish spots, the other egg more heavily blotched with reddish brown, particularly at the larger end. Only one bird was seen, and that was very dark in colouring. The eggs were very difficult to secure, the climber having to hang by one arm on the rope for some time whilst drawing them towards the edge of the nest with a stick. This Eagle must have seen us approaching when we were two miles away in the morning, and left the nest to watch our movements from the upper air, as when this bird was sighted it was the first and only Eagle which was seen for the day, although we kept a sharp look-out for the species. No doubt when we stopped under the tree for lunch the Eagle thought it was safe to return to the nest as we had gone.

On 10th July, 1937, another trip was made into a different part of the Flinders Range near Wilmington. Three old nests were inspected, but were found to be in a neglected state. An Eagle's nest will remain in good condition after five to eight years' weathering. At length an Eagle was seen flying about, so it was reckoned that the mate was sitting somewhere near. On walking over a spur of a hill a bird was seen to glide out of a tree and off down the gully to join its mate. The nest was found to be a very small and flimsy one—three feet wide by one and a half feet deep—egg-cavity eight inches by five inches—and constructed of gum sticks and bark and lined with gum leaves. It was placed in a fork of a young Red Gum 30 feet from the ground. The tree was growing on a steep slope at the head of a gully giving a look-out over Wilmington and the Willowie Plain. The nest was built entirely this year, but rested on a few old sticks which must have been a nest many years ago. The current nest could have been pulled out of the fork with one hand, and was easily the flimsiest nest of this species that I have ever seen. The bird that left the nest was very small, and it was most probably a young bird nesting for the first time and therefore not as experienced at nest-building as an old bird. In 1935 eggs were taken from a pair of birds in this vicinity, but both the birds were then of ordinary size. The current nest was found to contain two eggs rather smaller than the normal size and very pointed for this Eagle. These again seem to point to the probability of the bird being a young one. The eggs were sparsely marked with blotches of reddish brown and lavender, a little more thickly at the smaller end. They were fresh. After dinner a trip was made into a

different part of the Range, and we found a nest in a Box-tree (*Eucalyptus*) which had held eggs in it a few days previously, but was now empty. No birds were seen about. The nest was 20 feet from the ground and appeared to be years old. It was six feet across and five feet deep, and just relined with gum leaves for this year. A visit was then made to the nest which had been inspected on 29th June. One bird flew from near the nest and watched closely while it was being inspected. From the side of the hill above the nest it was seen to be empty still, but the half of a rabbit was missing on this occasion. Four more Eagles were seen on the way home, but it was supposed that they were after the rabbit carcasses left by rabbiters in the vicinity.

On 27th July another day—the last for the season—was spent after Eagles. A visit was paid to the nest from which two eggs were taken on 20th June, but no birds were seen there, and the nest had not been interfered with. After that the nest inspected on 29th June and 10th July was visited, and a bird was seen to leave while we were 200 yards away. This time it contained two eggs. No new leaves had been used in lining since our first inspection. The nest was in a large Red Gum leaning out over a steep gully, making it 70 feet from the ground—the tree being 150 yards up the hillside from the bed of the creek. The nest was built between three sloping limbs and consisted of four nests built one on top of the other as the latter became too old to use. This year's nest was three feet wide by two feet deep; the egg-cavity eight inches by six inches, but from the bottom of the original nest to the top of the current one the measurement was eleven feet and each nest could be easily distinguished. I should say the bottom nest would be from 30 to 40 years old. One Eagle watched from a great height. The eggs were rather large and rounded, spotted and blotched with reddish-brown and lavender.

Very few Eagles have been seen out here on the Willowie Plain this season. At times in previous years it has been necessary to watch lambing ewes all day, armed with a gun to keep the Eagles off. On 28th January, 1937, two Eagles were seen soaring about, but they did not settle. On 12th February three were seen flying low over lambing ewes. On 20th and 29th March one was seen flying over the sheep. On 23rd March one was found eating a lamb—the brains and eyes had been eaten out. On 22nd July one was seen flying with two Crows (*Corvus*) in hot pursuit, and making the Eagle utter short peculiar squeals every time they struck at it. That was the third occasion on which I have heard an Eagle make a noise.

The first time was when I hit one with a rifle bullet, and the second time was when a bird came gliding into its nest with a rabbit in its talons to find the writer standing in the nest with its two fledglings. It dropped the rabbit, uttered a peculiar squeal, and flew off to a great height. That was on 13th August, 1934.

On 28th June, 1935, a half-built nest was found. On 7th August, 1935, one egg was taken from a nest. On 14th August, 1935, I took two eggs from the nest found on 28th June—one was infertile, and the other heavily incubated. On 2nd August, 1936, two big chicks were found, nearly ready to fly.

