

A Wedgies Tale

By Tom Dunbabin

It's March. The afternoon is warm and balmy, stillness ruffled occasionally by a light breeze. With a long fallen branch as a seat I absorb the bush for a while. Gliding upwind, downwind or just hanging in the breeze, a wedge-tailed eagle scans the paddock, its eyes many times stronger than mine. Without as much as a single wing flap, it rides the thermal higher and higher; a diminishing silhouette in the clear blue sky.

I think back to a day cooler and windier. Winding my way along an old track with Gypsy my sheep dog, I was trying to catch up with a few sheep, stragglers that had been missed at gathering. Suddenly, a wedge-tail eagle, wings beating furiously, raced through the trees and round the rocky crags. The sun glinted momentarily off its black feathers as it disappeared behind the cliff. A jet fighter then—not the glider I see today.

I rather like the Tasmanian Wedge-tailed eagles' portentous full title: *Aquila audax fleayi*. More dignified I think, than the "wedgie" of normal conversation, but less practical. Wedgies here became isolated from their mainland relatives around 10,000 years ago, when the sea rose following the last ice age. They are a more robust bird than their cousins over the strait. I'm told there are less than two hundred pairs in the whole of Tasmania. Three pairs nest on our land.

Typical for July, the morning starts cold and frosty but with the sun now up, the air is warming perceptibly. I crunch my way across the grass to the toppled tree and flattened fence, and set about repairing the damage. The far-off screeching of a wedgie reminds me it's the time of year they begin to breed, building up old nests or starting new ones. Looking skyward, I don't immediately see anything. On a slow wider scan I spot two birds in what resembles a battle—or is it a dance? High in the sky, wheeling, diving, and locking feet they tumble towards the earth. One hundred meters, two hundred meters they plummet, gathering speed ever-downwards. Surely they must crash. But no, the 300-meter descent, at near terminal velocity, ends with a sharp banking as the wedgies break away from each other and reach out for adjacent branches in an old tree. A risky business, I think to myself, but then such manoeuvres are probably standard fare for wedgies, just part of life in the air. What was the purpose of this high altitude free-fall? Warding off rivals, love making or just having fun.

Wedgie nests are big: cubic meters of sticks, piled in a crook between branches. Trees with thick solid trunks growing on sheltered lee slopes are selected to build in; nests need to be stable. Many sticks are needed and I marvel at how many times the wedgies fly past a treetop, grab a branch and carry it back to add to the nest. Each year they make them bigger, adding new sticks prior to egg-laying and green twigs and leaves following hatching. On our farm, nests are used for five, sometimes up to ten, successive years before being abandoned. Perhaps the wedgies—which I am told pair for life—become too old to breed, or move on and build another nest. Maybe in years to come they will return, or another pair will use the nest. I have heard of wedgies driving off sea

eagles, usurping the nest to raise their own chick. Opportunistic aggression I wonder, saving the task of building? Or simply reclaiming what is rightfully theirs, a nest temporarily abandoned.

Wedgies usually have a single greyish white egg with speckles of brown on it. (I am told they sometimes have two eggs.) They are laid at the end of August and for six weeks neither cold wind nor rain nor hail distracts the mother from her incubating task. Sitting statue-still, she is barely discernable from the branches and leaves around and only some ruffling of a few feathers now and then alerts me to her presence. Sometimes she leaves the nest to feed, whilst her partner keeps the egg warm, but mostly she does the sitting, with him often perched in a tree nearby, waiting.

Mid-October. It's a misty morning and the ground is wet. Overnight rain has moistened the forest and a smell of freshness pervades the nostrils, signalling spring, my favourite time of year. The grass is growing, days are lengthening, and temperatures are on the rise. The bush is renewing itself. The forest floor comes alive with colour, wattle yellow, heath pink, and daisy white. Bird song fills the bush. I pass the wedgies' nest—the big bird still sitting—and notice something different, a splash of white on the side of the nest. I grab the binoculars for a closer look and with a sense of excitement realise it is a piece of eggshell. The chick has hatched!

Late November and the wedgie chick has grown quickly—but still looks fragile—a small bundle of white down with protruding oversized feet and a large beak. The temperature reaches 32°C soon after midday; the first hot day of the year has arrived. There is no cooling breeze. Moving uneasily around the nest platform the chick seeks what little shade there is and with beak hanging open pants to cool itself. The white fluffy down, ideal for keeping warm on cold days, is no help when it's hot. Flies in their hundreds are attracted to the nest by remnants of meals past, and fresh faeces. The youngster ruffles its down and shakes its head in a vain attempt at keeping the buzzing pests away. Relief comes late in the afternoon as a leafy branch casts a shadow on the nest: at last there is some shade, and a slight breeze quietens the flies.

Earlier in the morning the parent birds left to search for food and have not yet returned. There is little to hunt in the middle of the day; hares, rabbits, and wallabies are all sheltering, and the possums have withdrawn into their hollows. Late in the afternoon, as the sun sinks and the shadows lengthen, and a dramatic scene unfolds on the flat land a couple of kilometres to the west of the nest. The old mother wedgie, riding the last of the day's thermals, spots a young hare squatting in the long grass three hundred meters below. Descending quickly, she sweeps silently towards it, and with a final lunge, seizes the hare pinning it to the ground. Her strong talons pierce the skin and sink deeply into the flesh of the screaming, struggling rodent. Leaning over, she quickly despatches the hapless hare with rapid thrusts of her beak, exposing the still beating heart and lungs. Within a minute, she is off. A couple of "hops" down the slope, some laboured wing-beats, and she takes to the air, hare clasped firmly in her talons.

Two minutes later, a few short flaps and the old bird alights at the nest. Using her beak—such a powerful weapon in despatching the hare—she deftly dissects the carcass, tearing off small pieces of meat and gently placing them into the beak of the young chick. For half an hour feeding continues, the chick's constant high pitched cheeping pausing as it gulps down the morsels offered. Why the constant noise I wonder? Maybe to assure its mother that the chick is still there, and hungry; I'm sure she knows that! Then as suddenly as the old bird arrived she is off, launching from the nest

carrying a bone which she drops a short distance away. Over the next three months, both parents will repeat the cycle of slaughter, dissection, and cleaning up many times. Adult wedgies will feast on carcasses that shooters leave behind, and road-kill, but only animals the birds themselves kill are taken to the nest.

November becomes December, and the chick gets larger. Its downy white coat takes on a new appearance, flecks of brown appear; feathers growing. Within a couple of weeks the fluffy white bundle looks like a monster, its white down randomly punctuated by long brown feathers. Like all parents, the adult wedgies maintain their doting attention, bringing a constant supply of food, tearing it up and feeding it to their feathery bundle. By Christmas the transformation to adulthood is almost complete. The down has gone, fluttering to the ground below the nest, and the chick has become a slightly smaller, light brown version of its parents. When food arrives, there is a constant raucous screeching as the chick is fed, and from the top of the gully, almost three hundred meters away, it is easy to tell when its mealtime; I just listen.

Meal times have become a dance. The chick no longer waits for the food to be dissected; it constantly pecks and nibbles at the beak of its parent, making persistent verbal and physical demands to be fed. Its parent, trying to avoid the interference, turns round and round but the chick follows. The old bird departs before the meal is finished, leaving some of the carcass for the chick to practice feeding itself. Along with meat, the youngster consumes bits of bone, hair, and claws. These indigestible bits are regurgitated over the side of the nest as “fur-balls” that fall at the base of the tree. They, along with the bones the adult birds drop, tell me a lot about the young wedgies diet. The obvious targets; possum, wallaby, rabbit and hare are eaten, but also echidnas, cats, birds, wombats and even new born deer.

The summer gale arrived from the north. It was horrendous: limbs and leaves flying about, even trees falling. How did the wedge chick fare I wonder? Towards evening the wind abates and it is safe to venture back into the bush. On passing the nest tree I glance up; the chick is standing on the very edge of the nest, flapping its wings wildly. For this youngster the wind was not a bother but a blessing; it was able to practice the art of flying without leaving the nest. The fledgling's breast muscles require a lot of exercise before the first flight. They must hold the meter-long wings extended for hours supporting the bird as it roams the sky, and when in pursuit of prey flap the wings vigorously propelling the bird at high speed. The flat top of the nest is large but it makes a very small 'runway'. The fledged chick will have just one opportunity to get airborne, as launch failure—a tumble to the forest floor—would be a disaster. With little hope of getting airborne from there the youngster would probably die from starvation. How do young birds learn the skills of flight before taking the ultimate plunge? The takeoff, the glide, and the landing must all be right – first time!

A few days on and I pass the nest again, look up and see it's empty. The bird has flown. I move off down the track, wondering how the first flight went, and where the youngster is now. Suddenly, from the corner of my eye, I catch a movement, turn and see the young bird alight on a branch very close to me. Rusty brown ruff fluttering in the breeze it turns its head and fixes me with its eyes. Why did it stop I wonder? Perhaps to look at me, or Gypsy, who is with me, exploring pieces of its new expanded world? As I walk on, I contemplate the birds' future, will it survive the three or four years before reaching adulthood, find a mate and have chicks of its own? The first winter will be the

hardest as it hones its hunting skills but at least it has a chance with wallaby, hares, and possums abundant in the surrounding open country.

There is a massive block of dolerite on our farm, an imposing feature that solidified from the earth's magma during the Jurassic. Called "The Quoin," (meaning cornerstone) it is a kilometre across and a favourite haunt for wedgies, its high cliffs combining with the almost constant westerly wind to create updrafts ideal for soaring. The flat top, a great place for a walk, affords panoramic outlooks over the landscape; scenes I never tire of. As I sit—taking in the view—a wedgie rides the updrafts at the cliff face. Gliding upwards, almost vertically, and without a single wing beat, it alights on a rocky outcrop nearby, gracefully folding its wings. Its light brown colouring tells me it has recently fledged and although perched only a few meters away, it makes no move to leave. I watch, and listen, but the bird is quiet, except for an occasional short soft screech, a communication with its parents soaring somewhere around the cliffs. Although the youngster is now free to roam and explore the skies on its own, for many months yet it will hunt with the older birds, for there is much it has to learn. Is this the chick I have been watching for the last few months, I wonder? It rests a while, and then relaunches; simply unfurling its wings and dropping from the rock, it glides away—the ultimate base-jumper.

Seeing a wedgie in the sky, knowing the tree in which one sits and the nest from which one hatched, generates the wonder, cements our awe, and engenders our respect for these magnificent birds. Sitting at the kitchen table I see a pair of wedgies, their recently fledged offspring with them, ride the updrafts a few hundred meters away. What does the future hold for them? How will the youngster cope with the structures of our increasingly mobile and energy-hungry world?

A speeding car can kill a wedgie as it feasts on road kill carrion; the wires that transmit electricity to our homes electrocute any bird that strikes them; and collision with a wind turbine—erected in the name of green energy—will mean certain death to a wedgie. It is the things we do to change our world—and their's—that threaten their existence. We must consider the consequences for the wedgies of the structures that we build to serve our needs, if these majestic birds are to forever ride the sky.

The moral right of Tom Dunbabin to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted.

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