

Where Do Wedgies Dare?

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When you have an adult Wedge-tailed Eagle tucked under your arm, it's really important to keep hold of those legs. The skin-tearing talons on the end of each toe, together with several tonnes of crushing power per foot, make them a formidable weapon. Just ask any kangaroo who has watched her joey get carried off into the sky by our largest bird of prey.

"Why on earth might I be holding one?" you might ask. Having just fitted a satellite transmitter to the eagle using a specially designed harness, I was ready to let it go. I placed it down on the ground, pinning the wings with one hand and gripping the tarsi firmly with the other. Then, I quickly let go and stepped back...

Seeing a 'wedgie' soaring effortlessly above the landscape is an iconic image of the Australian outback. It is a vision I had many times as a young boy on family holidays around Western Australia (WA). Studying and photographing eagle biology while at university and for years afterward further fuelled my quest to find out more about these majestic birds. Eagles became 'my thing', and I was hooked.

In late 2011, I began researching Wedge-tailed Eagle ecology at Lorna Glen, a conservation reserve in the middle of WA. This study site provided an ideal location to track birds, especially because detailed information on habitat use in relation to reintroduced threatened mammal populations was part of the research.



Gidjee feeds Kuyurnpa a freshly killed rabbit. Both eagles have solar PTTs attached to their backs.

In 2012, I set out to fulfill a boyhood dream and track the movements of adult Wedge-tails, being lucky enough to successfully obtain a WA Dept. Parks and Wildlife Community Grant to cover the costs of three 70g solar Argos/GPS PTTs and an

Australian Geographic seed grant to aid with logistics and the production of a community education website about the project. In June 2013, after months of preparation, my team and I headed to the remote outback of WA to attempt adult eagle capture.

How do you catch a wild wedgie? Along with "how tall are you?" (I'm 6'8") and "do you play basketball?" (No), this had become a popular daily question since people found out about my mission. Seeking the wisdom of retired eagle experts, Michael Ridpath and Michael Brooker, from WA, lent me insights into the methods they used during research in the 1970s. A giant 'chook pen' cage trap with an open roof, built beneath a dead perch tree, would prevent eagles from having their usual 'runway' needed to get airborne, once lured inside with a piece of carrion. Wedgies find it hard to resist a 'roo, and, in mid June 2013, I was thrilled when we captured two adults in two days of trapping. An adult male (who I decided to name 'Wallu', after the local Aboriginal word for eagle, 'Wallu-wurru') and an adult female, named 'Gidjee' (an alternative spelling of the name for the eagles' favoured nest tree in the area), both birds were paired breeding adults living in separate territories.

Four months later, I found myself clinging to the side of an eagle nest, face to face with Gidjee's beautiful, healthy 9 week-old chick. A 7-week incubation period that only a patient mother could sit out, together with regular delivery of food by her mate, had produced a pretty young girl. I

removed 'Kuyurnpa' (a Martu word meaning 'little girl') from the nest, fitted the third PTT, then placed her back. She was almost ready to fledge—only a week or so longer. Then, after all that flapping practice on the nest, it would be time to use those massive, feathered appendages for the first time, and take me, via a virtual satellite connection, along for the ride.

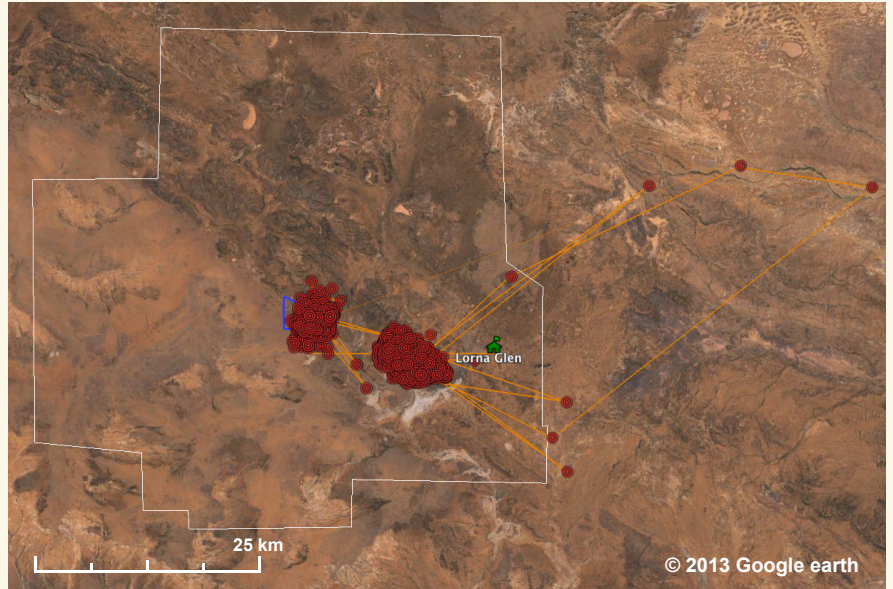


Figure 1. Home range of two adult Wedge-tailed Eagles at Lorna Glen: Gidjee (left) and Wallu (right).

After eleven months, Wallu and Gidjee had remained in relatively small fixed home ranges of approximately 45 km² and 25 km² in size, respectively (Figure 1). The one exception was a 'Wallu walkabout' where he travelled 60 km to the edge of a desert salt lake and back in a day. Altitude data (accurate to ±22 m) showed Wedge-tails are capable of soaring incredibly high, reaching the maximum height of about 6900 m above sea level (Figure 2)! This can probably be explained by thermal air currents (which peak during late spring and summer) carrying the eagles very high as they soar above the landscape. While these heights are exceptional, most of an eagle's daily routine occurs between ground level and about 1500 m above sea level. Sadly, in May 2014, Gidjee unexpectedly left her home range, travelled 200 km north and died in a remote part of the desert. The cause of death is unknown, but I suspected she was expelled by a rival adult female. Wallu is still being tracked, and after nearly 2 years of data collection, he still remains within the same home range at Lorna Glen.

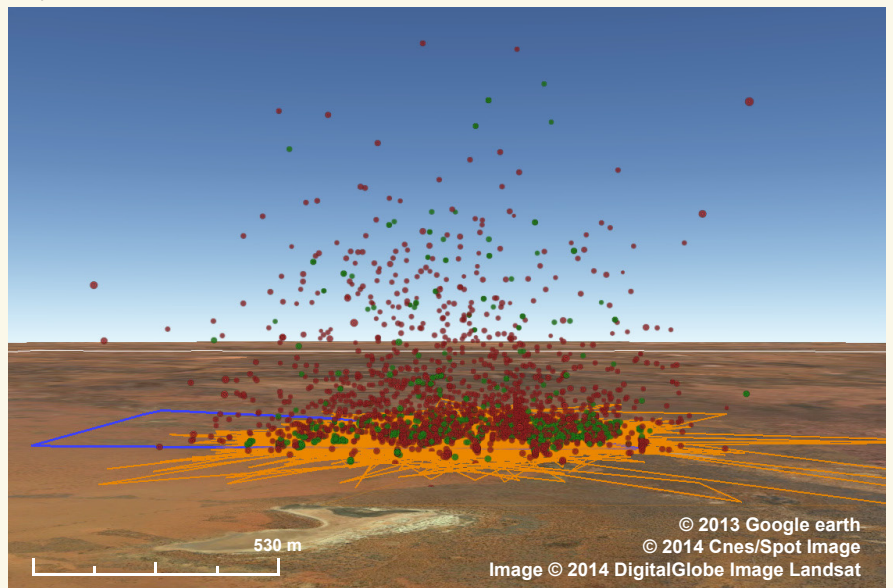


Figure 2. A 3D picture of Gidjee and Kuyurnpa's movements in March 2014 showing altitudes of about 3500 m above sea level. The maximum height recorded was 6900 m above sea level!

One of the most exciting parts of the eagle tracking project was watching Kuyurnpa, the first ever juvenile Wedge-tailed Eagle to be tracked during dispersal, leave Lorna Glen. She spent her first night 'away from home' on 29 March 2014, roosting about 60 km south of her natal nest. Then she

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