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Encounters between Wedge-tailed Eagles and Hang-gliders

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Hang-gliding enables humans to share the same element as large soaring birds, often at close quarters. During 10 years of hang-gliding I had many aerial encounters with birds. In Africa I ridge-soared and shared thermals with several species of vulture, Black Eagles *Aquila verreauxi*, Jackal Buzzards *Buteo rufofuscus*, crows and ravens. In Australia I have flown with White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax* and Australian Pelicans *Pelecanus conspicillatus*, among others. My most frequent contacts were with Wedge-tailed Eagles, which may be aggressive towards hang-gliders as reported by others (Mooney 1986, Upe 1988, Tonkinson & Reiner 1988). Conversations with other hang-glider pilots confirmed that by far the most common aerial encounters are with Wedge-tailed Eagles. I therefore solicited the experiences of other pilots who had met eagles in the air. Here I reproduce, in full or in part, some of their replies and also describe one of the most notable of my own experiences with the Wedge-tailed Eagle. I begin with that incident. Imperial measures have been used for heights, to accord with aviation practice.

At about 1300 h on 6 January 1985 I was flying westwards over the Murray River valley in northern Victoria. I was a few kilometres east of Tintaldra when, having dropped from cloud-base (which on that day was at 8500 ft above ground level) to about 2000 ft, I found a small, very rough thermal. At the same time I heard a plaintive mewling cry and a moment later caught sight of a Wedge-tailed Eagle. It was black, with none of the light colouring of immaturity, and seemed to have a large amount of white, bare skin about the face, which made it appear almost vulture-like. The beak was open, its legs were lowered and its talons extended. Keeping slightly ahead of me and about 6 m off my right wing, it followed me for a few turns in this extraordinarily bumpy thermal, which was taking me up at a rate of 800-1000 ft per minute. Through fine adjustments of its wing geometry, the eagle was controlling its ascent rate to match mine. Now and again it climbed out ahead of me quite effortlessly, without flapping, all the time glancing back with quick movements of its head. Then it swept round to my left (that is, into the powerful core of the thermal) and positioned itself about 10 m above and almost directly behind me, more or less in my blind spot. From this vantage point it now began to swoop with half-closed wings on my lime-green glider, passing over the left wing to reappear ahead of me. Then it peeled away to the left

again and swept round behind me to repeat the whole performance. Although the bird was not making contact with the glider, its antics were causing me to lose concentration and occasionally drop out of the thermal. To get back into it I had to watch to see where the eagle was getting its best lift and then fly over and join it. As I approached, it manoeuvred itself behind me again and resumed its attacks. While all this was going on I spotted another Wedge-tailed Eagle soaring in large circles perhaps 1000 ft above me.

I tried putting my attacker off by screaming or roaring, then by shouting abuse. Apart from startling it initially, this had no effect. I had heard that hang-glider pilots had successfully deterred Golden Eagles *A. chrysaetos* in the U.S.A. by taking their feet and legs out of their harnesses and letting them hang threateningly like exposed talons. I tried this, but without success. The Wedge-tail continued to attack.

The eagle's final attack had the greatest effect. When we had reached about 6000 ft the bird swooped as before, but this time, instead of going for a spot a metre or so inboard from my left tip, it appeared to aim for the nose of the glider. It probably would have hit its target had not my upper rigging been in the way. As the eagle struck the wires I heard a thud and felt the whole glider shudder. Then it was all over. The eagle climbed until it was a ragged speck above me and finally cruised off eastwards. I did not see whether it joined the high-flying bird that had stayed aloof from the drama.

This was my most uncomfortable encounter with Wedge-tailed Eagles. Fortunately there was no damage and I was able to continue my flight. Other encounters have been much less aggressive, with the birds joining me in thermals or ridge-lift, apparently out of curiosity. More than once I have used eagles to pinpoint good lift and on other occasions have felt that eagles were using me for the same purpose.

George Smith of Tuncurry, N.S.W., also encountered Wedge-tailed Eagles in northern Victoria. Late in the afternoon of 12 February 1986 he was flying at 6500 ft above sea level, about 2300 ft above the summit of Burrowa Pine Mountain. He reported:

A Wedge-tail flew up at me from way below, checked me out silently, then closed its wings and free-fell almost vertically until it was too small to see. Summer of 1987, Feb.-March-early April — constantly harassed by Wedge-tails, particularly on the east side of Mt Mittamatite. They screeched but did not strike, and stayed mostly in my blind area. The only strike was on 19 Feb. Climbing at 1000 ft/min in a huge thermal above Mt Elliot, I gained 3000 ft in 3 mins. I heard, or felt, a thump from my right wing and I saw a Wedge-tail clinging to the trailing edge. The thermal core was such that I was able to free both hands and photograph the bird. Later examination revealed a small hole in the upper leading edge. 15 March 1987, flying from Mt Mittamatite to Tooma, I found lift unexpectedly above flat land and lazily circled. A Wedge-tail joined in and we flew together. I continued on after topping out and ran into another thermal at high altitude. Probably the same eagle, silently eyeball to eyeball we flew.

Bruce Crerar, of Bridport, Tasmania, reported that all the attacks he has experienced have taken place around Christmas time. At other times of the year eagles have behaved much less aggressively towards him. He reported:

At a property called 'Billog' at the base of the Great Western Tiers, 10-13 km out of Cressy, near the Poatina power station, a pair of Wedge-tails struck me four times on 11 January 1988. I was about 800-900 ft above ground level when I heard a loud whack, then off the nose of the kite rolled an eagle. It opened its wings, turned and looked at me, put its landing gear down and went round again.

Bruce reported that the eagles aimed only for his glider's nose. They positioned themselves about 3-4.5 m above and 6-10 m behind the glider, stopped flapping and closed their wings to attack. Eventually another hang-glider had to intervene, splitting the eagles up and driving them off. There was no damage.

On another occasion Bruce found that an eagle stopped attacking when he switched off the audio function of his variometer, an instrument that registers changes in height. The audio function makes a bird-like warbling sound.

On 20 November 1988 Bruce and five others were thermalling above the Great Western Tiers when he suddenly noticed a young Wedge-tailed Eagle flying less than a metre under one of the wings. He reported, 'It was just under the crossbar and circling with me. I got such a fright when I saw it that I might have initiated a turn.' That turn brought the wing down. The eagle's head touched the wing's undersurface, quite gently, at which point the bird dived away.

Richard Parsons, of Canberra, reported that eagles have regularly attacked hang-gliders on the Lake George Range, N.S.W., about 20 km north-east of the city, over a number of years but have become more persistent recently. The attacks have occurred mainly in January, February and March. Richard has come under attack on two occasions, he suspects by the same eagle. Because of air traffic control restrictions, hang-gliders do not fly higher than 300 ft above the ridge. He reports:

The first one knows of the attacks is when the eagle thumps into the wingtip. The bird climbs behind the glider, then dives at one wingtip from above, sticks out its talons as it hits and, after colliding, wheels away to repeat. Sometimes it glides in front and slightly higher, making a squealing noise, opening its beak a little, then it peels back to attack again. The eagle has only ever attacked the wingtips of our gliders and has hit mine some 15 times. I have tried yelling at it, squealing, chirping and flying erratically but none of this seems to discourage it from attacking. Last time, I watched it by turning my head when the bird was behind. This seemed to stop it attacking, but when I turned away or it flew to where I couldn't see it, it attacked again.

The attacks have resulted in 2-4 cm long cuts in the glider's fabric near the wingtips. All the attacks have occurred in the afternoon or early evening.

Bill Temby, of Blackwood, S.A., reported that he has often flown among Wedge-tailed Eagles in or around the Flinders Ranges:

My main encounter with an eagle occurred at Barn Hill in the mid-north of S.A. It was in September 1987 on a blustery and thermally day with thermals going to about 3000 ft above take-off (i.e. 4167 ft above sea level). This particular eagle had attacked a couple of gliders earlier on this day. At 2700 ft (above take-off, i.e. 3867 ft above sea level) the eagle struck. On its third strike it dislodged the tensioner on the wingtip, releasing all the tension in one wing, and I spiralled in from that height. I was hospitalised and the glider was wrecked.

It must be emphasised again that, although aggressive eagles can be one of the hazards of hang-gliding, most aerial encounters with these birds are entirely free of violence. Some research has been initiated into factors that may have a bearing on attacks (e.g. shape and colour of glider) but no conclusive results are available. As hang-glider pilots gather more experience in contacts with eagles, greater importance may come to be attached to such factors as proximity of nests and time of year when flights are to take place in areas known to be inhabited by eagles.

References

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