Little Eagles in the Australian Capital Territory during two breeding seasons: 2015 and 2016, and the myth of ‘buffers’ and ‘corridors’

Previously we reported on the collapse of breeding Little Eagles *Hieraaetus morphnoides* in the ACT from about 13 territories in the 1980s and 1990s to one to four breeding territories, depending on the year, between 2005 and 2014 (Olsen et al. 2015). Causes of the decline could be the use of the poison Pindone to control rabbits, or breeding Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax* displaced from other locations and displacing Little Eagles, but mainly suburban development in the northern ACT. Little Eagles have not been found breeding in heavily forested Namadgi in the southern ACT, but breed mainly in open forest and woodland in the north, areas susceptible to urban sprawl.

Results

In the two breeding seasons, 2015 and 2016, breeding attempts (eggs or young) were reported to us for Little Eagles in the ACT. The total across the ACT was one fledged young from two active nests in 2015 (Campbell Park and Strathnairn), and one fledged young each from two active nests in 2016 (Campbell Park and Strathnairn). That translates to 0.75 young per territory per year, low productivity for this species (Olsen 2014), even compared to recent years such as 2008 when a total of four young were fledged from four breeding territories in one year (Olsen et al. 2009).

Because Wedge-tailed Eagles might usurp Little Eagles breeding territories, we monitor as many Wedge-tailed Eagle territories as possible near Canberra. In 2016 we checked nine Wedge-tailed Eagle territories close to the city. In contrast to Little Eagles, they fledged a total of 11 young, 1.2 young per territory per year, high productivity for this species (Olsen 2014).

Discussion

Little Eagles still breed at low levels in the ACT, but because of increased urbanisation, and, possibly, Pindone, and interference from Wedge-tailed Eagles, Little Eagle breeding success is poor.

Property developers have set up ‘buffers’ around eagle nests, including the Little Eagle nest at Strathnairn. The developers claim that no development, including infrastructure and construction-related activities, is permitted within 200 m of the Little Eagle nesting tree and immediate foraging area. This is junk science. ‘Buffers’ set around raptor nests by ACT real estate developers and government planners are not based on evidence. The buffers are arbitrary, always too small, and set to advantage land developers, not eagles.

In *Australian High Country Raptors* JO said (page 232), “Three concepts need to be mentioned that can help a developer more to kill off. Land developers love them. And the problem is, ACT developers always find a compliant ecologist who, for pay, will support these bogus notions, and pretend there is evidence to back them, though no evidence is ever produced. This happened with the Strathnairn Little Eagles. The eagles were never seen foraging within 200 m of their nest. This was a foraging -free-zone. So developers set up a buffer area in a 200 m radius of the nest to protect the area for foraging (in the area Little Eagles were never seen foraging). Stephen Debus (pers. comm.) has never seen Little Eagles foraging within 200 m of the Little Eagle nests he studied.

We did see Little Eagles foraging outside of this 200 m ‘buffer’ zone, in areas now being destroyed by developers and the government to build suburban residences.
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And developers cannot buffer the Strathnairn Little Eagles from disturbance because these Little Eagles are only 50 metres from a major public facility, the Strathnairn Homestead Gallery. The Gallery has regular public functions that can be noisy. The people and noise haven’t deterred the Little Eagles, but loss of foraging habitat outside of the 200 m buffer zone, we believe, will deter them. We suspect that Little Eagles routinely nest close to houses in the ACT and nearby New South Wales as protection from Wedge-tailed Eagles, which don’t nest so close to houses.

There is a good reason why eagles forage less frequently close to their nests. Prey animals, such as rabbits, magpies or corvids, close to the Little Eagle nest, learn the habits of the nesting eagles, so the element of surprise is lost. So most hunting is done at some distance from the nest, where eagles can surprise prey, and carry it back. ‘Corridors’ matter little to the eagles we study in Canberra because eagles can carry prey over houses to their nests, and we’ve seen them do this. What eagles need is extensive home-range areas to hunt in. And these areas are being destroyed while ‘corridors’ and ‘offsets’ are being offered up as sweeteners, ‘corridors’ and ‘offsets’ that are substandard for Little Eagle breeding. The ‘corridors’, ‘buffer zones’ and ‘offset areas’ give limited foraging opportunities, and some are within the home ranges of hunting Wedge-tailed Eagles. So we have predicted that this Strathnairn Little Eagle home range will eventually be abandoned because suburban development there will destroy foraging areas.

A buffer around a Little Eagle nest, meant to protect the eagles from disturbance, and maintain foraging areas, should be a minimum of 1 km radius from the nest if the buffer is based on similar species such as the Booted Eagle Hieraaetus pennatus in Spain (López-López et al. 2016, Journal of Ornithology DOI 10.1007/s10336-016-1357-z), and it should be more than 2 km away from breeding Wedge-tailed Eagles, to protect them from these larger eagles in the ACT where numbers of macropod prey are artificially inflated and benefit breeding and non-breeding Wedge-tailed Eagles. The situation may be different in other parts of Australia.

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References

Jerry Olsen and Susan Trost

Canberra Wedge-tailed Eagle surveyed in 2016
Photo—S. Trost & J. Olsen

BirdLife Australia’s EagleCAM

As at 21 January there was no more news about juvenile SE17 [since 16 Dec. – see last issue]. The adults have been coming to the nest again from time to time and are seen regularly on the river.

As at 19 May, the Sea-Eagle pair were repairing and preparing their nest for new eggs. There was extensive damage to a camera and other data and electrical equipment that is essential for the sea-eagle cam to record and broadcast.

Our volunteers have been working feverishly installing replacement equipment and testing connections to make sure that the Eagle-Cam is working; they don’t want to interfere with nesting activity.

As at 17 June, the eagles are on the nest and preparing for eggs. The cameras and equipment have been replaced and/or repaired and are running, though still without sound.

Thank you for all of your efforts and support: Judy Harrington, Stephen Davey, Geoff Hutchinson, Cathy Cook, Helen Stibbs, Shirley McGregor plus many more at home and abroad. Thank you to those generous donors who have contributed much-needed funds to help with the replacement and repair costs. Please click on the following link to view the EagleCam: http://www.sea-eaglecam.org/video.html

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