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Eagles and Aborigines

‘At the beginning of winter, the iguanas hide themselves in their homes in the sand; the black eagle hawks go into their nests; the garbarlee or shingle-backs hide themselves in little logs, just big enough to hold them; the iguanas dig a long way into the sand and cover up the passage behind them, as they go along. They all stay in their winter homes until Mayrah blows the winter away.’

From ‘Mayrah, the Wind that Blows the Winter Away’, Australian Legendary Tales, collected by K. Langloh Parker (1897).

The earliest human records of Wedge-tailed Eagles are found in the rock paintings that were part of the religious and practical life of many Australian Aboriginal tribes. In Western Australia, the people of the Kimberley painted some particularly beautiful and easily recognisable eagles onto a rock shelter, at least 5000 years ago.

Wedge-tailed Eagles are so identifiable, powerful and omnipresent that it is hardly surprising that they have a strong presence in Aboriginal custom and mythology. Many south-eastern moieties, a division of society that governs rituals and marriages, are named after Eagle and Crow. The ancient story of eagle and crow is at the core of Aboriginal culture. Although based mostly around the Murray-Darling River systems, versions of this ancient myth have been transmitted as far as the northwest of Western Australia. One interpretation is that the relationship between this pair of similar birds with contrasting qualities is a metaphor for moiety (clan) systems, which are often