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Eagles and their relatives

‘All that has been said by previous writers respecting the courage, power, and rapacity of the Golden Eagle applies with equal force to the Aquila audax: in size they are also nearly alike; but the lengthened and wedge-shaped form of its tail gives to the Australian bird a far more pleasing and elegant contour.’

John Gould (1865).

Eagles belong to the family Accipitridae, one of the most species-rich bird families, which includes the kites, harriers and hawks but not the falcons—they are in their own family, the Falconidae. Wedge-tailed Eagles are members of a group of 33 or so true or booted eagles, considered to be the most highly evolved species in the family Accipitridae. All are large, generally dark, eagles with feathered tarsi, that is, their legs are fully feathered right down to the top of their feet, or ‘booted’.

In Australia, the only other true eagle is the Little Eagle, which is just over half the dimensions of the Wedge-tailed Eagle and more compact. It is also much lighter in weight and the difference between the sexes is greater than in its larger cousin: males weigh about 630 g and females 1000 g, compared with 3 and 4 kg, respectively.

The other Australian ‘eagles’ include the White-bellied Sea-Eagle and Whistling Eagle, more correctly known as the Whistling Kite, both of which are kites. Among the kites’ shared features are bare legs, scale-covered rather than feathered. They throw their heads back to make powerful far-carrying