



Rapturous raptors

AUSTRALIA'S BIRDS OF PREY

by Lauren Cabrera

Birds of prey, or raptors, have a unique place in Australian culture and mythology. They are a symbol of power, vision, speed and audacity, fascinating us from the ground as they soar high above, with their impressive wingspans and hunting accuracy.



Birds of prey have long captured people's imagination. These magnificent hunters actively catch and feed on live prey, with keen eyesight for detecting a range of animals, mainly mammals, reptiles and other small birds from high in the air.

In addition to speed and strength, they have strong feet with sharp talons for grasping and killing prey, and powerful curved beaks for tearing off flesh.

Although the term 'bird of prey' could theoretically apply to all birds that actively hunt and eat other animals, ornithologists use a narrower definition. Hunting live vertebrates with their feet, rather than their beak, has been largely accepted as an ecological trait of raptorial birds, yet not all species are considered raptors.



A strongly curved bill, and sharp talons are the most commonly used morphological characters for identifying raptors. Although predatory birds primarily hunt live prey, many species also scavenge and eat carrion.

Australian raptors are species that include hawks, falcons, kites, harriers, buzzards and eagles within the Accipitridae and Falconidae families, owls within the Tytonidae and Strigidae families and the osprey, from the Pandionidae family.

CULTURAL TOTEM

Australia's native birds feature prominently in stories of First Nations peoples. Birds feature in Songlines and play an important role socially, ceremonially and ecologically.

Aboriginal peoples in northern Australia believe birds of prey intentionally starting fires in order to lure their prey into the open.

Raptors can see smoke from far away and will capitalise on hunting opportunities created by (particularly grassland) fires that flush an abundance of prey animals (including native rodents and small birds), making them easy targets to swoop down and snatch with their talons.

FAST AND FURIOUS

Australian raptors are efficient, capable hunters. The wedge-tailed

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Main Australian kestrel (*Falco cenchroides*).

Photo – Mark Davidson

Above left and above Wedge-tailed eagle (*Aquila audax*) and its natural habitat.

Photos – Simon Cherriman

Below left Collared sparrowhawk (*Tachyspiza cirrocephala*).

Photo – Keith Lightbody

eagle (*Aquila audax*), Australia's largest aerial predator, which dominates open landscapes with its impressive wingspan. In contrast, the agile brown goshawk (*Tachyspiza fasciata*) navigates dense forests with remarkable precision.

Because of their need to spot slight movement of their prey, the ability to discern detail sharply may be as much as eight times keener in the larger birds of prey than in man.

Nocturnal hunters like the barn owl complement their diurnal counterparts, utilising acute senses to capture prey under the cover of darkness. These avian predators play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance by controlling populations of rodents and small mammals throughout their varied habitats.

In diurnal raptors, females are always larger than their male counterparts. There are 24 species of raptor that breed in Australia, and all but one species—the



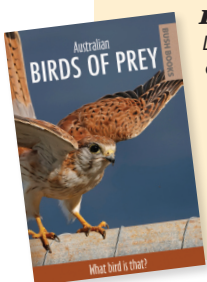
Above Brown falcon (*Falco berigora*).
Photo – Keith Lightbody

Above right Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*).
Photo – Allan Burbidge

Below right Australian kestrel.
Photo – Keith Lightbody

rare letter-winged kite—are regularly found in WA.

The red goshawk (*Erythrotriorchis radiatus*) and the grey falcon (*Falco hypoleucos*) are officially declared as threatened species, and the letter-winged kite (*Elanus scriptus*) is on the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions' priority list as a possible threatened species.



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Meet the raptors

There are a variety of raptors in Australia with different characteristics.

Accipitridae family

The Accipitridae family includes a variety of raptors such as kites, harriers, goshawks, eagles and buzzards. These birds are known for their keen eyesight, powerful talons and hooked beaks, which they use to hunt and consume their prey. Notable members of this family found in Australia include:

- Wedge-tailed eagle (*Aquila audax*): The largest bird of prey in Australia, recognised by its long, wedge-shaped tail and broad wings.
- Pacific baza (*Aviceda subcristata*): A distinctive bird with a prominent crest and striking plumage.
- Brown goshawk (*Tachyspiza fasciata*): A medium-sized raptor known for its agility and hunting prowess in dense forests and open landscapes.

Falconidae family

The Falconidae family is composed of falcons and kestrels, known for their incredible speed and precision during flight. These birds have long, pointed wings and strong, hooked beaks. Key members in Australia include:

- Australian kestrel (*Falco cenchroides*): A small, agile raptor often seen hovering while hunting for insects and small mammals.

- Peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*): Renowned for its diving speed, making it one of the fastest birds in the world.

Tytonidae family

The Tytonidae family, also known as barn owls, includes species that are primarily nocturnal and known for their distinctive heart-shaped faces. In Australia, this family includes:

- Barn owls: Recognisable by their white face and underparts and known for their eerie screeching call.
- Masked owls: Larger owls with darker fascial discs and a robust build.

Strigidae family

The Strigidae family, often referred to as 'true owls', includes a variety of nocturnal hunters with rounded faces and large eyes. In Australia, all 'true owls' belong to the genus *Ninox*, commonly known as hawk-owls. Key species include:

- Barking owl (*Ninox connivens*): Known for its dog-like barking call and robust appearance.
- Boobook owls (*Ninox boobook*): The smallest and most common owl in Australia

