

HALIASTUR? SPHENURUS.

Whistling Eagle.

Milvus sphenurus, Vieill. 2^{de} Edit. du Nouv. Dict. d'Hist. Nat., tom. xx. p. 564.—Ibid. Gal. des Ois., tom. i. p. 41.
pl. 15.—Ibid. Ency. Méth. Orn., Part III. p. 1204.
Haliaeetus canorus, Vig. and Horsf. in Linn. Trans., vol. xv. p. 187.—Gould. in Syn. Birds of Australia, Part III.
Moru and *Wirwin*, Aborigines of New South Wales.
En-na-jook, Aborigines of the Cobourg Peninsula.
Jan-doo, Aborigines of the lowland districts of Western Australia.
Whistling Hawk, Colonists of New South Wales.
Little Swamp Eagle, Colonists of Western Australia.

THIS species of Eagle has been observed in every portion of Australia yet visited by Europeans, but is more abundant in New South Wales than in any other part of the continent; I have never yet seen an example from Van Diemen's Land, and I am consequently led to believe that it rarely if ever visits that island. As might be expected from its almost universal diffusion, the *Haliastur? sphenurus* is not a migratory bird; at least in New South Wales it is equally as numerous in summer as it is in winter; not that it is to be observed in the same locality at all times, the greater or lesser abundance of its favourite food inducing it to wander from one district to another, wherever the greatest supply is to be procured. Displaying none of the courage or intrepidity of the true Eagles, it never attacks animals of a large size; but preys upon carrion, small and feeble quadrupeds, birds, lizards, insects and fish, and while on the one hand it is the pest of the poultry yard, on the other no species of the *Falconidae* effects more good during the fearful visitations of the caterpillar, a scourge of no infrequent occurrence in Australia. In 1839 it was my lot to witness the inroad of vast swarms of caterpillars in the region of the Upper Hunter River, and at the same time I observed many hundreds of the Whistling Eagle assembled on the Downs near Scone preying solely on them, thus tending in a great measure to check their progress, and certainly to lessen their numbers; so partial, in fact, is the Whistling Eagle to this kind of food that the appearance of one is the certain prelude to the appearance of the other. The *Haliastur? sphenurus* is little alarmed by the presence of man, and when sitting on the branches of low trees, will often admit of a near approach even to within a few feet: as an evidence of its indifference, I may mention that, having winged a very rare Tern on the surface of a lagoon, a Whistling Eagle immediately descended and carried it off; and although this circumstance took place at a very short distance from me, neither the shouts of the natives nor of myself deterred the Eagle from bearing off the bird in triumph, to my extreme vexation. It is generally to be seen in pairs, inhabiting alike the brushes near the coast and the forests of the interior of the country. It is incessantly hovering over the harbours, and sides of rivers and lagoons, for any floating animal substance that may present itself on the surface of the water or be cast on the banks; and it is nowhere more common or more generally to be seen than over the harbour of Port Jackson. Its flight, when high in the air, is buoyant and easy, and it frequently soars to a great altitude, uttering at the same time a shrill whistling cry, from which circumstance it has obtained from the colonists the name of the Whistling Hawk, and by which it is at once distinguished from all the other members of the family inhabiting Australia.

The nest, which is constructed of sticks and fibrous roots, is frequently built on the topmost branches of the lofty *Casuarinae*, growing by the sides of creeks and rivers. The eggs, which are laid during the months of November and December, are usually two in number, but sometimes single; they are two inches and three lines long by one inch and nine lines broad, and are of a bluish white slightly tinged with green, the few brown markings with which they are varied being very obscure and appearing as if beneath the surface of the shell. I once found a nest of this species in the side of which had been constructed that of the beautiful little Finch called *Amadina Lathamii*, and both birds sitting on their respective eggs close beside each other; and both would doubtless have reared their progenies had I not robbed the nests of their contents to enrich my collection.

The Whistling Eagle presents the usual difference in the size of the sexes, but in respect to colour no variation is observable; the plumage of the young, on the contrary, as shown by the front figure on the Plate, presents a striking contrast to that of the adult, rendering it by far the handsomer bird during the first autumn of its existence.

Head, neck and all the under surface light sandy brown, each feather margined with a darker colour; feathers of the back and wings brown, margined with greyish white; primaries blackish brown; tail greyish brown; cere and bill brownish white, gradually becoming darker towards the tip of the latter; legs pale bluish white; irides bright hazel.

The figures represent an old and a young bird about two-thirds of the natural size.