



Fig 1. White-bellied sea Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*). Credit - UNE

## White-bellied sea eagle nest spotted at Warrego River's Boera Dam

If you stand in just the right spot on the bank of Boera Dam in the [Toorale State Conservation Area](#) (SCA) and look to the trees in the east, you will spot a very large mass of twigs and sticks neatly curated into a large bowl shape. When our bird expert, Steve Debus, spotted this mass his interest was piqued. He raised his binoculars to have a good look and immediately identified a white-bellied sea eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) nest. This is the furthest west in NSW that Steve had ever seen or heard of a white-bellied sea eagle nest with a breeding pair. Given that Steve is a raptor expert with about 40 years of experience, this observation is probably unique.

The junction of the Warrego and Darling Rivers, where Toorale SCA is located, is a significant meeting place for the Gunu People of the Baakanji Nation. To learn more about the significance of white-bellied sea eagles breeding on this Country we spoke to Gunu-Baakanji First Nations Traditional Custodian, Stephen Howarth. Stephen told us that sea eagles aren't common to his country so they

do not have a name in the local language, although, he was aware that both the Kaurna People (Adelaide Plains) and Adnyamathanha People (Flinders) traditionally refer to the species as *Wilto*. Stephen also shared:

"The sea gull must have informed the sea eagle that it's good country out Toorallie [Toorale] way."



Fig 2. White-bellied sea eagle setting into flight at Toorale SCA. Credit - UNE

So despite their name, sea eagles aren't dependent on the sea for any part their lifecycle. Although most of the sea eagle population do settle by the coast for their breeding season, many will claim breeding territory inland provided there is good food and good habitat available (Fig 2).



Fig 3. Sea eagle surveying the land of Toorale SCA. Credit - UNE

### Sea eagle habitat

You know what they say, give a white-bellied sea eagle a house (a woodland) by the water and she will make it a home. Okay – maybe you haven't heard that, but it's essentially the truth. White-bellied sea eagles occur all around the Australian coastline as well as inland along many major rivers and wetlands of the Murray-Darling Basin (Fig 3). There are three key elements that their coastal and inland breeding territories have in common: (1) intact woodland or forest (2) a permanent waterbody nearby said woodland or forest (3) limited human disturbance around the nesting site.

### Diet

The white-bellied sea eagle feeds alone, in pairs or in family groups mainly on aquatic animals, such as fish and turtles, but it also targets reptiles, waterbirds and mammals such as feral piglets. This species is a skilled hunter and will attack prey up to the size of a swan yet will opportunistically feed on carrion (dead prey) along the waterline. They also harass smaller birds, forcing them to drop any food that they are carrying for a quick and easy meal. Despite their relatively varied diet, white-bellied sea eagles ultimately depend on aquatic and wetland prey, and therefore need healthy aquatic systems to survive.

### A little more about Boera Dam

Before Toorale was a State Conservation Area it was an agricultural property and Boera Dam, among other dams, was constructed to service it. Today, Boera remains as a waterbody with significant ecological value. Our Flow-MER team recently did some analysis and found that of all the channels and dams in Toorale SCA, Boera was one of the most consistently inundated (>75% of the time; Fig 4) and was in the top tier for consecutive wet days (360 days; Fig 5) during the very dry 2019-20 water year (July 2019 – June 2020). In that year, Boera Dam provided refuge for a diverse suite of local and regional aquatic and wetland species, including the white-bellied sea eagle.

Through Commonwealth management, more water is being held in the channels and wetlands of Toorale SCA. With more reliable inundation of the ecosystem, species like the white-bellied sea eagle have a place with essential resources, a refuge, that allows them to persist through the good and the not so good times.

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Managing water for the environment is a collective and collaborative effort, working in partnership with communities, private landholders, scientists and government agencies - these contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we live, work and play. We also pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.



Australian Government  
Commonwealth Environmental Water Office



Monitoring  
Evaluation  
Research



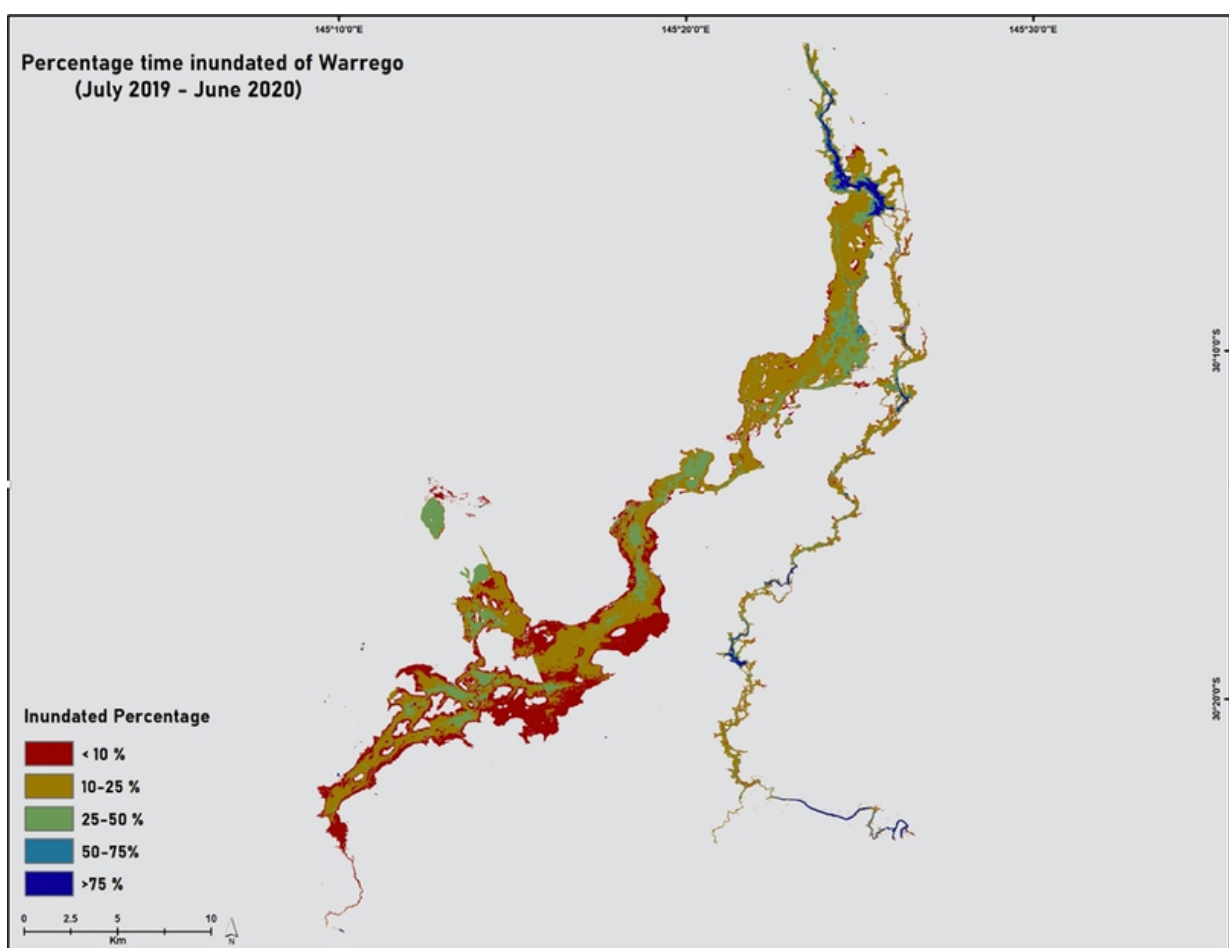


Fig 4. Percentage of time the southern Warrego River and its Western Floodplain were inundated in 2019-2020.

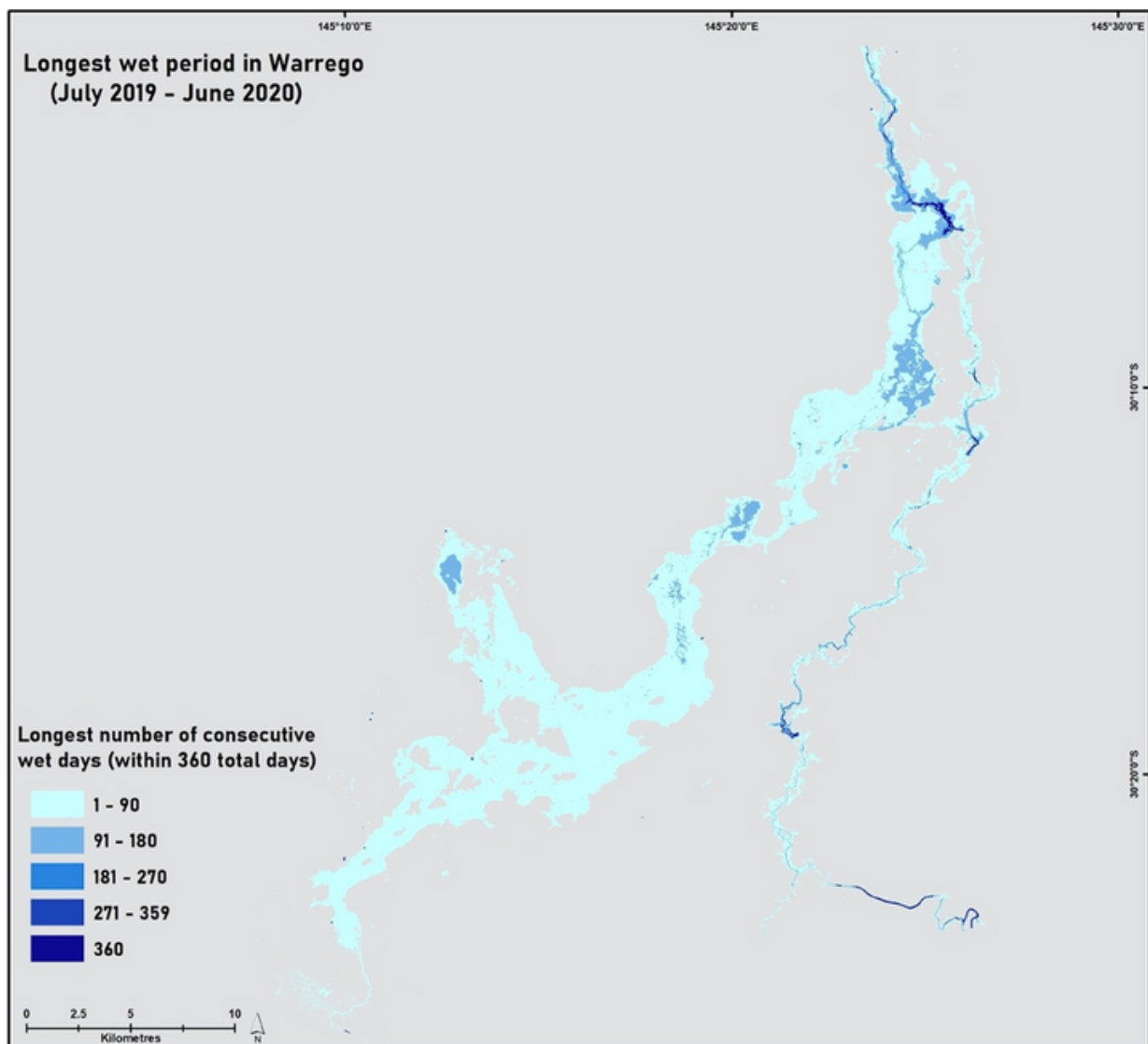


Fig 5. Longest number of consecutive wet days in the southern Warrego River and its Western Floodplain during 2019-2020.