

# THE GENTLE HAWKS

*A family of Pacific Bazas reveals its nest-life to a photographer*

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SNEDIC



'I'VE JUST LOCATED a Pacific Baza's nest and I'm going to set up the tower!' Glen thundered down the phone-line. For many years my friend and fellow wildlife photographer, Glen Threlfo, and I had hoped to photograph this beautiful bird of prey—here was our chance.

The Baza, also commonly known as the Crested Hawk, tends to nest quite high in the horizontal branches of various types of eucalypts or melaleucas. Its nest is often inaccessible, but this one was relatively low and positioned on the outer branches of a casuarina tree. Most importantly, it was in an area suitable for positioning a photographic tower, at the edge of a patch of Gold Coast hinterland rainforest. Our tower was assembled piece by piece, with each 2 m section bolted on top of the next, until the 20 m was reached. To keep it from toppling over, especially during windy conditions, we attached around 17–18 guy-ropes. From the hide perched on top, we were able to view the nest at eye level from a distance of around 4 m.

Any birder who has had the privilege of seeing a Pacific Baza at close range would have to agree that they are one of Australia's most attractive birds of prey. Their bright yellow eye, distinct crest, and brown and white barred chest make them one of the most easily recognised raptors. Their distribution ranges from coastal northern Australia to as far south as Sydney, and they are also found in Indonesia, the Solomon Islands, New Guinea and nearby islands.

The pair that Glen and I were watching had constructed their nest in the usual manner: no more than a pile of loosely stacked sticks covered with a layer of green-leafed eucalyptus twigs. Yet, the untidy structure was kept clean. Once or twice a day the male brought a fresh spray of eucalyptus leaves. From a very early age, their single chick began to release its droppings over the side, rather than soil the nest. It was an amusing sight to see the chick, only a few

minutes after it had eaten, edging to the side of the nest, backside raised, 'aiming' at a nearby branch!

The Bazas were highly protective of their single chick, but gentle at the same time. Often, one parent would be away feeding while the other sat guard in a nearby tree. Most other birds kept their distance, although some would fly into the 'no-go' zone near the nest. Then, either parent would fly casually to where the trespasser was perched and land nearby, displaying no aggression whatsoever. I must add, though, that not once did I see an intruder stay around long enough to find out!

The parents shared hunting duties, with breaks between feeds being anywhere from 10 minutes to over an hour and a half. They brought in a large variety of insects (mainly stick insects and large grubs/larvae) as well as a few small frogs. Considering the size of the chick in its early stages, it really was amazing to watch it swallowing such huge insects in one go.

Often, I observed either parent searching for insects to bring back to feed their chick. They used such precision and agility, swooping on insects that were in the outer foliage of nearby eucalypts. On a few occasions the male hung upside down on the drooping branches, wings outstretched. He would scour the leaves carefully, returning to the nest minutes later with a beak full of morsels for his chick. On other occasions he spent lengthy periods of time away and on his return would often land on the same branch, beak brimming with offerings, calling repeatedly with a '*wi chu, wi chu, wi chu*'. The female, who tended to do more of the feeding, would respond in kind and immediately fly over to perch next to him, take the food from his beak, and fly directly to the nest to feed the ever-hungry chick.

One morning it started to rain. I was sheltered by the hide but the tiny chick wasn't so lucky. It was just starting to get wet when the female arrived. She ruffled her feathers, outstretched her wings and proceeded to create an 'umbrella'. After a few minutes she was totally drenched, but did not falter in her resolve to keep her offspring dry! As soon as the rain stopped, she flew to a nearby tree and spent the next hour and a half preening.

When the chick fledged about 33 days after hatching, the second egg of the original two-egg clutch still remained intact in the nest.

The hours spent sitting cramped in a hide 20 m above the ground, in all weather conditions, were certainly worthwhile. I learnt much from my close encounter with this placid raptor family. Capturing numerous photographs was icing on the cake!

MICHAEL SNEDIC completed his environmental studies at the University of Queensland. He divides his time between working as a Quarantine Officer and photographing our natural world. His aim is to promote wildlife and the environment through photography and writing.

