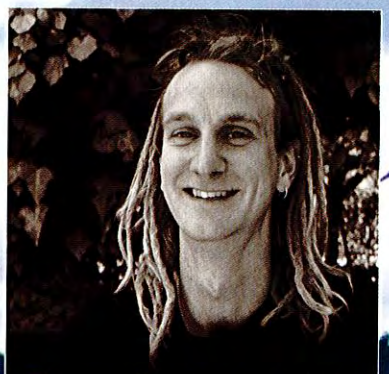

People in profile

Story by Joanna Moore

Simon Cherriman is a young wildlife filmmaker and wedge-tailed eagle specialist with fresh perspectives on environmental education.

Environmental educator Simon Cherriman

He's only young—just 28 years old—but Simon Cherriman's achievements in the environmental education field are as impressive as he is tall—"I'm 6 foot 8," he rattles off by heart, obviously used to being asked, "All the better for climbing trees". A useful skill, one supposes, when researching birds and, in particular, his favourite, the wedge-tailed eagle (*Aquila audax*).

Simon has been passionate about the wedge-tailed eagle for as long as he can remember. And this specific interest is part of a broader environmental calling that started as a child and now helps Simon reach out to children and other audiences through education and wildlife filmmaking. Simon has worked as a field zoologist, as a field biologist, as a tour guide with the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, as a volunteer at Whiteman Park, and in several roles with the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) including as a threatened flora officer, threatened fauna officer and technical officer. He is also an expert tree climber, with a high level of skill and experience in finding, climbing to, photographing and filming nests of Australian birds.

Well known in the Perth environmental community as a wedge-tailed eagle specialist, Simon now runs an environmental consulting business. Adding to his qualifications as a biologist with first class Honours in wedge-tailed eagles, Simon recently completed his Masters in Natural History Filmmaking and co-produced the film *A Wedged Tale*, which contributed to his being awarded the Australian Geographic Young Conservationist of the Year in 2010. Simon also won the environmental category of the Western Australian Young Person of the Year Awards in 2008. But Simon is perhaps best known as an enthusiastic young speaker and educator, with a special ability to inspire environmental interest in adults and children alike.

Previous page
Main This massive nest in the Avon Valley boasts two large eaglets, almost ready to fly at 10 weeks old.
Photo – Simon Cherriman
Inset Simon Cherriman.
Photo – Joanna Moore/DEC

Opposite page
Left An adult wedge-tailed eagle prepares to take off after gorging itself on a kangaroo.
Photo – Simon Cherriman

Below Knee-deep in a Pinjarra swamp photographing an ibis breeding colony.
Photo – Gillian Basnett

A passion for eagles

Simon says it's hard to put a finger on the moment when it all began. Growing up in the Perth hills, there were plenty of inspiring moments, though he says there are a few that stand out. In one, the 15-year-old Simon spotted a huge structure of sticks high in a wandoo tree. He climbed up to the wedge-tailed eagle nest and marvelled at its size. "I was hooked!" he said. Simon's parents would often point out eagles and the family would

The wedge-tailed eagle story

"No one knows how many wedge-tailed eagles lived in Australia 250 years ago; certainly thousands, perhaps tens of thousands. Many of these birds lived in breeding pairs occupying permanent territories, while others were solo nomads wandering the landscape, as they do today. The breeders built massive nests in large, old eucalypts, with a commanding view over their kingdom—a perfect perspective on the pristine forests and woodlands which contained their prime food: mammals. Kangaroo, wallaby, bettong and possum, numbat, bilby and bandicoot—the diversity was as rich as anywhere else in the world, and it still is.

Today, the south-west bioregion is recognised as one of only 12 biodiversity hot spots in the world. We still don't really know how many eagles live here. There have probably been changes in eagle numbers, but it is uncertain whether these were increases or decreases. Whichever is the case, European settlement brought about two major changes to the environment which transformed the wedge-tail's life forever.

Drastic habitat alterations were perhaps the most significant. The ideal of acres of rolling green pasture, crops and livestock drove settlers to clear more than 90 per cent of the original vegetation in the south-west of WA (the area between Shark Bay and Hopetoun). Diverse eucalypt forests and woodlands were replaced with wheat stubble and sheep paddocks. And, with this disappearance of habitat, and the introduction of cats and foxes, came a wave of declines and extinctions in native mammal numbers. Eagles lost much of their food, but because of their versatility, managed to survive on what was available, including kangaroos, birds and reptiles. Did they decline, or remain constant? We will never know.

Another foreigner arrived: the European rabbit. This animal spread quickly across southern Australia, booming to plagues of millions. Eagles thrived on the abundance of this prime food, which spread into all habitats, was easy to hunt in the largely open landscape, and, except in very bad years, remained plentiful as a prey item. Wedgies feasted on rabbits as they took over the continent, often replacing the native species of yesteryear in the predator's diet. The once-diverse ecosystems over which the eagles ruled had in many areas been simplified, from numerous natives to one or two introduced species. Eagle numbers may well have increased during this time, but again we don't know for sure. But we do know that another introduced mammal became eagle food, and the settlers didn't like it—sheep.

Sheep were part of the grand scheme of agriculture envisioned by many pioneers in Australia. And, as the human population grew, so did the requirement for sheep. Small flocks soon became paddocks of hundreds, and the eagles undoubtedly took lambs when they needed to. But in many cases the eagles were feeding on dead lambs already killed by ravens or foxes.

Nevertheless, the farmers waged war on the eagles; hundreds of thousands were shot, until as recently as the 1980s. Governments endorsed this by declaring the birds 'pests of agriculture' and paying bounties on their scalps. Most shooting ended when scientific research exonerated the birds. As research scientists AS Leopold and TO Wolfe concluded in 1970, "[we cannot] justify the continued persecution of a native predator that eats mostly rabbits and has scarcely any adverse impact on the sheep industry". Luckily, wedge-tails didn't become extinct, probably because the birds killed were often immature non-breeders which were destined to die of natural causes. Culling by humans essentially replaced natural mortality, so the population remained largely stable.

Through all these changes, and despite persecution, wedge-tailed eagles have persisted. We are lucky to have them and while the number of eagles still isn't known, it is known that they aren't threatened on mainland Australia. This provides an opportunity for us to study and appreciate them. Wedge-tailed eagles represent one relationship between humans and the environment, and are a useful example for thinking about ecological systems and our place within them."

Contributed by Simon Cherriman

Left This black swan's nest was thrilling to find among an ibis colony. Weeks later, the cygnets were seen swimming on the lake with their parents, among hundreds of squabbling ibis chicks.

Below left Simon conducting a bone identification activity with school children. *Photos – Gillian Basnett*

share the excitement of seeing them around Western Australia during holiday trips.

Simon explains that as he grew up, he found he shared a connection with eagles—they too were tall and conspicuous. "Just as eagles are mobbed by other birds, I was often mobbed by other people when I went out, usually asking about my height," Simon says. "And I admired qualities that eagles possess: loyalty, cooperation, patience, dedication, caring for each other." Simon has also discovered that the striking and charismatic wedge-tailed eagle is a great topic with which to grab the attention, and stir the curiosity, of young people. He can talk for hours about eagles—what we know about them, what we don't know, and common misconceptions. He explains that the wedge-tailed eagle story (see box on page 35) is a useful educational tool.

Seeing the penny drop

Simon says engaging with children is one of the most rewarding aspects of his work. Whether through building eagle 'nests' and filling them with prey bones as part of a 'detective' workshop with Millennium Kids (a Western Australian not-for-profit youth environmental organisation), or running educational activities through DEC's *Nearer to Nature* program, creating fun, rewarding and exciting learning for children is his main aim. "I want them to feel that knowledge is useful," Simon explains, "And for them to go back to the classroom, or return home, knowing things about their environment and being excited about that. Science—which is merely seeking answers to questions about our world—is so often misinterpreted. It can actually be fun!"

How does Simon know a workshop has been successful? The kids are still talking about it after the session—on the bus ride back to school, in the playground, to their parents at dinner. Simon recalls a recent workshop in which the most distracted student at the start of the session was, by the end, "totally unrecognisable"—engaged, excited and really thinking about what he had learnt. "It's that moment the penny drops that I look for," he says.

Simon explains that education should not only be fun and engaging, but also challenging. "There's a lot to be said for incorporating a bit of adrenaline and risk—I think all people need it to some degree," he explains. Of course classroom educators need to keep their students safe, but Simon feels young people should be encouraged to find a 'rush' in positive ways, rather than just through going on a show ride, in simulated high-risk scenes such as those in some computer games or by engaging in dangerous and sometimes illegal behaviours such as drinking recklessly, taking illicit drugs or driving unsafely. "All activities need to be undertaken with an awareness of risk," Simon says, "I'm certainly quick to emphasise the 'don't try this at home' message when showing photos of me up massive trees! The risks I take climbing trees should certainly not be taken by most people—I have years of practice and training, special qualifications and good safety gear—but there's a certain beauty in the physical and mental challenge of many outdoor activities. To engage with your natural surroundings is to live!"

Right A 35-metre climb to a wedge-tailed eagle nest in the Perth hills.
Photo – Gillian Basnett

Simon's childhood playground of the Perth hills—where he spent time in national parks such as John Forrest, Mundaring (now Beelu), Kalamunda (now Mundy) and Walyunga—provided many opportunities for physical and mental challenge. These included the thrill of spotting a tiny tortoise hatchling washed past in a winter torrent of creek water, the challenge of climbing a tree with just-not-quite-enough lower branches, and the fascination of watching a trigger plant spring, as well as many others. These experiences set Simon's life on the positive and fulfilling journey he follows to this day.

A new perspective

From Simon's perspective, the dominant social view sees humans aiming to control and command the environment, and imagines nature as 'out there', as separate from us. This attitude that separates humans from the natural environment leads to us working against the natural system, or at least trying to find solutions without understanding the reason that problems arise in the first place. The former killing of eagles that occasionally took lambs is one example that Simon uses to illustrate this point. Of course this understanding is now implicit in many environmental management activities around the state, but it's a key lesson for young people to keep learning. Simon feels that change is constant, and we must adapt our knowledge to a changing world.

Through his educational activities, Simon aims to break down this disconnect people feel with the environment. "It all starts with nature in your own backyard," Simon explains, asserting that by providing just a few small bits of knowledge about the environment around them we can help children gain an appreciation of the natural systems that exist.

Sharing the view

Perhaps it was destiny that Simon Cherriman grew to be 203 centimetres tall. As a child, Simon felt he "just had" to climb trees. "We're all primates, aren't we?" he says. And that habit gave him a special perspective, one rarely gained by others—a bird nest, hatching chicks, views across the beautiful jarrah-marri bushland. "My eyes were the video camera," Simon explains, "And, more and more, I wanted to share the growing reel of footage in my mind with other people."

As a child, Simon was strongly influenced by Sir David Attenborough and the late Malcolm Douglas. He started imagining making the many things he saw in the bush into films—birds, nests, skinks, echidnas, 'roos, turtles—as well as showing the human side of his bush explorations—climbing, building hides, bushwalking and more. Simon says he wanted to share what he saw with other people, as well as share his environmental philosophy.

"I knew if you wanted something in life you just had to do it!" Simon says. So he got a video camera when he was about 20 and started filming what he was seeing. He collected hours of footage, with a particular focus on wedge-tailed eagles. This led to amateur and often frustrating attempts at filmmaking and eventually to a filmmaking course in New Zealand, where he learnt the professional approach.

Above Eagles have such good eyes that tree hides need to be entered in darkness to prevent the observer being seen.
Photo – Adam Hermans

Below These tiny eaglets are only a few days old.
Photo – Simon Cherriman

The premise of Simon's short film *A Wedged Tale*, co-produced with Adam Hermans, is the quest for the elusive predation shot, where a wedge-tailed eagle is filmed for the first time catching live prey. The film's hero, played by Simon, travels around WA to get this sought-after shot. While on his mission, he frequently gets distracted—watching shelduck ducklings jump from a lofty nest, for example, or observing the activities of numbats, echidnas and nesting honeyeaters. As well as creating a platform to generate appreciation for, and educate about, the wedge-tailed eagle, the film captures the rich diversity of the state's south-west.

One of the biggest challenges in environmental education—and in education broadly—is how to reach people with facts. There is so much information out there, how does one encourage people to relate what they see and are told to their own life, to their own surroundings? Simon's film is much more than a documentary. He explains that there's a strong aspect of storytelling to the film: "The narrative draws the viewer in and tells a bigger story—that biodiversity is important. My message is that there's so much out there, we just need to pay attention—even in our own backyards. Education as a child begins in the backyard and if you pay attention to the animals that are around you, you can learn a hell of a lot about the natural environment."

Simon is bashful when asked about winning the 2010 Australian Geographic Young Conservationist of the Year. "I'm just a big kid in love with my country," he says. "I believe the land connects all people, past and present, and we can all develop a connection to this land by spending time getting to know it." The other approach to this—which hopefully encourages people to one day get out there themselves—is to bring nature into the classroom and into people's lounge rooms—and this is what Simon's work aims to do each day. "Never stop learning," Simon says, "And keep the child in you alive."

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