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**The Taking of a Dead Prickly Toadfish *Contusus brevicaudas* by
a White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster***

A dead toadfish, later identified to be a Prickly Toadfish *Contusus brevicaudas* from Hutchins & Swainston (2001), was observed washed ashore on a beach approximately 300 m south of Camel Rock, Wallaga Lake near Bermagui, New South Wales (36°22'S, 150°05'E), at approximately 1030 h on 4 January 2002. The fish was approximately 20 cm in length, appeared to be relatively fresh, and was likely to have died sometime in the preceding 24 hours.

At 1115 h, a White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* was observed soaring north along the shoreline at a height of about 30 m and disappearing out of view behind Camel Rock. Approximately 15 minutes later the Sea-Eagle returned, gliding back south along the coast. Although not initially obvious to the observer, it had spotted the dead fish, continued to glide slightly south and proceeded to do a slow 'u-turn' inland, and slowly dropped with its wings in the soaring position as described in Marchant & Higgins (1993). The Sea-Eagle secured the fish in both feet without landing before again heading north past Camel Rock and out of sight. The site is a popular swimming area, and the fish was only 20 m away from the observer and up to six other people when taken.

Smith (1985) reported the presence of toadfishes (Tetraodontidae) and pufferfishes (Diodontidae) at combined White-bellied Sea-Eagle and Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* roosts, and identified the Stars and Stripes Toadfish *Arothron hispidus* to the species level. Savory (1989) also noted the presence of Porcupinefish *Dicotylichthys* sp. at Sea-Eagle nests. As noted by Smith (1985) and Hutchins & Swainston (2001), these fish have highly toxic skin and internal organs.

This appears to be the first record of White-bellied Sea-Eagles taking Prickly Toadfish. Furthermore, although Debus (1998) noted that spiny and poisonous

fish are taken live, the taking of dead, beachcast fish from these families appears not to have been described previously.

Individuals of these fish families are relatively common beachcasts, possibly because their toxicity is a deterrent to other beach scavengers such as gulls. Further observations would assist in determining the importance of beachcast Tetraodontidae and Diodontidae as a food source for White-bellied Sea-Eagles. That this bird initially bypassed the fish when flying north (assuming that it spotted it at that time), and returned to retrieve it, may suggest that these fish could be a 'last resort' owing to the relative effort involved in separating the skin from the flesh. Alternatively, the Sea-Eagle might have been cautiously assessing the situation, in view of the close proximity of humans.

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