

# WEDGE-TAILED SHEARWATERS

## *Puffinus pacificus*

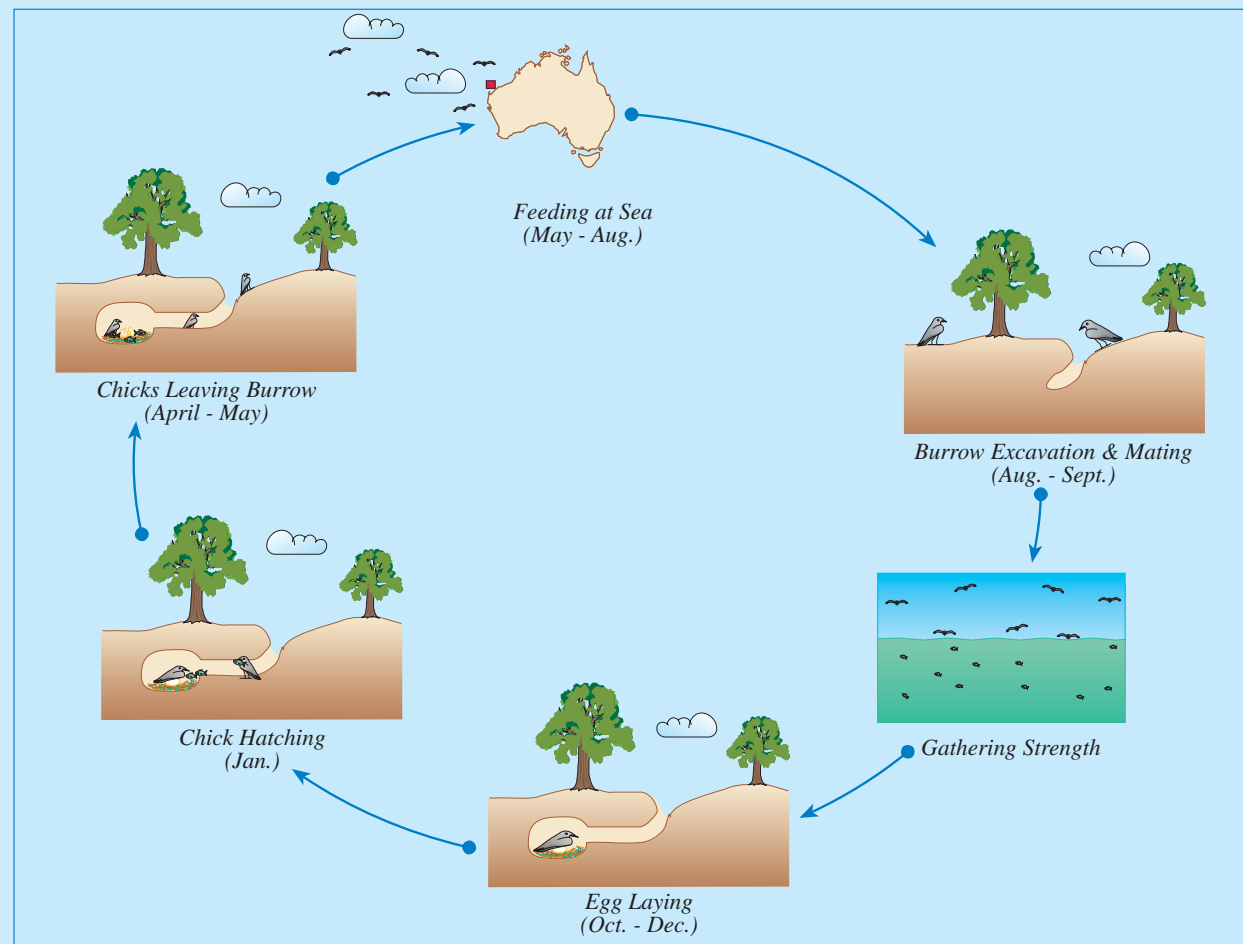
As night begins to fall, the summer evening sky becomes a sudden mass of birds, diving and gliding in spectacular form. Abruptly they descend into their burrows, their characteristic calls ringing out through the night air to their hungry, waiting chicks. These are the wedge-tailed shearwaters or mutton birds of Varanus Island.

This unique bird can be distinguished from other petrels by its buoyant drifting flight, slim head and wedge shaped tail, which is long and folded back during flight. On average, the birds are 37-46 cm in length, with both male and female having a similar appearance.

During the breeding season, Varanus Island is home to about 1000 wedge-tailed shearwaters. The birds return to their colonies on the island each year during late August or early September. The colonies consist mainly of burrows in the soft sand, with some nests in crevices and under bushes. Generally a mating pair will take up the same burrow of previous years, excavating and rebuilding it. The completed burrow may be 1-2m long and 15cm wide, ending with a nesting chamber 30cm in diameter.



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Preparation of the burrow occurs at night, as during the day the birds are at sea. While at sea they are generally solitary, occasionally forming small packs to feed. They catch squid, crustaceans and small fish while swimming or from shallow dives in flight. The birds congregate in the afternoon to rest just offshore in massed rafts on the water, waiting for night to fall before flying back to their burrows.

Once the shearwater pairs have mated, they go to sea for a week or two, building up reserves of energy. A single white egg is laid between late October and December, which hatches during January. The chicks are brooded for only a few days, and are then fed by both parents, at night, at irregular intervals. The young fledge after approximately 70 days leaving the burrow in April.

By May, all the shearwaters have departed for the last time into the night sky and the rookeries fall silent. After leaving Western Australia's coastal waters, the birds spend four months at sea, feeding and resting around the Indian Ocean and Timor Sea. They then begin the journey back to the islands for the next breeding season..... and the cycle continues.