

NOTE:

RAPTOR PERSECUTION IN THE GULF OF ELAT REGION

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Israel is the principal land-bridge for birds migrating between Eurasia and Africa in spring and fall (Yom-Tov, 1984). The largest recorded raptor migration occurred in Elat during the spring of 1985, when almost 1,200,000 raptors were counted (Shirihai and Christie, 1992). This mass migration attracted not only ecotourists, but also malefactors.

Raptors have always been persecuted in the name of sport, egg collecting, taxidermy, or superstitious beliefs (e.g., Leshem, 1984; Elliot and Avery, 1991; Cadbury, 1992; Nurse, 1995). Persecution of raptors in the Palearctic is well-documented (Woldhek, 1979; McCulloch et al., 1992; Bildstein, 1993), especially in the Mediterranean basin (e.g., Beaman and Galea, 1974; Frumkin, 1983). Here I report on raptor persecution in the Elat region.

From 1993 to 1995, I compiled a list of cases in which raptors found on the Israeli side of the border exhibited signs of human persecution. Raptors collected were either in bad physical condition or dead. The vast majority of the live persecuted raptors did not respond to the rehabilitation efforts. Physical mutilations included tied feet, eyelids stitched open, wings partially clipped, or some combination of the above. Many of these raptors were photographically documented.

A total of 77 raptors were found during the spring (February to June) and fall (September to November) migrations. Seven raptors were found in fall 1993, 18 in spring 1994, 16 in fall 1994, 13 in spring 1995, and 23 in fall 1995. Thirty-four (44 %) of the raptors found with pseudo-jesses of string or rope were falcons (*Falco* sp.). Most common were kestrel (*F. tinnunculus*), 25; lesser kestrel (*F. naumanni*), 4; barbery falcon (*F. pelegrinoides*), 2; hobbies (*F. subbuteo*), 2; and lanner (*F. biarmicus*), 1. The rest included 14 (18.2%) steppe buzzards (*Buteo buteo vulpinus*); 13 (16.9%) sparrowhawks (*Accipiter nissus*); 7 (9.1%) steppe eagles (*Aquila nipalensis*); 6 (7.8%) honey buzzards (*Pernis apivorus*); 1 (1.3%) booted eagle (*Hieraaetus pennatus*); 1 pallid harrier (*Circus macrourus*); and 1 Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*). Two of the steppe eagles and a lesser kestrel had their feet tied with barbed wire.

Most raptors are assumed to have come over the border from Jordan. However, persecution on the Israeli side was also evident. Two one-year-old hobbies were found hanging from a fence line. The owner considered these important for warding off evil spirits. In spring 1995, a dead barn owl (*Tyto alba*) was found with its feet bound to the end of a frond of a date palm. It appears that the owl was tied while still alive and died trying to escape. A lanner had leather jesses on its feet and its eyelids were tied in the open position, with the knot tied and cemented with Superglue above the head. Moyal (1989) found that stitching of eyelids during training is practiced by bedouin, and

reported six kestrels entangled on fences over a period of 13 days along the Israeli-Egyptian border. Two steppe buzzards were recovered in a no-man's-land and minefield on the Israeli Jordanian border. Their flight feathers were partially clipped, so they could only fly short distances. Another case of mutilation involved a steppe eagle found in fall 1995. All its dorsal feathers, from crown to rump, had been plucked. This bird is held at present at the Hai-Bar sanctuary. In Aqaba, trading of raptors appears to be common. Tourists regularly report a tethered short-toed eagle (*Circus gallicus*) at a cafe, and others reported sooty falcons (*F. concolor*), booted eagles, and kestrels for sale in the market. Since Aqaba is a small town, one may infer that larger towns have larger raptor markets. On the Israeli side, two barn owls were recently trapped and eaten by foreign workers.

These findings, amounting to 77 raptors in five migratory seasons, indicate a lack of awareness of the importance of conserving raptors. In addition, the lack of discrimination among raptor species subject to persecution suggests that those involved are unable to distinguish among species and their use for falconry. For example, honey buzzards and Egyptian vultures are virtually useless for falconry, yet had jesses tied to their feet.

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