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**Volume 24
August 2018**

**THIS EDITION:
Raptors**

WANDER to WONDER

by MARTINA NICOLLS



**The world will never starve for wonder, but only for want of wonder.
G.K. Chesterson**



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editor's note

Welcome to the 24th edition of WANDER to WONDER

This edition of Wander to Wonder focuses on raptors – birds of prey – some of the many raptors that I have photographed in several countries. The cover photo is a yellow-billed black kite with a southern giant pouched rat in Nairobi, Kenya.

Until next edition, with another theme,

Martina

MARTINA NICOLLS



raptors

A raptor is a bird of prey with excellent eyesight that hunts and kills mammals and other animals for food. Raptor means 'to take by force.' Distinguishing features of raptors are their curved beaks, curved talons, and large eyes.

Raptors include buzzards, caracaras, condors, eagles, falcons, goshawks, harriers, hawks, kites, ospreys, vultures – and owls.

Many raptors are accipiters or accipitrids or accipitroformes. These include buzzards, eagles, goshawks, harriers, hawks, and kites. Ospreys are pandionids, whereas falcons and caracaras are falconids. Vultures are cathartids.







augur buzzard

The Augur Buzzard (*Buteo augur*) is an African raptor. It has black upperparts with a rufous (red-brown) tail. Its flight feathers are black and off-white (with black bars, or bands). Its throat is mainly white, and the underparts and underwings are white. It has a grey beak with a yellowish cere. Its eyes are black. Its legs are creamy-yellow. It grows to about 60 centimetres (23.5 inches) tall.

The Augur Buzzard prefers mountainous regions. It eats mainly small mammals, but it will also eat snakes, lizards, birds, and insects. It drops on its prey from a perch and grabs it with its strong talons.

Its nest is large, made of twigs, and built on a tree branch. It is up to one metre (39 inches) wide, and is often re-used each year. Females lay 2 creamy-white or bluish-white eggs. Only the female sits on the eggs until they hatch after about 40 days. Chicks will get their flight feathers after 56–60 days; then they can fly.





striated caracara

The Striated Caracara (*Phalcoboenus australis*) is a raptor in the falconid family. It is also called a Johnny Rook.

The Striated Caracara is black-brown with orange-grey legs. Its neck is flecked with grey. It has yellow patches around the bottom of its eyes and the rear of its beak. It has a hooked grey beak. It measures about 60 centimetres (24 inches) tall.

It is native to the rocky coastal regions of Antarctica, Argentina, Chile, and the Falkland Islands. It is a scavenger, eating seabirds, bird eggs, small animals, worms, and carrion (the meat of dead animals). It can dig small seabirds out of their burrows to eat them.

The Striated Caracara is social and hunts in flocks of up to 50 individuals. It is a fast flier and can reach speeds of 60 kilometres per hour (37 miles per hour).

It nests on the ground or high on a cliff ledge. The nest is made of twigs and vegetation, lined with wool or grass. Females lay about 4 eggs, which hatch after about 30 days. The chicks take about 5 years to reach its full adult colouring. The Striated Caracara is known to live for about 30 years.





andean condor

The Andean Condor (*Vultur gryphus*) is a large South American raptor. It is black with a white ruff (collar) around its neck. Its face and neck are pinkish-red and nearly bald. Females have a bald blackish-red head and neck. It has a flattened head. Males have a dark carbuncle or comb on their head. It has white feathers on its wings. Its pale cream beak is strong with a slightly downward-curved hook, and its eyes are orange-brown. It has long sharp talons on its feet to grip its prey.

It measures 100-130 centimetres (39-51 inches) in length, with a wingspan of 320 centimetres (126 inches) across. It is the largest flying bird in the world.

The Andean Condor is native to the coastal regions of the Andean Mountains and along the Pacific coast of western South America, in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. It prefers open grasslands and alpine regions. It is a scavenger, feeding on dead animal meat, called carrion. It prefers the dead body (carcass) of large animals, such as cattle, llamas, sheep, pigs, rabbits, and deer. Its predators include foxes.

The Andean Condor makes its stick nest high on rock ledges. Females lay 1-2 eggs, which hatch after 54-58 days. Both parents look after the egg. The chicks are born with down feathers and are able to fly after about 6 months of age. It has an average lifespan of about 70 years.





african fish eagle

The African Fish Eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*) is a large raptor found in most of Africa, near water, such as large lakes and rivers. It does not like dry regions. It has brown body feathers, a white head, and black wings. Its head, chest, and tail are white. Its featherless face is yellow. It has dark brown eyes, and a yellow hooked beak with a black tip.

It can grow to 63-75 centimetres (25-30 inches), with a wingspan of 2.4 metres (7.9 feet).

The African Fish Eagle feeds mainly on fish. It swoops from a tree and catches the fish in its sharp talons. It takes the fish to its nest, or perch, to eat. Fish are slippery, but the African Fish Eagle has spicules on its toes that can stick into the skin of the fish, so that the fish does not drop from the eagle's claws when it flies.

It mates for life, making a nest in a tree. Females lay 1-3 eggs, which are mainly white with a few reddish speckles. The female sits on the eggs, which hatch after 42-45 days. Chicks fledge after 70-75 days. They still depend upon their parents for about three months after they can fly.





asian golden eagle

The Asian Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos daphanea*) is a large raptor. It is also called the Himalayan Golden Eagle or the Berkut. It is dark-brown with red-golden-brown feathers on the back of its neck. It is blackish on its back. It has white on its tail and some white markings on its long, strong wings. It has a grey beak with a dark, sharply down-turned tip. Its beak has a yellow cere. It has grey legs, and grey feet with long claws.

It measures 66-102 centimetres (26-40 inches) in length. Its large wingspan is about 221 centimetres (87 inches) across.

It is widespread in Kazakhstan, Iran, and the Caucasus region. It also lives in the Himalayan mountains, from Pakistan to Bhutan. It prefers open grasslands, as well as forested regions.

It is an excellent flier. It flies with slightly up-turned V-shaped wings (called dihedral flight). It can glide very fast, reaching speeds of 190 kilometres per hour (120 miles per hour). When it dives to capture its prey, it can reach speeds of 240 kilometres per hour (150 miles per hour).

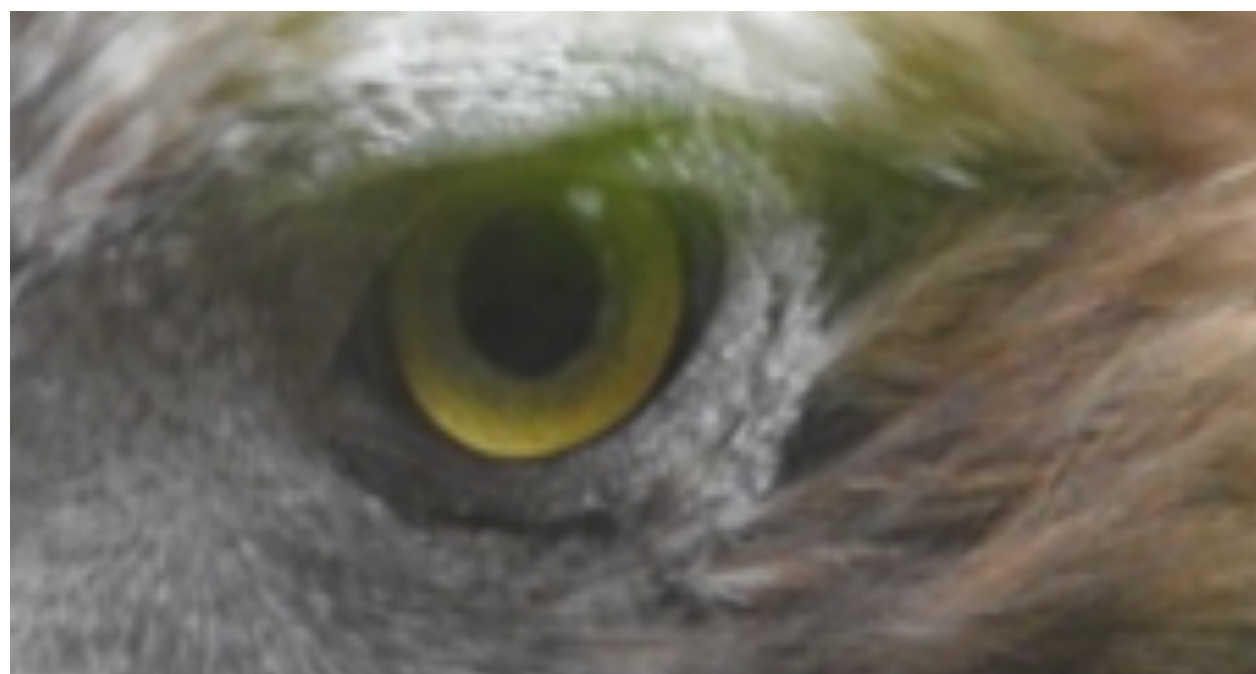
It is territorial. It is diurnal, and hunts during the day. It eats hares, rabbits, squirrels, and other mammals. It captures its prey in its long talons.

It is residential. It does not need to migrate to warmer regions, because it likes cold locations. However, it sometimes migrates to look for food. This is called partial migration. If it migrates, it travels south.

It mates for life. It builds a nest on a cliff ledge. Females lay 1-4 eggs, which hatch after 6 weeks. One or two chicks will survive, and they will be able to fly after about 3 months.

The average life expectancy is 13-20 years.





black-chested snake eagle

The Black-Chested Snake Eagle (*Circaetus pectoralis*) is a large African raptor. It has a dark brown-black head and chest. Its underparts and underwings are white, with dark barring on the flight feathers and tail. Its upperparts of dark brown. Its eyes are bright yellow. It has grey legs with sharp talons.

It is found in southern and eastern Africa in a range of habitats, from semi-deserts to desert areas. It feeds mostly on snakes, but also lizards, small mammals, and frogs. Females lay only one egg, which she incubates for 50 days, before it hatches. The chick leaves the nest after 3 months.



long-crested eagle

The Long-Crested Eagle (*Lophaetus occipitalis*) is an African raptor. It is black-brown over most of its body, with patches of white on its wings. It has a long, shaggy crest. It has black and grey bars on its tail. Its eyes are big and bright yellow. It has a black beak with a yellow cere, and yellow legs.

Its body length is 53–58 centimetres (21–23 inches).

The Long-Crested Eagle is from Sub-Saharan Africa. It prefers forest edges and moist woodlands, particularly near grasslands, and a river or a stream. It is territorial, and it will defend its territory by chasing away other eagles. It eats rodents, such as mice and rats.

Both the male and female build their nest in a tree. It is made of sticks and lined with green leaves. Females lay 1-2 eggs, and she sits on them for about 42 days before they hatch. The eggs hatch asynchronously, about two weeks apart. The father initially feeds the young chicks. The chicks take about 53 days to grow all of their feathers. They remain in the nest for a total of 4-5 months.



tawny eagle

The Tawny Eagle (*Aquila rapax rapax*) is a common African raptor. It is usually brown, but it can vary from dark-brown to light ginger brown to almost white. It has a dark-brown tail. Its feathers often look scruffy. It has feathered legs with 'boots' and yellow legs.

It grows to about 66-72 centimetres (26-28 inches) tall.

It lives in northern Africa, west Africa, east Africa, and south Africa. It likes open grasslands and lowlands, where it feeds on termites, small mammals (such as mongooses, hares, rabbits, and gazelles), lizards, snakes, or carcasses.

It can be seen alone or in pairs. It builds a shallow stick nest on top of a tree or pole.





african pygmy falcon

The African Pygmy Falcon (*Polihierax semitorquatus*) is the smallest raptor in Africa. It lives in eastern and southern Africa.

It is only 20 centimetres (8 inches) tall. It is grey and white, with a red eye ring and pink legs. It has short, rounded wings.

It likes dry lands with lots of thorn bushes and plains with few trees. It eats lizards, insects, small birds, and rodents, such as rats.

It usually takes over the nest of weaver birds instead of building its own nest. Females lay 2-3 eggs and raise their chicks together with the male.



eastern chanting goshawk

The Eastern Chanting Goshawk (*Melierax poliopterus*) is an east African raptor. It has a grey head, neck, chest, and upperparts. Its tail is barred black and white. It has narrow grey and white bars on its belly. Its beak is black with a yellow cere. Its legs are orange-red.

It averages 49-55 centimetres (19-22 inches) tall, with a wingspan of 96-110 centimetres (38-43 inches), and a tail length of 20-25 centimetres (8-10 inches).

It lives in semi-desert, dry bush, and wooded grasslands in southern Ethiopia, Djibouti, western Somalia, eastern Kenya, Uganda, and northeastern Tanzania.

It is usually seen alone, often perched on the top of a tree or pole.





african harrier-hawk

The African Harrier-Hawk (*Polyboroides typus*) is a medium-sized raptor. It has pale grey upperparts, head and chest. Its belly is white with fine dark barring. Its wings are pale grey with a black edge with a narrow white line. Its tail is black with a single broad white band. The chicks are brown instead of grey, with dark brown replacing the black parts. It has double-jointed knees, which enable it to reach into holes and cracks in trees, to search for prey. It can climb trees.

It is about 60–66 centimetres (23.5-26 inches) tall. The African Harrier-Hawk can be found in woodland, tree plantations, and urban areas. It is omnivorous, eating fruit and small mammals. It builds a stick nest in the fork of a tree. Females lay 1-3 eggs.



yellow-billed black kite

The Yellow-Billed Black Kite (*Milvus aegyptius*) is the African species or sub-species of the Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*). It is commonly found in Nairobi, Kenya. The Black Kite has a black beak, and the Yellow-Billed Black Kite has a yellow beak.

It has brown or dark feathers. It has a wingspan of about 150 centimetres (59 inches). It eats mice, rats, and small mammals.

Females and males make a nest of twigs high above the ground. Females lay 2-3 eggs, which hatch after 30-34 days. The chicks have fluffy down feathers, and get their flight feathers after 18-22 days.





african white-backed vulture

The African White-Backed Vulture (*Gyps africanus*) is an African raptor. It has dark feathers, except for its white back and white neck ruff (collar). Its head and neck are bare, with just a few downy-soft feathers. It has very large wings and short tail feathers.

It can grow to 78-98 centimetres (31-39 inches), with a wingspan of 196-225 centimetres (72-84 inches) wide.

It is a scavenger, feeding mostly on carcasses of dead animals. It is native to eastern and southern Africa. It likes open plains and grasslands. It nests in trees. Females lay one egg, which both parents sit on until it hatches after 54-56 days.





cinereous vulture

The Cinereous Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*) is a large raptor. It is also called the Eurasian Black Vulture because it is native to Eurasia. It should not be confused with the American Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*), which is a different species. It is related to the Lappet-Faced Vulture.

The Cinereous Vulture is brown with some black feathers and white patches. It has a bald, blue-grey head and a ruff of white feathers around its neck. There is a white patch above its brown eyes. It has a blue-grey beak with a purplish cere. Its beak is the largest beak of all raptors. It has pale blue-grey legs.

It is almost 1.2 metres long (4 feet), with a wingspan of 3.1 metres (10 feet). It is one of the world's heaviest flying birds, but it can fly at a very high altitude.

The Cinereous Vulture is Eurasian, found from Spain in the west to Mongolia in the east, and south to the Caucasus and Middle East. It is a resident of countries and rarely migrates. It prefers mountainous areas. It forages for carcasses (dead animals) to eat, feeding on carrion, such as yaks, hares, rabbits, and sheep.

It is a solitary bird, found alone or in pairs. Nesting pairs make a very large nest from sticks and twigs in a tall tree or on a cliff. The nest can be 2 metres (6.6 feet) across and 3 metres (10 feet) deep. Females lay only one white egg and sits on it for 50-62 days. The chick has grey-white fluffy down feathers when it is born. It grows its flight feathers when it is about 30 days old. The chick is independent after about six months. The Cinereous Vulture may live for up to 39 years.



lappet-faced vulture

The Lappet-Faced Vulture (*Torgos torgos tracheliotus*) is a massive African raptor. It is also called the Nubian Vulture. It is black-brown with white streaked underparts. Its head and its back of head are featherless, and are bright pink and wrinkled. The wrinkles are called fleshy lappets. It has a large ivory or brown beak, with a grey cere. It has dark-brown eyes. Its legs and feet are blue-grey with white thigh feathers called boots.

It grows to 115 centimetres (45 inches) tall, with a wingspan of 250 centimetres (98 inches). It is the second largest vulture in the world (the largest is the Cinereous Vulture from Eurasia).

The Lappet-Faced Vulture is from eastern and southern Africa. It likes open plains, dry savannah, and grasslands. It is a scavenger, feeding on dead animals, called carcasses. It is generally a solitary bird, except when feeding on carcasses.

It nests in trees. The nest is large and made of sticks, lined with leaves and hair. Females lay 1-2 eggs, which both parents sit on until they hatch after 54-56 days. The young chicks are fully feathered after 124-135 days.





african grass owl

The African Grass Owl (*Tyto capensis*) is a barn owl from Sub-Saharan Africa. It has a large, heart-shaped creamy-white face with a light brown rim. It has a cream crown and neck, brown-black back and wing feathers, and a beige chest speckled with black dots. It has a short tail with dark bars. Its eyes are brown-black, and it has a pink-white beak and grey legs with sharp claws.

It grows to about 42 centimetres (17 inches) tall.

The African Grass Owl likes grasslands and open savannahs, close to water. It is a nocturnal raptor. It eats frogs, rats, mice and small mammals. It will sit and wait, then swoop onto its prey, picking it up with its sharp claws. It takes its food to a perch or it will eat it on the ground.

It makes a shallow, hollow nest, lined with grass. Females lay 2-4 white eggs, which hatch after 32-42 days. Males bring food to the females, and the females feed their chicks, called owlets, for the first 10 days. After 10 days, both males and females feed their owlets. At around seven weeks of age, the owlets gain their feathers and can fly, but they will stay with their parents for another three weeks before they become independent.



barking owl

The Barking Owl (*Ninox connivens connivens*) is also known as the Winking Owl or the Barking BooBook. It is grey-brown raptor with white spots on its wings. It has a vertically-streaked chest. Its underparts are grey-brown with white spots, and its tail has brown and white bands. Its eyes are large and yellow. Its feet are yellow.

The Barking Owl makes a loud, barking noise (like a dog). It also growls, screams, and twitters.

It is a medium-sized owl, growing to about 44 centimetres (17 inches) tall. It is a nocturnal bird from Australia and Papua New Guinea. It lives in forests and woodlands near water. It eats mice, rabbits, possums, bats, insects, and small marsupials.





owl butterfly



verreaux's eagle-owl

The Verreaux's Eagle-Owl (*Bobo lacteus*) is also known as the Giant Owl. It is a large nocturnal raptor from eastern and southern Africa. It is pale grey or grey-brown with some white feathers. It has a dark circle around its face, called a facial disc. It has dark brown eyes with pink eyelids. It has ear tufts.

It can grow to 66 centimetres (26 inches) tall.

It eats snakes, lizards, toads, frogs, fish, and insects. The Verreaux's Eagle-Owl prefers woodlands, semi-deserts, and acacia groves.

It does not make its own nest. Instead, it takes a nest that an eagle, vulture, or other bird does not use any more. Females lay two eggs.







the author: Martina Nicolls

I am an author and humanitarian aid consultant with over 30 years' experience in the management, implementation, and evaluation of international aid development projects, particularly in post-conflict environments and countries with transitional governments, such as Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Darfur, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Pakistan, Iraq, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Georgia, Kosovo, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka, and also Mauritius, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia – and others. I provide technical advice on areas such as peace-building and conflict mitigation, education, poverty reduction, human rights, child labour, data quality and financing models.

But mostly I am a wanderer. Wherever I am and wherever I go, I take photographs and I write. My books include:

Similar but Different in the Animal Kingdom (2017)
A Mongolian Lament (2015)
The Komodo Verses (2012)

Liberia's Deadeast Ends (2012)
Bardot's Comet (2011)
Kashmir on a Knife-Edge (2010)
The Sudan Curse (2009)

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