

## Javan Hawk-Eagle

**COMMON NAME:** Javan hawk-eagle

**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Spizaetus bartelsi*

**OTHER NAMES:** Java hawk-eagle, Elang jawa (Bahasa Indonesia)

**IUCN CONSERVATION STATUS:** *Endangered (populations declining, estimated 600–900 individuals remaining)*

**DESCRIPTION:** A small to medium-sized eagle with a long, noticeable crest. Like many large tropical forest raptors, the wings are relatively short and rounded and the tail is long and banded. Adult is dark brown above, and light with brown-streaked breast and barred belly and legs. Legs are well feathered. Pre-adults are dark above but often rufous below and without adult dark streaking and barring.

**SIZE:** Length: 56–60 cm (22–24 in); Wingspan: 110–130 cm (43–51 in); Weight: unknown

**THREATS:** Habitat loss is the greatest threat to this and many other Indonesian species. Javan hawk-eagles also are trapped and sold in markets each year.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Indonesia. Endemic to Java.

**MOVEMENTS:** Nonmigratory; juveniles appear to disperse long distances.

**HABITAT:** Primary tropical rainforest. Birds have been recorded in second-growth stands and in plantations, but only rarely.

**DIET:** Primarily small to medium-sized mammals, but birds and reptiles are also taken.

**NOTES:** It is thought that this species became Indonesia's national bird because of its resemblance to the legendary birdlike creature the Garuda, which appears in Hindu and Buddhist mythology and features on Indonesia's coat of arms.

### *Author's Biography*

VINCENT NIJMAN has to protect his identity for his undercover investigative work in Indonesia. This is a picture of a Javan hawk-eagle, Vincent's study species. Photo by Bas van Balen/ BirdLife

Art TK

Born in the reclaimed lands, or “polders,” of the Netherlands, Vincent became interested in wildlife from an early age. He first started to observe eagles while undertaking his BSc in biology at the University of Amsterdam, and then later in Scotland while undertaking fieldwork for his MSc in behavioral ecology at Manchester University. Vincent began his studies on the Javan hawk-eagle in 1993. With Bas van Balen, Resit Sözer, and numerous Indonesian students, he tried to assess the status of the eagle and, with mixed success, tried to implement a management strategy to safeguard the species from the threat of extinction. During those first years in Indonesia, he typically spent half of his time in the field. As forest-dwelling eagles appeared to be late risers, he studied forest primates during the early parts of the day and subsequently earned his PhD in primate conservation and ecology in 2001. In 1998 while studying the resident eagles of the Dieng Mountains in central Java, Vincent noted the arrival of dozens (and later hundreds) of migrant sparrowhawks and honey buzzards, and this sparked a series of studies on the magnitude and timing of raptor migration in Indonesia. Vincent is currently employed as head of the Vertebrate Section of the Zoological Museum of the University of Amsterdam and continues his interest in birds of prey.

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## JAVAN HAWK-EAGLE, INDONESIA

Vincent Nijman

I write this from behind my desk at the zoological museum in Amsterdam, surrounded by old jars with pickled bats and primates and parts of a whale's backbone. In a similar environment, almost 15 years ago, I rested my eyes for the first time on a Javan hawk-eagle.

In the early 1990s, the Javan hawk-eagle was considered one of the least known and most rare eagles in the world. Fifty to 80 pairs were thought to remain. Endemic to the island of Java, Indonesia's political, industrial, and economical center, few ornithologists had observed the eagle firsthand. Photographs of the Javan hawk-eagle were nonexistent, and illustrations in field guides and books varied so much that it was difficult to picture what the bird would look like in the wild. Despite the fact that so little was known about the species, in 1993, President Suharto declared the Javan hawk-eagle "Indonesia's National Rare Animal." With that designation, increasingly strange-looking eagle-like birds were depicted on stamps, telephone directories, and in children's magazines. With its fame came special protection. Keeping a Javan hawk-eagle as a pet required special permission from the president, permission that was never granted to anyone. Furthermore, trading in Javan hawk-eagles was declared illegal, resulting in fines of US\$10,000 and imprisonment for up to five years. With the eagle now a star among Indonesian birds, it was recognized that there was an urgent need to collect the most basic data on its identity and whereabouts.

Having finished my master's degree in biology with a year and a half of government funding remaining, I decided to conduct extra studies in tropical ecology. With fellow student Resit Sözer and under the guidance of the BirdLife Indonesia office, I embarked on a nine-month field study of the Javan hawk-eagle in central Java, an area where the species had not yet been recorded. Back home in the Netherlands, we felt that the best way to prepare ourselves for our trip was to get familiar with the specimens and data collected at the beginning of the twentieth century, a time at which Java and the rest of Indonesia was a Dutch colony. One important source for those specimens was the National Natural History Museum in Leiden.

There were 18 Javan hawk-eagle skins in the museum that had been collected over a 150-year period. The differences between the 18 specimens made clear that the Javan hawk-eagle showed quite a bit of external variation. One visit to the museum taught us more about how these birds look than all

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the field guides and books, and thus we felt confident that we could identify a Javan hawk-eagle if we saw one.

Having prepared ourselves as thoroughly as possible, we left for Java in early 1994. Only a few short weeks later, Resit and I saw our first pair of Javan hawk-eagles and their nest, in a remote valley of Mount Pangrango in west Java. For the next three months we spent our time surveying forested areas in central Java and studying the nest we had first found in west Java. We quickly learned that the Javan hawk-eagle was indeed a very rare bird, difficult to observe in its rainforest environment and with a low reproductive output of approximately one fledgling every other year. If the estimate of 80 pairs remaining was indeed correct, this meant that only some 40 young were produced every year. The world could not afford to lose even a single chick.

We were therefore genuinely shocked when we heard that the director of BirdLife Indonesia had seen not one, but two, young Javan hawk-eagles for sale in a small village in the southern part of west Java. He informed us about his findings but immediately warned us not to do anything stupid. This was the time when Indonesia was still firmly ruled by the autocrat Suharto, and when it came to politically sensitive issues, international nongovernmental organizations had to be very careful.

We decided to follow our hearts and distracted the BirdLife office by announcing we would take a day off. Having worked hard for the last couple of months, we thought a visit to the southern beaches was timely. The next day we headed southward with our swimming gear, our permits, and copies of the president's declaration that the Javan hawk-eagle was the National Rare Animal. A few hours later, in the small village of Boyong Galeng, we stepped out of the bus for some refreshments, and lo and behold, we saw the two Javan hawk-eagles. Hatchlings still, they were being offered for sale on the side of the road, together with two adult crested serpent eagles. We quickly enquired where the birds came from, at what price they could be purchased, and whether or not the vendor had sold these kinds of birds before. From this it became clear that in his mind, these birds were nothing more than just the young of a large eagle and nothing to get excited about really. He informed us that he sold eagles on a regular basis and that he was fully aware that all eagles were protected by Indonesian law.

We felt that we needed to report this to the nearest branch of the Ministry of Forestry, and this happened to be in Palabuan Ratu, a town 30 minutes or so to the south. We finished our coffee, jumped on the next bus, and before

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midday, found ourselves reporting the illegal sale of Indonesia's National Rare Animal to the forestry department. All things take time, and yes, surely, the officer would visit the village the next day and take subsequent action; "Leave it all to us, trust us, don't worry." We did worry, we did not trust them, and we wanted action to be taken now. After all, we were studying this species and had firsthand experience how rare the eagle was. We worked closely with the bosses at the head office in Jakarta ("How do you feel about this lack of initiative?" and "Since there are two eaglets, wouldn't it be a great idea to present one as a gift to the president? A rare chance for him to see the National Rare Animal up close."). This surely would make the headlines, with all the credits going to the Palabuan Ratu forestry department. By this time the police had arrived, and after having assured themselves that we were indeed who we said we were, the idea of confiscating the two eaglets started to grow on them. A bit of positive publicity could only bring good things.

After lunch we got in the car with two forestry officers and two policemen, and we set off to confiscate the two eaglets. Within minutes upon arrival back in Boyong Galeng, all the villagers had gathered around us and the two eaglets. It was at this point that negotiations began. Not wishing to interfere in this delicate process, we three foreigners stepped aside. After half an hour, one of the police officers came to us with the first offer. The two birds were to be confiscated, all we had to do was to reimburse the bird seller—after all he had made efforts to obtain these birds and he had fed them good meat for the last week. Clearly someone had to pay for that. We discussed this option with the police and the forestry officers, but we noted that we could not pay for the birds, as then we would be in breach of the law. The birds had to be confiscated without an exchange of money, and we asked, "Shouldn't the vendor be taken to the police station for questioning?" While we were discussing this, the bird seller decided that a timely visit to the mosque was in order. This left us with nothing to do other than wait, and wait, and wait. Surely, we could not take the birds without the vendor being present. In the meantime, the crowd of villagers around us was getting noticeably annoyed with the three foreigners wanting to do this injustice to one of their community members. Finally, after another negotiation session, just before darkness fell, the vendor came out of the mosque. He and the eaglets were taken in the car, and we all left to return to the forestry office in Palabuan Ratu.

After a communal dinner with all the enforcement officers involved in the confiscation, the tables turned. The police became suspicious about our motives, and instead of watching the vendor face the heat, we found ourselves

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being taken into the police office for interrogation. Since we were law-abiding citizens, little came from this questioning, and finally, nearly at midnight, we left Palabuan Ratu, leaving the eaglets at the mercy of the police officers.

The next day we informed the BirdLife Indonesia office about our unexpected adventure, and after some quibbling among the staff there, it was decided that action needed to be taken. The eaglets had to leave the police office as soon as possible, in large part because we were worried that the birds would be brought back to the vendor. Action was indeed taken, and in the end the birds were taken to Taman Safari zoo. No charges were filed against the vendor. Furthermore, by the end of the next month, the then 6-week-old eaglet we had studied in the rainforest of Mount Pangrango had disappeared, quite possibly taken by poachers.

In the years that followed, we continued our studies on the Javan hawk-eagle and broadened our work to include other forest eagles. We found the hawk-eagle to be more common than initially thought, and working with the Ministry of Forestry and other government agencies, we prepared a recovery plan. Our experience in Boyong Galeng was a harbinger of our future work, and our recovery plan identified addressing the wildlife trade as the top-priority action. Ironically, the declaration of the Javan hawk-eagle as the National Rare Animal not only made clear that this was indeed a rare bird worthy of protection, but also introduced the eagle into the world of bird keepers. It was only after the mid-1990s, when the species became politically important, that zoos and private collectors felt a need to display them. Since the confiscation of the two eaglets in Boyong Galeng, at least a dozen Javan hawk-eagles have been confiscated, yet none of the owners or traders has been prosecuted. Thanks to a large amount of research (it appears that this is the most popular bird to study for Javan biology students, and also several international teams have worked on aspects of the eagle's biology), we now know more about the Javan hawk-eagle than ever before, yet due to a lack of serious protection and institutional deficiencies, we still run a serious risk of losing this ambassador for the Javan rainforest and all its rare animals.

What lessons can be learned from the above experiences? First and foremost is the sobering lesson that making a threatened species a focal point for conservation may also draw the attention of others with less noble intentions. Merely putting a species on a protected-species list, without a proper strategy as to how to implement this protection, may directly contribute to the extinction of a species. Demand increases, prices go up, supply decreases, prices go up even more, and the inevitable vortex toward extinction sets in. Although

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this might suggest that oblivion and obscurity provide effective protection, there is also a real possibility that little-known species might go extinct for reasons that could have been solved easily, had we only known. I do not know what to prefer—a species heading toward extinction simply because we do not know, or a species heading to extinction with all of us watching.

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