

## THE ETHICS OF RAPTOR RINGING

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### Introduction

The Raptor Conservation Group has some concerns regarding the ethics of trapping, handling and ringing of raptors. As most raptor ringers use bal-chattris with live bait to trap free flying raptors, it is obvious that some act of rules or ethics must be applied. The handling of nestlings at nests required an even higher set of ethic rules.

### Bal-chatri trapping

The age-old tradition and skill of using a bal-chatri still proves to be the most effective way to trap free-flying raptors.

### Construction

#### *Knots and nooses*

- Virtually every raptor ringer makes use of different knots to form the eye of the noose. Our concerns lie with these criteria. I have personally trapped cage-shy birds with amputated toes. This indicates that the birds had been previously trapped with a bal-chatri and that the string of nylon gut forming the noose may have broken; the badly-constructed noose then kept its grip and cut of the blood flow to the limb.
- If the correct knot is use to form the eye, and if the eye is big enough to allow free gliding of the nylon gut, it will result in immediate release if the gut snaps. To release itself, the eye must have a diameter of at least 5mm. Angling manuals give examples of the best knots to use to make an eye, but please do not use slipknots, as I have seen in some cases on bal-chattris!
- Great care must be taken not to put out a bal-chatri with too wide nooses for smaller species, eg. Gabar Goshawk *Micronisus gabar*. The bird could be caught around the neck, with injury or suffocation as the obvious consequence.

#### *The cage*

- It is very important that the cage is securely and neatly finished off. Loose or protruding



mesh wire and/or binding materials could injure the trapped bird or the live bait.

- Care must be taken in the weighing down of cages. Too much weight may cause the tarsi to be cut on impact or snap the nylon gut. The result is an injured or a trap-shy bird.
- The diameter of the mesh wire's eyes must be small enough to stop a raptor putting its claws through the openings and injuring the live bait.
- As live animals are used as bait to lure raptors to the bal-chatri, great care must be taken not to injure, harm or maltreat them, and also to avoid accusations from the public of cruelty to animals. I know of a case where a bal-chatri was deliberately put on an active ant's nest in order to get performance from the bait!
- To prevent unnecessary injury to the legs of the live bait when the bal-chatri is put out, or to prevent the hot sand from burning its feet, it is advisable to use some bottom lining on the inside of the cage. A piece of an old floor carpet makes an excellent bottom lining and when slightly sprinkled with water, creates a cool microclimate by means of evaporation.

### Handling of trapped birds

Trapped wild birds are under immense stress – great care must be taken to minimise the stress factors.

- As soon as the bird in the trap can be reached, cover it with a piece of cloth, such an old towel and cover its head with a transparent material that allows good ventilation (the cloth coin bags provided by banks are excellent for this purpose).

Work as quickly and professionally as possible to fit the ring and record the necessary data:

- A bird's feathers are its most precious asset and great care must be taken not to damage or pollute them. If you have to handle a bird with its back on the ground, please use an old towel or another piece of cloth underneath it to avoid pollution of the back coverts and to prevent burning from the hot surface.

### Releasing

Releasing is as important as catching, or if not more so. Do not shake the bird out of the bag. Get a good grip of the bird's legs and folded wings, gently take the bag off and release it against the prevailing wind (if one is blowing), having first checked for obstacles like fencing or telephone wires, powerlines as well as for any approaching vehicles.

### Ringing place

As trapped birds have been run over and killed by passing vehicles, it may be wise to ask trappers not to put out bal-chatris along busy roads.

The necessary permission **must** be obtained from the landowner **before** trapping or ringing on privately-owned land!

Ringers, if trapping on private land, do not lie to the landowner about fictitious involvement with nature conservation services, registered projects, let alone posing as scientific researchers. Such practices only degrade our profession and foul public relations. **They are unacceptable and mean under any circumstances!**

Most provinces have registered raptor conservation projects running. Therefore, the local coordinator must be contacted and the necessary permits obtained, before any ringing trip into another province is undertaken. If this procedure is ignored, we will advise local conservation services to cancel every raptor ringing permit other than those of registered projects!

### Ringing time

Ringers have sometimes visited an area at the beginning of the breeding season, or in mid-

season, and started trapping birds. If the locality of the nests is not known, breeding pairs may be caught in the vicinity of their nest before egg-laying, possibly causing them to abandon their nests. An adult female carrying a fully-developed egg could be trapped and the egg damaged.

It is therefore recommended that no trapping of adult birds should take place before consulting with the local coordinator.

### Ring sizes

Birds are sometimes reported as suffering obvious discomfort or injury from rings that have been fitted too tightly.

Ringers are advised to consult their *Guide to Ring Sizes* issued upon registration at Safring. If you happen to trap a bird and do not have its correct ring size, do not try to fit too small a ring. **Please let it go!**

### Permits

On occasion, untrained strangers have visited certain areas without the knowledge of local coordinators, and trapped free-flying birds – nests have even been robbed!

It is advised, therefore, that the conservation services responsible for issuing permits, consult with local project coordinators before do so.

### Sampling

Sometimes ringers are asked to collect blood samples from birds. As this often requires intravenous operations, it is recommended that only a selected group of experts or well-trained people be allowed to do this. The wrong method may, and already has, resulted in serious injury to the birds and even in their deaths.

### Sensitive data

The Raptor Conservation Group is seriously concerned about sensitive data and the publication of such data.

In this era of nest robbers, everyone involved with ringing should be aware of the fact that the locality of virtually every raptor's nest is sensitive data. We therefore recommend that Safring

not to publish any data in any form that may concern the nest localities of the following species.

Secretary Bird	<i>Sagittarius serpentarius</i>
Palmnut Vulture	<i>Gypohierax angolensis</i>
Lammergyer	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>
Hooded Vulture	<i>Necrosyrtes monachus</i>
Cape Griffon	<i>Gyps coprotheres</i>
Whitebacked Vulture	<i>Pseudo-gyps africanus</i>
Lappetfaced Vulture	<i>Torgos tracheliotus</i>
Whiteheaded Vulture	<i>Trigonoceps occipitalis</i>
Bat Hawk	<i>Macheiramphus</i>
Black Eagle	<i>Aquila verreauxii</i>
Tawny Eagle	<i>Aquila rapax</i>
Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Aquila wahlbergi</i>
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus spilogaster</i>
Ayre's Eagle	<i>Hieraetus ayresii</i>
Longcrested Eagle	<i>Lophaetus occipitalis</i>
Martial Eagle	<i>Polemaetus bellicosus</i>
Crowned Eagle	<i>Stephanoaetus coronotus</i>
Bateleur	<i>Terathopius ecaudatus</i>
African Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus vocifer</i>
African Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus minor</i>
Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>
Rednecked Falcon	<i>Falco chicquera</i>
Giant Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo lacteus</i>
Pel's Fishing Owl	<i>Scotopelia peli</i>

### Ethics of nestling ringing

Ringing of nestlings at the nest requires a high standard of ethic rules and also respect for someone else's property; in this case the raptor's nest!

### Basic rules

- First of all respect the private owner's ownership by requesting his or her permission to visit the nest and by making your intentions clear. Ask the owner to accompany you.
- It is almost criminal to disturb a raptor at its nest during spells of bad weather, such as rain, cold or extreme heat conditions.
- The time of day is also of great importance, as the midday sun may also prove fatal to a small nestling and the egg(s). For the same reason, never visit a nest just before or after sunset.
- Approach a nest openly to give the bird time to detect you and to prepare itself to flying from the nest. If it is suddenly frightened, the

adult may accidentally topple the egg or even small nestlings(s) over the rim of the nest, as the egg(s) and small nestlings(s) rest on the feet of the adult.

- If the nestling(s) are already fully developed, it is better leave them alone, as their possible premature flight may result in broken limbs.
- If you have to climb the tree to reach the nest, please try to avoid breaking twigs and branches unnecessarily. It may expose a nest to potential predators or bad weather conditions.
- Try to handle the nestling on the nest itself, and remember the nestling's position and orientation to the sun if you have to move it. The nestling has to be put back in exactly the same position after handling. Care must be taken that the ringed leg is well hidden beneath its body.
- If working on the ground, lower the nestling in a well-ventilated bag. Beware of protruding sticks or branches that may hurt the chick while doing so. Please ensure that the rope is solidly tied to the tree and well-hooked to the bag.
- Place one nestling only per bag, to prevent them hurting each other.
- When taking the nestling from the bag, be careful not to hurt its talons if it grips the bag and you have to loosen them!
- Don't spend unnecessary time with the nestling – return it to the nest as fast as possible.
- Leave the area as soon as possible.
- **Certain species, like the Bateleur, are better left alone!**
- Finally, I have seen nestlings that look like christmas trees from all the colour rings, and even wing windows, that were applied by a novice! Please leave the colour-ringing programmes to ringers who know what they are doing, within a registered programme – And if you ever planned to cut windows in *pulli's* wings, better cut your own throat!