

Some Observations on Birds of Prey in Peru

Michael P. Wallace

During my three years' experience of Peru I was mostly working in the north coastal area, studying Andean Condors and other cathartid vultures so that the following observations refer only to the northern part of the country. Peru is a very large country; it has seacoast, mountains, large tracts of forest, deserts, many varied kinds of habitat and I am sure that the plight of raptors in each one of those habitats is different. Fishermen along the coastline are told and believe that if they stray onto the guano islands and molest any of the seabirds they will be shot at by the wardens. Whether or not this is true, it still has the effect of keeping people off the area; moreover the birds are very highly protected - heavy fines are imposed for molesting them. No such kind of protection is afforded the many raptor species throughout the country, unless within the many preserves located in Peru. The military personnel, for instance, will shoot large birds of prey, given half the chance, though generally restricted from discharging their guns indiscriminately. However, during the three-week war with Ecuador a few years ago I happened to be working in the area and immediately began to collect a lot of Turkey Vultures shot by people practising and getting excited about the activities across the border.

A large portion of the population is poor and if they do have guns at all they usually don't waste the bullets. However shooting does occur when the opportunity presents itself and I know of goat-herders for instance shooting Condors and King Vultures which they thought had killed the goats the birds were feeding on. I also believe that the pet trade has a fairly considerable impact on the birds of prey, at least to judge from my experience. The larger towns and cities, and particularly Lima, have pet markets where young raptors are often displayed for sale. The following species were all obtained from these markets and give an idea of the kinds of species that show up and, although Lima is on the coastal side, many of them are from all parts of Peru: Ornate Hawk Eagle, Black and White Hawk Eagle, Bicoloured Accipiter, Peregrine Falcon, Orange-breasted Falcon, Aplomado Falcon, Harris Hawk and many other more common species were frequently displayed: Kestrels, Red-backed Hawks, Owls, Variable Hawks, Great Black Hawks, Caracaras, all come through these kinds of markets.

Interestingly enough, superstition affects raptors directly and indirectly. I have been approached several times by *brujas* or witches in the back country to see if they could acquire live Black Vultures, Condor feathers or King Vulture parts, to be used for "medicinal purposes". More indirectly, however, the rocky mountain peaks above the treeline are supposedly guarded by *diablos* who represent the devil. And because of this belief, along many stretches of cliffs where the Andes meet the desert floor

Condors, Black-chested Buzzard Eagles and Peregrines stake out their territory and are pretty much unmolested by the flatlanders in the lower part of this area. The fear of diablos doesn't seem, however, to scare off the woodchoppers, who creep their way steadily up the lower Andean slopes, disturbing territories and eliminating nest trees of Black Hawks, Harris Hawks, Red-backed Hawks and Aplomado Falcons, as well as disturbing the lower altitude Condor nesting.

Birth control methods are practised by some in the larger cities but are virtually non-existent in the rural areas, where the bulk of the population lives. Over-population, as everywhere, demands development, planned and unplanned, and natural habitats always lose out. One drastic, unfortunately only temporary, reversal of the process was the 1982-83 EL Nino: the northern desert where I worked was normally accustomed to about two inches of rain every year, but during the El Nino period they collected twelve feet of rain in eight months. This set back a number of long-term development projects in that area which will eventually have an impact on a number of Condor pairs and a major migrating stopover for Peregrines and Ospreys. Over 1000 people died during this whole period, from malnutrition and other causes; meanwhile the fecundity of the scavenger species increased dramatically because of the El Nino-related mortality in domestic livestock. The food supply in one area I looked at went up about 17 times, and in some areas five pairs of previously non-breeding Condors were tending fledglings in their territories in 1984. Also the greening up of the desert after the rains increased the insect, reptile and bird prey base for various species of raptors. Buteo polyosoma, the Red-backed Hawk, showed an increase from 3 breeding pairs in 1980/81 to 9 nesting pairs in 1983/84 along a 20-mile stretch of cliffs and canyons in our study area, the Sierra Iescas, a 500 m. high mountain group on the Sichura peninsula about 20 miles long N to S and ten miles wide, separated from the Andes by about 150 km. of desert. We collected a lot of ecological data in this area, the only place along the coast where Condors actually breed; Peregrines and Osprey also use this area heavily during migration and Peregrines may even breed there in very wet years. There are sealion and seabird colonies on the coastal side and it is regarded as a pretty valuable place both outside and inside the country. Some conservation groups, using the ecological data that we collected, are currently attempting through education to familiarise the public with the value of making this place a reserve, with its accompanying estuary where numbers of Peregrines and Ospreys stop over on the way south, and on the return trip.

Michael P. Wallace, Greater Los Angeles Zoo Association, 5333 Zoo Drive, Los Angeles, California 90027, U.S.A.