

ACQUISITION OF ADULT PLUMAGE IN THE SPANISH IMPERIAL EAGLE

Aquila (heliaca) adalberti

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In the course of extensive studies of this eagle in Spanish Extremadura (Meyburg 1989), we were also able to follow the plumage development of an individual in captivity. This young eagle had been illegally taken from the nest by a "Guarda" (gamekeeper) in the Sierra de San Pedro and had ended up in the possession of a taxidermist whom we knew in Caceres and who was keeping it until it attained adult plumage. At each visit we photographed the bird, both in colour and black and white.

When we first saw it, in the spring of 1972, it bore the typical, almost uniform tawny buff juvenile plumage. During the following year this became somewhat darker and even more uniform. The upper wing coverts were interspersed with distinct, dark brown feathers. At four years old the eagle had become very mottled. It already had white feathers on the shoulders – the characteristic mark that distinguishes it from its close eastern relative, *Aquila (heliaca) heliaca*; those on the scapulars were still completely lacking, however. The back, breast and belly bore an irregular pattern of light and dark brown feathers. In 1976, now five years old, the bird had in the main attained adult plumage, though there were still a few pale feathers on belly, legs and back. The patch of golden-yellow extending from the nape to above the eye was not yet fully developed and sharply defined. At six years old the bird had finally acquired full adult plumage.

According to Valverde (1960) this eagle takes five to six years to develop adult plumage, but it is not clear whether his comments refer to birds in captivity or in the wild. According to Glutz von Blotzheim (1971: 623) it often takes longer for captive birds to acquire adult plumage. Two birds kept by Gurney (1877) were already in mature plumage after four and a half years apart from isolated juvenile feathers.



The young Spanish Imperial Eagle about two years old. Photo: B.-U. Meyburg

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The young Spanish Imperial Eagle now five years old. Photo: B.-U. Meyburg



The four years old Spanish Imperial Eagle. Photo: B.-U. Meyburg