

Where eagles dare! Dutch police unveil new arm against drones (Update)

September 12 2016



A young eagle attempts to catch a drone during a demonstration organized by Dutch police to combat drones flying over sensitive or restricted areas, at the Dutch Police Academy in Ossendrecht, Netherlands on September 12, 2016

After months of tests, Dutch police will become the world's first force to train and employ an army of eagles, using the centuries-old skill of falconry against the modern-day scourge of unauthorised drones.

In their first public demonstration of their unorthodox new weapon,

Dutch police on Monday sent out two-year-old Hunter, a female American bald eagle and her trainer Ben.

And what better scenario to show off the bird's prowess than a mock-up of a state visit?

As the "visiting" head of state, played by a woman police officer, emerged from her car at a police academy in the southern Netherlands to shake hands, a drone suddenly appeared.

"Attack, attack," came the cry, while sirens began wailing.

Hunter flew into action, heading for the drone and gripping it in her powerful talons before landing safely again a few metres away, still clutching her mechanical prey.

"It's a low-tech solution to a high-tech problem," police spokesman Dennis Janus told AFP.

As in other countries, increasing numbers of drones are invading Dutch skies raising concerns in places like airports and restricted, sensitive areas.

Dutch police launched tests in early 2015 to see how the battle between eagles and drones would shape up, and are now confidently preparing to recruit the majestic birds into their ranks.

"We found out that it is probably one of the most effective counter-measures against hostile drones," police head of operations Michel Baeten told AFP.

Pieces of chicken or turkey attached to some of the test drones have been used to reward the birds for their "kill", attuning the birds to idea

that the drones are in fact prey.

During the long tests, "none of the eagles were hurt, but as for the drones, none of them survived," said Janus with a smile, brushing aside concerns from animal rights groups.



Dutch police have now purchased their own birds, which have reached five months old, and will be deployed as needed alongside dogs and horses

The plan is now to launch the eagles whenever drones are believed to be posing a danger to the public, such as during sensitive state visits or if the remote-controlled tiny craft are flying too close to airports.

Eagles are 'not robots '

But the scheme is not infallible. During Monday's demo, Hunter missed

the drone several times.

"It is a bird, it is a animal, it is not a robot. It is not a flawless solution," Baeten insisted.

"It's very hot today and I have been told that weather conditions can affect the bird." But he stressed that during training, the birds had brought down the drones 80 percent of the time.

Dutch police have purchased their own birds—although they refused to say how many—which are now reached five months old, and will be deployed as needed alongside more traditional four-footed recruits, dogs and horses.

About 100 police officers will be trained in working with the eagles, and the Dutch "flying squad" with its own birds of prey could go into action from next summer.

In the meantime, the police will be using birds supplied by a specialist company, Guard From Above.

And further developments will be needed. While Hunter and her feathered friends can bring down the most common drones, other larger machines could risk cutting the birds' feet.

So the Dutch police are working on developing a protective glove to cover the birds' talons.

They are also continuing to explore other methods to combat drones such as using nets carried by another drone, or deploying electronic counter-measures against the hostile craft.

Amid the publicity, police forces from other countries like Germany and

France have also been in contact to find out more about the eagle force.

"A lot of law enforcement agencies are really interested in our programme. I think other countries will follow," said Baeten.

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Citation: Where eagles dare! Dutch police unveil new arm against drones (Update) (2016, September 12) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-09-eagles-dutch-police-unveil-latest.html>

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