

Birds of prey face global decline from habitat loss, poisons

August 31 2021, by Christina Larson



This Sunday, March 14, 2010 file photo shows "Girlie," a 29-year-old Philippine Eagle at the Parks and Wildlife Center at Manila's Quezon City. An analysis of data from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and BirdLife International released on Monday, Aug. 30, 2021 found that 30% of 557 raptor species worldwide are considered near threatened, vulnerable or endangered. Eighteen species are critically endangered, including the Philippine eagle, researchers found. Credit: AP Photo/Bullit Marquez

Despite a few high-profile conservation success stories—like the dramatic [comeback](#) of bald eagle populations in North America—birds of prey are in decline worldwide.

A new analysis of data from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and BirdLife International found that 30% of 557 raptor species worldwide are considered near threatened, vulnerable or endangered or critically endangered. Eighteen species are critically endangered, including the [Philippine eagle](#), the [hooded vulture](#) and the [Annobon scops owl](#), the researchers found.

Other species are in danger of becoming locally extinct in specific regions, meaning they may no longer play critical roles as top predators in those ecosystems, said Gerardo Ceballos, a bird scientist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and co-author of the study published Monday in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

"The golden [eagle](#) is the national bird of Mexico, but we have very few golden eagles left in Mexico," he said. A 2016 census estimated only about 100 breeding pairs remain in the country.

[Harpy eagles](#) were once widespread throughout southern Mexico and Central and South America, but tree cutting and burning has dramatically shrunk their range.



This undated photo provided by Evan R. Buechley in August 2021 shows a hooded vulture in Ethiopia. An analysis of data from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and BirdLife International released on Monday, Aug. 30, 2021 found that 30% of 557 raptor species worldwide are considered near threatened, vulnerable or endangered. Eighteen species are critically endangered, including the hooded vulture, researchers found. Credit: Evan R. Buechley via AP

Of threatened [birds of prey](#) that are active mostly during the day—including most hawks, eagles and vultures—54% were falling in population, the study found. The same was true for 47% of threatened nocturnal raptors, such as owls.

That means "the factors causing the decline have not been remedied"

and those species need immediate attention, said Jeff Johnson, a biologist at the University of North Texas, who was not involved in the study.

Globally, the biggest threats to these [birds](#) are habitat loss, climate change and [toxic substances](#), said Evan Buechley, a research associate at the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center and a scientist at nonprofit HawkWatch International who was not involved in the study.

The insecticide DDT thinned egg shells and decimated bald eagle populations in North America, leading to its [ban](#) in the U.S. in 1972. But Buechley said other threats remain, including rodent pesticides and the lead in hunters' bullets and shot pellets. Many raptors feed on rodents and dead animals.



This 2018 photo provided by Evan R. Buechley shows a Tawny Eagle in Ethiopia. The tawny eagle is considered vulnerable to extinction by scientists. The destruction of forests and grasslands in Africa and South Asia are shrinking its habitat. Globally the top threats to birds of prey are habitat loss, climate change and toxins in the environment. Credit: Evan R. Buechley via AP

The [Andean condor](#) is declining due to exposure to pesticides, lead and other toxic substances, said Sergio Lambertucci, a biologist at the National University of Comahue in Argentina.

Widespread use of an anti-inflammatory drug in livestock led to the rapid decline of vultures in South Asia. The birds died after eating carcasses, shrinking the population of some species by [95%](#) in recent decades.

In East Asia, many raptor species are long-distance migrants: They breed in northern China, Mongolia or Russia and travel down the eastern coast of China to spend summers in Southeast Asia or India.

"Certain areas of the coast will see 30 to 40 species during peak migration," said Yang Liu, an ecologist at Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou, who was not involved in the study.

But eastern China is also the most populous and urban part of the country, with steep development pressures. "Sites that are bottlenecks for migration, with thousands of birds passing through, are important to protect," he said.



This June 2013 photo provided by Carlos Navarro shows a female harpy eagle and its young in a nest in Darién Province, Panama. Harpy eagles were once widespread throughout southern Mexico and Central and South America, but deforestation has dramatically shrunk their range. Credit: Carlos Navarro via AP



This 2020 photo provided by Evan R. Buechley shows a golden eagle feeding on roadkill in Utah. Gerardo Ceballos, a bird scientist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, says, "The golden eagle is the national bird of Mexico, but we have very few golden eagles left in Mexico." A 2016 census estimated only about 100 breeding pairs remain in the country. Credit: Evan R. Buechley via AP



In this Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2021 file photo, scientists and journalists watch as an Andean condor is released into the wild by Bolivian veterinarians, on the outskirts of Choquekhota, Bolivia, as part of a project run by a state conservation program. The Andean condor, the world's heaviest soaring bird, is declining due to exposure to pesticides, lead and other toxic substances, said Sergio Lambertucci, a biologist at the National University of Comahue in Argentina. Credit: AP Photo/Juan Karita

Of 4,200 sites identified by conservation groups as critical for raptor species globally, most "are unprotected or only partly covered by protected areas," said Stuart Butchart, chief scientist at BirdLife International in the United Kingdom.

A 2018 [study](#) in the journal *Biological Conservation* found that 52% of all raptor [species](#) worldwide are decreasing in population.

More information: Carlos Cruz et al, Global patterns of raptor distribution and protected areas optimal selection to reduce the extinction crises, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2018203118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2018203118)

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