

# Neotropical Falconry



Ornate hawk-eagle  
(*Spizaetus ornatus*)





# A Conservation Tool in Colombia

Ana María Morales Cañizares  
Colombia



*Atila, a female black-and-chestnut eagle (Spizaetus isidori).*





Ana Morales from FADA checking a patient.

Colombia is the second most megadiverse country in the world, occupying the first place in bird species with over 1900. From those 1900 bird species we have around 100 raptor species, which include owls, hawks, kites, harriers, and hawk-eagles.

Our foundation (Fundación Aguilas de los Andes, FADA) is dedicated to the conservation of raptors in Colombia, and our rehabilitation center (CRARSI, for the acronym in Spanish) helps over a hundred birds of prey per year. Alex Ospina, our director, started the rehabilitation center back in 1999, but he had been involved with birds of prey for a long time before that. In 1990 he became friends with doctor Alvaro Torres Barreto (author of the book *Neotropical Falconry*, where he studied the Spanish falconry done by Dr. Felix Rodriguez de la Fuente), but his friendship ended when Dr. Torres died suddenly in 1994. The same year, Alex became a NAFA member (and probably the only Colombian member to this date.)

Being the only renowned falconer in Colombia in 1999, Alex

got permits to rehabilitate birds using falconry, and today we are the only specialized raptor center in Colombia, and the only Colombian associate member of the IAF. We receive birds from all over the country, and this is how we have gotten to deal with all kinds of raptors, from the tiny pearl kite (*Gampsonyx swainsonii*) to the all-mighty and powerful harpy eagle (*Harpia harpyja*). We have successfully treated and released hundreds of birds during this time, and we also give sanctuary to the unreleasable ones.

Historically we have used aplomado falcons (*Falco femoralis*), peregrine falcons, and Harris' hawks to hunt crested bobwhite (*Colinus cristatus*). As a principle of the Colombian falconer, we do not take wild raptors, but we use birds we have reproduced from pairs bought in Europe or birds brought to us for rehabilitation. Due to habitat loss, our game species are becoming endangered, and since a recent Colombian law forbids hunting, wild game is not an option anymore. Today, we focus mostly on lure and drone work to keep our birds fit,

unreleasable birds hunt. The goal of the rehabilitation center is to check the hunting and flying ability of the patients. We are working on getting falconry on the spotlight and on showing why it is a great tool of pest control in airports and other sites, but it is always challenging to change people's minds about a subject they do not fully understand.

## Education

As any other foundation, we have little to no support from the Colombian government. Our director covers most of our functioning costs, but we need to start producing to be sustainable and to have a future. We are hoping to teach people about falconry and its cultural heritage, and about birds of prey and their importance in ecosystems in future education programs we are planning.

Most of our education ambassadors have been rescued from the illegal wildlife trade and have been deemed unreleasable because they are imprinted. Our amazing team includes a male ornate hawk-eagle named Felix, a young mottled owl (*Ciccaba virgata*) that has no name, several aplomado falcons and Harris' hawks left from out hunting days, and our crown jewel, Atila, a female black-and-chestnut eagle (*Spizaetus isidori*). She is the reason our conservation efforts are focused on what is probably the most endangered Andean eagle in Colombia, the black-and-chestnut eagle. This species is not very well known. Biological and ecological studies have been done, but the human-predator conflict has not been fully assessed, and this is where we think it will make a difference.

## Conservation

The black-and-chestnut eagle is a medium- to large-sized raptor from the *Spizaetus* genus, known as the hawk-eagle genus found in the tropics in the Americas. This genus includes the black hawk-eagle (*S. tyrannus*), the black-and-white hawk-eagle (*S. melanoleucus*), the popular and beautiful ornate





*Felix, ornate hawk-eagle*





*Black-and-chestnut eagle (Spizaetus isidori).*



hawk-eagle, and the almighty and powerful black-and-chestnut eagle. Its range goes from northern Colombia, with isolated populations in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta and Serranía del Perijá (in both Colombia and Venezuela), all the way south to northern Argentina. They are found in montane forests in elevations between 1800 and 2500 m (5900-8200 ft), and they are considered top predators in this ecosystem. They mostly hunt small mammals like squirrels, capuchin monkeys and coatis, and large birds like guans (Cracidae). Lately, the human-predator conflict has intensified as the farmers move into their habitat and domestic fowl like chickens and turkeys become part of the diet. Due to this conflict and habitat loss, the species is considered endangered by the IUCN with a decreasing population trend, and as a foundation we say it is critically endangered in Colombia because we estimate there are less than 100 individuals left.

Atila's story is one with a somewhat happy ending. She was found tied in a farmer's backyard because she was caught eating chickens. She was very young when caught and spent almost a year with the farmer before being discovered by a friend of Alex. He convinced the farmer to give her to him and then moved the bird from the Eastern Andes to Bogotá, where she later was boarded into a flight to Pereira, where the foundation is located. Because she had been in captivity for a long time, she was imprinted and unreleasable. This is when we realized she should be an ambassador for her species, and in order to use her as an education bird, we started training her as a falconry bird. Other individuals have not been that lucky, and unfortunately they have been shot and killed.

A couple of weeks ago we assessed the fitness of a juvenile eagle at a government rehabilitation center in northern Colombia. The eagle was also caught while trying to prey on chickens and was kept for a couple of months before she was traded and later surrendered to



*Atila, a female black-and-chestnut eagle (Spizaetus isidori).*

the authorities. This center had no clue what species the new patient was and they got in touch with us. We gave them all the medical, dietary, and handling information they needed, and after almost six months of rehabilitation, they asked us to go check her. After a thorough physical exam and a rigorous behavioral one, we concluded she was in great shape and ready to return to nature as soon as possible. The rehab center is in the process of getting the paperwork in order for her

release, and we are looking forward to see her in the wild again. As that happens, we are satisfied with our work assessing other centers and sharing our experience as falconers rehabilitating birds of prey so we can all work towards conserving the most endangered Andean eagle in Colombia.

Ana Morales  
Wildlife Biologist & Falconer  
Fundación Aguilas de los Andes  
amorales@fada.org.co

