

Crowned Eagles for San Diego Zoo

by Glen Holland
Eshowe, South Africa

The internationally acclaimed San Diego Zoo recently completed a new African exhibit which includes sections housing Carmine Bee-eaters, Black and White Colobus monkeys, Pygmy Chimpanzees (Bonobo's) and a large aviary for a pair of Crowned Eagles. A huge sum of money was spent on this section and one of the themes was to show the predator—Crowned Eagles, adjacent to their prey—the monkeys. A forest habitat has been constructed for these powerful predators. Having completed this, the Zoo approached the Natal Parks Board for assistance with a pair of Crowned Eagles. Unbeknown to me their motivation reached the Natal Parks Board at the same time as my request to remove a second egg and hand raise a bird for education with particular emphasis on the launching of our raptor survey. This includes working closely with, and giving talks to the KwaZulu/Natal farmers who provide a safe haven for many of our raptors.

Having received both motivations, the NPB granted me permission to raise not one but two chicks to be used for the launch of our project and then to be donated to San Diego Zoo. I had already begun motivating farmers in the Eshowe,

Melmoth and Babanango areas to start reporting raptor nest sites. From this work I had received reports of 14 active Crowned Eagle nests. Unfortunately, the drought had an impact and nesting attempts were limited to a few pairs. Fortunately, however, we found two nests which were active and managed to remove a second chick from one nest containing two newly hatched chicks, and an egg from a nest which already had a chick. While monitoring the nests it was necessary to climb to the nests periodically and during this procedure the adults remained in the vicinity calling. At no time did they attempt to attack the intruder. It was interesting to note that on returning to check on the progress of the two chicks which remained in the wild, firstly both fledged successfully and secondly both were the same sex as their siblings which I had raised.



The author with a large Crowned Eagle on his arm. This kind of hands-on live-bird demonstration gets a lot of attention when teaching young folks about conservation.

The egg hatched in an incubator 72 hours after the first loud calls were heard from within the egg. The newly hatched chick weighed 71 grams and was extremely vocal but rather unsteady. The first feed was offered 18 hours after hatching at which time two small pieces of minced bird (including all bones) were taken. Five feedings were given per day and at the end of the first week (144 g) up to 10 pieces of food were taken per feed. The nest consisted of a large plastic bowl with branches and sticks in the base. Green sprays of vegetation were regularly placed in the nest. At two weeks it weighed 316 g and was feeding voraciously with loud calls whenever movement was detected near the nest. Any food dropped in the nest was picked up by the chick. At this stage supplementary heat was removed during the day and the chick was regularly placed outdoors in dappled sunlight. This forest dwelling species soon began panting if placed in direct sunlight.

Food consisted mainly of Vervet Monkey (controlled problem animals) and Dassie meat. Many of the smaller bones were fed whole and the chick swallowed these with no problems. A two month old wild chick was recently observed swallowing a busbock leg bone! Powdered calcium supplements are insufficient to guard against bone problems, when raising large raptors.

By a month old (830 g) the bird was standing strongly and flapping its "wings"—the first quills had begun to show on these. At six weeks (1562 g)



This and other Crowned Eagles were raised from the egg or taken as tiny chicks from the nest.

Photos courtesy the author.



While traveling from place to place to give slide shows on the eagle and conservation, the Crowned Eagle rode in the truck.

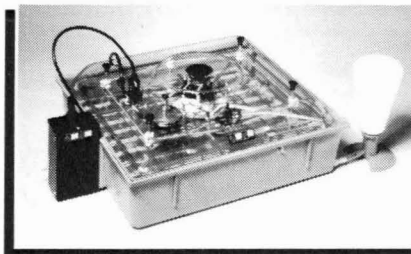
feeds were reduced to three a day and dark quills appeared over the back, wings and tail. The chick was spending increasing amounts of its time standing, but while sleeping it stretched out flat

in the nest with the limbs extended in all directions. At two months (2085 g) the chick was now feeding so aggressively that all food was offered on a forceps tweezers and fingers kept well clear of the beak. Even at this stage, however, only relatively small pieces of meat were swallowed and feeds had been reduced to two a day. At three months the bird was first seen on a perch to which it had flown, approximately two weeks earlier than the first flight of the larger female. Once fledged the birds were fed about 700 grams of meat five times a week. All the smaller bones were eaten as well.

Due to the size of the female and in particular her talons, and the warnings which falconers gave over the hazards of using this species on the glove, the smaller male was chosen to use for talks. Once jesses had been fitted the handling began with few problems. He appeared more relaxed tethered to a large stump than in a cage when travelling. This became our *modus operandi* as we travelled about the province with many drivers nearly forgetting their responsibility as they tried

to identify this creature that was giving them the eye out of my back window. Together we attended as many farmers meetings, in particular conservancy meetings, as possible. Along the way a number of school groups were also visited. In total we visited about six thousand people where I gave a talk and slide show on raptors with an emphasis on the conservation habitats which ensure the conservation of our province's biodiversity.

Many purists frown upon the use of live specimens but in my experience there is nothing that gets the message home like a close encounter with the real thing. Surely the benefit gained from this single specimen is in line with the wise utilization of a natural resource. In the middle of July I accompanied the two birds to San Diego Zoo where they will continue to spread the conservation message. Having recently bred their first Harpy Eagles we hope in time to hear of similar success with our Crowned's. Both birds have settled in well and last I heard the quarantine staff were wearing crash helmets when entering to feed the birds! 



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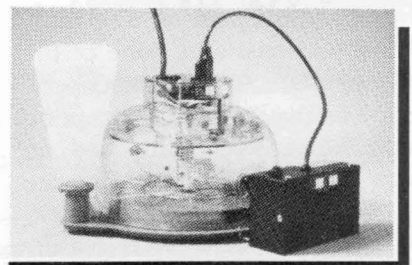


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