

"Hope" for the endangered Philippine Monkey-eating Eagle

(or How to Burn Your Shoulders With Coffee)

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, CA

On the lush tropical island of Mindanao, in the Philippines, Domingo Tadena kept a sharp eye on the huge Philippine Monkey-eating Eagle that was perched 40 feet above him. And the sharp-eyed eagle followed Tadena's every move. The instant Tadena turned his head and broke eye contact, the eagle dropped like a stone and slammed, talons first, into the back of Tadena's head. With extraordinary strength, the eagle's dagger-like talons wrapped around and punctured the man's face.

Tadena, on the ground with the great eagle gripping his entire head, cried out for help and two of his assistants rushed in to save him. The eagle refused to release its iron grip. One assistant used a pair of pliers to pry the talons out of Tadena's flesh but the eagle was too strong. The men tried with both hands to pull open the eagle's grip, again to no avail. Finally, one man ran to get some limb loppers to cut the toes off the eagle's feet.

Tadena, on the ground with the great eagle gripping his entire head, cried out for help

Face down in the dirt, the world's largest eagle tearing his head open, Tadena had the courage and dedication to forbid using the limb loppers. He could barely talk or see but he told his men to try one last trick—throw a cloth over the eagle's head and blind it. Unable to see, the eagle relaxed its grip and remained motionless. Tadena was dragged to safety and hauled to the nearest hospital some 40 miles away where he put in for days of repairs and recuperation.

Why, you may ask, did the eagle attack Tadena? What is the relationship between the eagle and the men?

Actually, it is a story of hope. A

story of a magnificent bird on the brink of extinction and of the people who are dedicated to preserving it.

The great Philippine Monkey-eating Eagle *Pithecophaga jefferyi* is one of the largest eagles in the world and is endemic to the Philippine Islands. Much of the Philippines are naturally covered with tropical jungle growth typical of south east Asia. The rain forests are vast, often mountainous and very rugged. Eagles are fiercely territorial, each pair claiming huge tracts of forest as their exclusive hunting grounds. They rarely soar above the canopy. When hunting, they fly silently through the forest from one lookout perch to another. The eagle's preferred food is medium-sized mammals such as monkeys, squirrels and flying lemurs. They will take large birds when they can catch them, and the natives claim the eagle takes pigs.

The eagles nest in huge old trees often 150 feet high where they construct nests five or six feet across. They lay just one egg which is incubated by both parents but with the female assuming about 70% of the chore. The chick hatches in about 60 days and takes about five weeks to stand in the nest. It will leave the nest in about three and a half months but may remain dependent upon its parents for several years. These eagles are obviously slow growing, slow to mature, and slow about raising a family. With good luck, a pair might raise one baby per year. Actually, at the end of 1995 there were only four known active nests and no documented wild babies raised during 1993, 1994 or 1995.

In 1982, ornithologist Robert Kennedy, studying the birds of the Philippines, estimated the eagle's population on Mindanao to be around 300-500 individuals. By the end of 1994, only 67 eagles could be accounted for on Mindanao and just seven more on other islands. Obviously, when an entire species has no more

than 74 known members (numbers vary as when a new bird is spotted or when a bird or two disappears), it is in serious trouble perhaps to the point of no recovery.

But the Filipino people are rallying to save their national bird. As with the California Condor, captive propagation was deemed a necessary tool in a desperate attempt to head off the eagle's imminent extinction. To carry out this daunting task, the Philippine Eagle Foundation, Inc. (PEFI) was created in 1987. It is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the endangered Philippine Eagle and its rain forest habitat. It is staffed by very skilled, highly trained professionals who are personally dedicated to the conservation of the country's raptors and to the management of wildlife habitats.

The ultimate goal is twofold: to preserve enough primordial habitat to sustain a wild population of the eagles, and to increase the number of eagles through captive breeding techniques. These efforts work hand in hand. The hope is to eventually release captive bred eagles into safe habitats and once again populate the remote rain forest with its most majestic bird. Of course, captive bred birds are not substitutes for wild birds. They are meant to support the wild populations. And the goals are long range, extending well into the next century.

The Philippine Eagle Foundation, Inc. has the rare good judgment to recognize that the eagle's habitat is being penetrated by a growing population of slash-and burn subsistence farmers. The farmers' plight leaves no room for concern about the status of some wild bird. Indeed, if a farmer could catch a bird (endangered or not) he would gladly feed it to his children—just to survive.

To ease this situation, PEFI has begun work with the hill people in the areas where the eagle is found. Staff members live and work with the local people and help organize them, train them, and provide them with tools and equipment to make a living. The goal is to enhance the local farmers' capability to sustain themselves with a minimum impact on the ecosystem.

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The endangered Philippine Monkey-eating Eagle is one of the largest eagles in the world.



The enclosures for the breeding eagles are huge and seem a part of the surrounding jungle. It was in an enclosure like this that Domingo Tadena was caught by the eagle.

Eventually, these indigenous communities become responsible stewards of the forest.

At the same time, there are conservation education programs in place that are designed to develop public awareness and understanding of wildlife and the natural environment. The most visible of these is the Philippine Eagle Center in Malagos, Davao City on the island of Mindanao.

In late 1995, after a forced change of destination between Malaysia and Borneo, I showed up in Davao City on Mindanao, Philippines, three weeks behind my schedule. Despite being unexpected, my contact, Dr. Roberto P. Puentespina, rescheduled the work at his veterinary clinic and we headed straight off to the Eagle Center about an hour's drive up into the hills. Dr. Puentespina is the chief veterinarian at

the Eagle Center. He has had extensive schooling at a fine university in the United States (Michigan State, if I remember correctly) and is absolutely dedicated to the well-being of the eagles. At the Eagle Center I had a chance to see first hand what a remarkable job PEFI is doing to preserve the eagles.

Captive breeding is never easy, and when working with a little-known



The Monkey-eating Eagle is extremely powerful. Its talons grab and lock so its prey can't escape. Its massive beak is designed to tear flesh.



Dr. Roberto Puentespina (hat) and Domingo Tadena hold a couple of huge Philippine Monkey-eating Eagle eggs laid in 1995.

species such as the Philippine Monkey-eating Eagle it becomes a trail-blazing work of heroic efforts. Combine the extraordinarily difficult biological aspects with a sometimes dangerous physical environment and you begin to see the hurdles to overcome.

Indeed, the first captive breeding center had to be moved from its location because it was situated in an artillery impact zone between the local rebel army and government troops. The incoming rounds were a bother to the eagles. Of course, the scientists and keepers were rather annoyed also.

Work at the relocated Center includes studying the eagles' behavior, biology and nutritional requirements. Here protocols and management techniques are developed for handling the captive birds. The Center is the main location for the captive propagation of the eagles. And here, in 1992, Pag-asa was hatched, the world's first Philippine Monkey-eating Eagle to be born in captivity. Later that year the same pair hatched another baby, Pagkakaisa. Pag-asa means "Hope" and Pagkakaisa means "Unity." Auspicious names for the beginning of the future.

At the Center, I met Domingo P. Tadena. And this brings us back to the beginning of this story. Tadena is the

Deputy Director for Captive Breeding and is responsible for the hands-on management of all the eagles at the Center. To monitor the precious eagles' health, Tadena routinely slips into the huge cage to collect fecal samples for microscope work. This time the eagle got him. Tadena brushes the incident off as just another on-the-job surprise. But what really surprised him, he told me, was the hot coffee he drank on the way to the hospital. It leaked out the holes in his cheeks and burned his shoulders.

Fortunately, Tadena survived, the eagle still has all its toes, and two baby eagles have been produced. Their names, "Hope" and "Unity," say it all.



From Coagula, Number 23

[Author's update: Now (1996) there are 17 Monkey-eating Eagles at the Center, the most recent a female that was wounded, captured by farmers and turned over to the governor of the province. The bird had a broken leg and malaria but recovered.

Six eggs were laid in 1996 (by two females), two of which were fertile. One embryo died in the shell and one baby hatched but later died due to a congenital anomaly.

The Center's dedicated field people found and monitored 66 locations where the eagles were seen on Mindanao, and located five active nests, two of which had nestlings. SLD]

Photo by Sheldon Dingle



This beautiful tropical hideaway is located immediately next to the Philippine Eagle Center. One can stay here for several days while visiting the eagles. It is as close to paradise as I've ever been.

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