



*The new Black Eagle hatchling (above) and at one week of age with the puppet Lorna used to feed it.*



*Drying out and fluffing up one hour after hatching.*



*A fluff ball at one month old.*

# The Story of a Black Eagle

by Carine Lavril  
Honeydew, South Africa

**Editor's note:** *the following is a human interest story from South Africa. But it must be emphasized that any bird of prey in the United States must not be removed from the wild. It is strictly against the law. If one observes an injured or distressed bird of prey in the wild, please call your local or state Fish and Game Department. But as seen in the article below, disturbing wildlife usually ends in disappointment and/or disaster.*

It all began on Sunday, the 25th of July, when a friend of ours, Paul Venter, living on the other side of the road, phoned that evening to ask me if I could come over to have a look at an egg he had with him. He insisted so much that I went to his place at once. My surprise was great when I saw the size of this thing, not really knowing what it could be. My first thought was — a Ground Hornbill egg. It was about eight or nine cm long, and Paul was holding it under his shirt, close to his skin, the only way he knew to keep it warm!

After telling me it was a Black Eagle's egg, he went along explaining he could watch the nest from his time sharing in the Magaliesberg and every year the same sad story repeated itself. One of the two chicks killed the weaker one. He felt so sorry about this situation that he thought he could maybe remove the last egg before anything could happen to it, as anyway it would be lost to nature if left in the nest. Before doing so, he took the advice of mountaineers and the decision was unanimous.

Anyway, here he was with a situa-

tion he did not really know how to handle, especially as chirps and squeaks could be heard inside the shell. Obviously, the little guy was ready to make his entrance in our world and was becoming increasingly impatient.

It was brought to the Parrot Breeding Centre for a proper hatching the same evening, and was put into an incubator. It had not been kept at the right temperature for a few hours so it was left there until late at night to warm up and at midnight we decided that a little help would be advisable. I then opened up the shell at the large end, after making sure by candling where the head was. As this was done, we were taking shots and a video movie of this exceptional hatching, but the egg had to be put back into the incubator every couple of minutes. Recording the hatching of a baby Black Eagle seems to be a first world wide, so we were very eager to do things right! The baby was very

weak when it got out of the egg so I gave it two drops of Lactated Ringers to boost its energy and wait for the first dropping to indicate that the digestive system was ready for solid food. His birth-weight was 98 grams, a very unusual weight to a parrot breeder!

The next morning, he was ready for a first feed and another series of photographs. After all, he was unknowingly a star! His energy was rising and he could stand on his legs for a few seconds at a time.

As we are not familiar with hand rearing raptors, and because we wanted to remain on the legal side of things, we phoned around to discover who would be best suited for his care. Another very good friend of ours who rehabilitates indigenous birds, told us she knew just the right person, Lorna Standton.

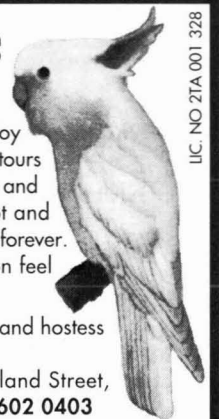
We phoned Lorna after trying in vain to reach Nature Conservation in Pretoria in the hope that they could tell us what should be done and who to entrust it to. At first, we wanted to meet her at her own place to see who we were dealing with and if she could have the right viewpoint on this matter, which was for us to rehabilitate this bird the best way possible. The same day it hatched, we went to Lorna's and saw at first a few raptors in her garden, including Bateleur Eagles, a beautiful Giant Hawk Eagle, Giant Eagle Owls, and as we came closer to the house, we could see many other raptors in aviaries that she kept for breeding purposes since most of these birds were brought to her after being injured for different reasons, often because of the heartlessness of some people.

What struck us the most is that she

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was living alone with her mother and was totally dedicated to her birds, whether she could rehabilitate them or, if impossible, breed from them. We knew at once we had found the right place for our baby and it was decided that she could come and collect it whenever it suited her, which was immediately, since she was quite curious to see how we operated with parrots!

No sooner said than done. Lorna followed us back home, and after spending another two hours together, she left us with her precious load.

Naturally we went to visit her the following weekend to see how she was doing, and we were amazed to discover quite a bigger chick! Lorna had fed it pieces of day old chickens with the exclusive help of a puppet made out of black felt material that looked a lot like the real mother. This was done so the chick would not become imprinted with the human hand, as this would hinder the future rehabilitation program. He was a lot stronger on his legs although he could not stand up for very long which made it difficult to take shots of him. Naturally, Patrick recorded him again with his video camera and after a long chat about the keeping of raptors and meeting every bird she was keeping indoors including the cute Pearly Owls invading her dining room! Actually, most of the house was taken over by those little fellows! A devoted person indeed. . . .

Lorna made then a very wise decision, considering this bird was perfectly healthy and could be most certainly rehabilitated. She would swap it around with the eldest that was raised in the nest so it would get imprinted properly by its natural parents. This can fortunately be done easily, since the parent birds readily accept other chicks from different nests even if they are not the same age as their own. It seems a lot easier to work that way with raptors than with parrots.

So, when this chick was over three weeks old, Lorna got in touch with a climber, Walter, and organized the first swap. This was decided very quickly, since it had been difficult for Walter to be free at that time. A few days later, we were back at Lorna's to meet the eldest. At that stage, the difference between chicks was important. He seemed a lot bigger, and, as

Lorna says, this one did not appreciate being scratched on his tummy like her baby!

For the following swap, a week after the first one, on the 27th of August, Lorna managed to get another climber, since Walter was not available. Patrick went along and it proved to be quite an expedition as they had to walk two km's in the rocks along steep edges above a deep cliff. The Black Eagles had built their nest halfway between the top of this cliff and the ravine. At that point, it was not difficult for an experienced climber to get to it and Walter went down with the chick in his rucksack. As he removed the chick from the bag and inserted the other one inside, the operation took only a few minutes. Lorna was impatient to see the reaction of her baby and although he was not panicking, he was not very reassured. He was quite a bit bigger, his flight feathers were pinning out through the very thick white down but the most impressive was the size of his legs and claws! Patrick had his video camera with him and recorded the whole scene. After a couple of days, the baby readjusted to his first environment. To Lorna, the birds had very different personalities. She was by then feeding him whole rats.

The next swap was organized on the 10th of September but, this time, Patrick called in the MNET team. They were very excited with the whole thing since nothing like this had ever been recorded in the world. Derrick Watts especially was very keen as was the well-known cameraman, Rick Lomba who was also very happy to be part of this rehabilitation program. They were all quite out of breath when they arrived heavily loaded with the TV equipment. After the exchange was done, Lorna noticed that the newcomer was thinner than her baby so it seemed that the parents were not feeding the chick in the nest as much as she was feeding the baby in her care. The growth rate was anyway very impressive and the back feathers on this one (the eldest) were already out quite a bit and they were dark brown edged with light brown. It still lacked the general black color as well as the white V in between the shoulders. His glance was very sharp and it seemed as if nothing would go unnoticed by this bird. He did not seem too worried by this move and, clever

as they are, he probably recognized Lorna.

The following swap happened on the 27th of September. Both birds were doing so well that it was decided to leave them together. The team arrived on site early and remained the whole day to observe the chicks. As they showed no sign whatsoever of aggression, they were left in the nest. Lorna and the climbers decided to take turns checking the nest as often as possible.

Unfortunately, things went wrong at this stage. No one could come so far out for the next few days, and the weather turned to heavy rain during this period, so it became impossible for the parent birds to hunt and provide enough food for both chicks: indeed the adults need warm air-pumps to get them to the desired altitude where they can soar and spot their prey. When Patrick and Lorna went a few days later to check on the two birds, they found the younger one dead from starvation.

For future rehabilitation programs, we had learned a few helpful things among which, past a certain age, they will not fight, the nest should be checked at least every second day, and if the crops are empty, food should be given to them until they are ready for their first hunting lessons with their parents.

Nature got its way after all. In the first place, this egg should never have been removed from the nest. What would happen if people decided to interfere with nests in the wild and remove eggs or chicks freely? Those birds would surely be in a lot more danger than they already are. But this egg could certainly not be thrown in the bin nor could Lorna do anything else than raise the chick once she was entrusted with its responsibility.

From failure something positive always comes out: experience. Lorna learned a lesson the hard way since she had put so much effort into bringing this young eagle back to nature. However, it has been a very promising adventure in spite of the outcome since it could be a first step toward the preservation of endangered species of raptors.

In conclusion, it is important to stress that no one should interfere with nature and anyone faced with a particular situation should get in touch with the specialists in the matter. ●