

# Sex Life of a Harpy Eagle

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Birds in the wild have no prior knowledge regarding reproduction behavior. Therefore, birds must rely on their natural instincts. Commonly, young birds will pair up with older birds which have lost their mates. But in any case, it is a trial and error process.

Our pair of Harpy Eagles commenced nesting in 1970. Nesting for these birds is a series of events of which mistakes may be made anywhere along the line. Birds do not copulate because they wish to fertilize their eggs. They copulate because they have instinct to rub their rear ends together. They do not build a nest because they realize they will lay an egg, but because it just seems like the right thing to do. One of its functions is to strengthen a pair formation through mutually involved activities. Mammoth Bald Eagle nests are a monument to this behavior.

When our birds laid their first egg, they became nervous at the sudden surprise; and since in the wild they will eat eggs of other birds, they ate this egg too. It is a natural reaction. After doing this several times, they, for some unknown reason, left the egg alone and acted confused and stared at it. Eventually they did properly incubate the egg. Why? They have no concept a chick is developing. They sit on the egg to soothe an irritated area of skin on their belly commonly known as a brood patch. They turn the egg not because of the needs of the developing chick but because the underside of the egg is always cooler. Incubation lasts 56-58 days. During this period, eggs were broken by being stepped on. Egg turning takes practice. Initially, our pair treated the egg like a billiard ball. Finally, when the chick hatched, the adults did not know what to make of it, and promptly ate it. This was possibly a nervous reaction. The second chick was not eaten, then again, it was not taken care of either. It seemed to be a curiosity.

To date, we have had three chicks hatched, one of which survived 16 days. Once a pair of birds learns how to properly rear young, they will continue to do so for the rest of their lives.

Unfortunately, many healthy eggs and young may be lost before they succeed. For this reason, we have recently begun taking the eggs away from the adults for artificial incubation and hand rearing.



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