



The Eagle Watchers: Observing and Conserving Raptors Around the World

Author: Murphy, Michael T.

Source: *The Auk*, 127(4) : 963

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1525/auk.2010.127.4.963>

The Auk 127(4):963, 2010
 © The American Ornithologists' Union, 2010.
 Printed in USA.

The Eagle Watchers: Observing and Conserving Raptors around the World.—Ruth E. Tingay and Todd E. Katzner, Eds. 2010. Comstock Publishing Associates, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York. 234 pp., 14 color plates, an introductory chapter, 24 species accounts, and 29 author biographies. ISBN 9780801448737. Hardback, \$29.95.—*The Eagle Watchers* is a compendium of largely anecdotal and very personal experiences of people who have often spent years in the field studying large diurnal raptors. I first became aware of and bought the book at the 2010 joint meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union, Cooper Ornithological Society, and Society of Canadian Ornithologists that was held in San Diego in 2010. The book's personal nature hit close to home and was the main reason I bought it. I do not study eagles, or raptors for that matter, and sometimes I find that raptor biologists are, shall we say, cut from a different cloth. But I understand passion, and therefore the book resonated with me. I also found it quite amusing that I received a copy of the book to review four days after I had finished reading it! My loss aside, I can assure you that I still feel that my money was well spent. The book furthered my knowledge of a fascinating group of birds, but most importantly it gave me the human stories behind the research. Why do we do it? What inspires people to endure hardships in remote regions, to emerge with data sets that most of us would regard as meager at best?

As alluded to above, raptor biologists are not your typical scientists. I think it fair to say that many of them have a certain craziness about them, and within that subset, it's very clear that it is the birds, and not the science, that come first. I do not mean that

to be a disparaging comment; it is simply an observation that I believe rings true. And if you have been around that "craziness," you understand. My undergraduate advisor was a raptor biologist and I saw it then, and it comes through in the 24 stories of eagles and some of the people who have studied them. Large raptors are generally not found in your backyard, and therefore nearly all of these people have had to go to great extremes to follow their passions. They love these birds—it is that simple. And ultimately, the book is about the conservation of these grand creatures and the love that inspires the researchers.

The opening chapter provides a cursory overview of the taxonomy and diversity of eagles, along with a description of their distributions, ecology, life history, and the primary threats to their conservation. It then moves immediately to the author and species accounts. It is not clear how the authors were selected, and many prominent names in raptor biology are not included, but in my opinion the book does not suffer for it. In this book we hear from the soldiers, not the officers, and the soldiers tell many wonderful tales of experiences to which all field biologists can relate. Whether it be observations of Harpy Eagles snatching sloths from the rainforest canopy, the personal discovery of the danger of handling large, dangerous birds such as the Steller's Sea Eagle by oneself, or the intimidating experience of facing down Doug Mock to justify your research goals (actually, it was probably "up," given Doug's height), the motivation for this book was the passion and conservation of these magnificent birds that require large tracts of intact natural habitats. The researchers are passionate and sacrifice mightily for the birds, but the message is clear: we ensure the persistence of eagle populations, and the entire ecosystem of which they are a part will survive. But that important message aside, the data that are essential to help preserve eagles can be acquired only through hard work, sacrifice, and dedication to the ultimate goal, and that comes through in spades in this book. But in many respects, this is the other message that emerges: small sample size and limited statistical power. This is the Achilles heal of many raptor studies—grand birds, important birds, but small sample sizes and low statistical power for testing hypotheses. Should that prevent their study? Absolutely not, and the enthusiasm (to put it mildly) that comes through in these personal accounts speaks powerfully for why we need to further promote efforts to increase our understanding of the role of raptors in diverse ecosystems around the world. I heartily recommend the book for people of all backgrounds. Each chapter is short, and I probably read 75% of them while riding the bus to and from work. It is a tight and tidy book that carries a large impact. Read it and enjoy!—MICHAEL T. MURPHY, *Department of Biology, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon 97207, USA. E-mail: murphym@pdx.edu*