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The Crested Serpent Eagle

BY

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Rarely is man so close to nature 'red in tooth and claw' as when he is confronted by an eagle on its kill. For there lies the natural food of the eagle, maybe a hare, a pheasant, or some other game that has met its end in violent death; and crouching over it, with raised hackles and open beak, all the while flashing yellow eyes, a perfect picture of muscle and ferocity, sits the eagle. Such moments have always remained vividly etched in my mind, and I have also made it a point to record all my observations as soon as possible.

I am no specialist to count the number of mouthfuls that constitute an animal's meal, but I really have been a lifelong lover of eagles, seeking them out in the wild and training them for falconry, and I do hope these random recollections have some interest for readers of the *Journal*.

The first brush I ever had was with the serpent eagle (*Spilornis cheela*). These eagles have a conspicuous fan-shaped crest, short wings and heavily scaled legs. In size a crested serpent eagle may reach a length of twenty-five inches, though twenty-four is the normal size of an adult female bird. The bright yellow and bare skin on the face identifies it at a glance, and there can be no mistaking this bird for other eagles. Its deep yellow eyes, and grey-black beak, always show up in great contrast to the bare patches around the eyes. The crest feathers are almost black, with white bars running along the edges. The feathers on the back of the neck are dark brown with light edgings. Some birds have white spots on their wing-coverts, while others have faded edgings. Below and above the wings are banded with black bars. The tail is of a dark sepia colour tipped with a white band, and with wide median bands of pale buff running across it. On the breast will be seen feathers of a light sepia colour, barred with light cinnamon streaks. The greater part of the belly

is generally of a cinnamon-brown shade, with white spots that persist down to the thighs. Because of the crested serpent eagle's extensive distribution, zonal colour differences are at times seen and generally birds from temperate zones are relatively paler than those that inhabit tropical forests with heavy rainfall.

The serpent eagle thrives in forested areas of the hills and plains skirting the Himalayas. In all my wanderings in the hills around Dehra Dun, I have not come across any serpent eagle at heights above six thousand feet though a friend of mine says he saw one at Benog some nine thousand feet above sea level.

The birds are nearly always seen near watercourses and streams, or soaring above marshy and swampy tracts. Lofty trees along the banks of streams and rivers provide ideal perches. Their food is mainly snakes, both poisonous and non-poisonous. Where there are not many snakes, or at seasons when snakes are hibernating, these eagles have been seen killing peafowl, junglefowl, and sometimes mammals as large as hares. They also rob other and smaller birds of prey.

I have very often seen the eagle devouring snakes in mid-air. A very large portion of its diet consists of snakes, and during the nesting season, when food for the young has to be brought in from long distances, the parent bird does not bring home the kill held in its claws, but swallows it first, leaving only a few inches of the tail sticking out of its beak. In this manner food is flown to the nest for the young. Once back in the nest the eagle regurgitates the snake for the young to eat. I once saw a serpent eagle attack and kill a cobra. The eagle lifted it off the ground but I think it was a bit too big for the bird to swallow, and the cobra was therefore carried home held in the claws. As the eagle flew down the ridge on which we sat, it happened to pass so close to us that I could very clearly see the yellow underside of the cobra and the steel blue of its upper portion as with each wing-beat the now dead snake oscillated from side to side. Occasionally frogs are also killed and eaten by this eagle, and when hard pressed I have noticed it feasting on crabs and insects as well. During the nesting season, the male bird is the more active of the pair. It has been noticed bringing food for the young as well as for its mate.

Whether the male shares the incubation of the eggs is not certain. From my observations I am led to believe that the arduous task of a sitter is entirely left to the female, and from what I could see she is a very close sitter. The nest is usually placed on a fork half-way or two-thirds up a tree. Of the several nests that I have seen, none was far from a stream or watercourse. Not unusually large, the nest consists mainly of twigs, sometimes lined with leaves. I once noticed a few tufts of grass, but this I think is unusual. I have never attempted to rob the nests that I have seen. Also I hate to disturb birds that are incubating for fear

they may desert the nest, leaving the eggs to addle. The eggs, not more than two, are blotched with some shade of brown. During the mating season the eagles are always very noisy, and readily betray their presence by harsh screams and high-pitched four-noted yelps.

With the snows clearly showing on the hills, one winter afternoon some twenty-five years ago, I went out to watch the performance of a newly trained goshawk owned by my uncle. It was our intention to hunt along the Ahsan river in the western Doon valley at a place called Chanderbunny. Lately there had been *khubber* of a lot of junglefowl in the area. The place had apparently not been hunted much, and was known to abound in small and ground game. To the south of this place, skirting the cultivated expanse, there stood a belt of thick sal forest. Near the Ahsan, cultivated patches with hedgerows made ideal cover for grey and black partridge; and the banks of the Ahsan, with their luxuriant growth of thick bushes and reeds, harboured junglefowl, peafowl, an occasional hog deer, and sometimes chital as well. Since pig and deer of many kinds came down from the sal forest to drink at the river's bank, at times many a grunter could also be disturbed.

In the low jungle bordering the heavy sal forest, pheasants too could be had. It was along this belt that we spread out, Teddy the Irish setter quartering the ground in front of us. We had covered barely a hundred yards when the setter froze in a perfect point. Immediately, we all like soldiers moved into position. Teddy was coaxed into movement, and a black partridge exploded out of the bush with a tremendous whirr of wings. This being the goshawk's first attempt at capturing game since it had been trained, our plans had been carefully worked out beforehand. I saw my uncle slip the hawk immediately in a perfect cast. After a short determined dash the hawk caught up with the ill-fated partridge and everything seemed set for a perfect kill. But we had forgotten eagles. The goshawk and its quarry had barely landed on the ground when we saw an eagle approaching. As it passed close overhead I could see its wolfish greedy expression. Its yellow eyes, and the bare bright yellow facial skin were clearly visible. My cousin who led the party was carrying a shot-gun. I saw him take aim and fire at the eagle as it passed no more than twenty yards away from him. All of us were well acquainted with eagle savagery, and fully realized what would happen should the eagle reach the goshawk. The eagle fell after it had been hit, and when I ran to it, I found it alive, gyrating on the ground, still dizzy from the dose of lead it had received.

After the goshawk had been collected, and the black partridge put in the hunting bag, the rest of the party came over to where I was busy examining the eagle. By now it had sufficiently recovered and showed signs of activeness. Close examination had shown that a stray pellet had merely grazed the skull bone. So it had been the stunning blow

of lead on this vital part that had brought the eagle down and kept it on the ground. As it was now rapidly regaining its faculties I grabbed its scaly legs, folded its wings as best I could, and tucked it under my arm. This way I hoped to carry my bundle home, but alas, 'man proposes and God disposes'. Though this was the first eagle I handled, I am unlikely to forget the part it played in my life on that fateful day. This being the goshawk's first day out in the field, no more flights were to be attempted that afternoon, so we decided to start back for home. On the way we were obliged to cross the Ahsan where a big tree had fallen across it, serving as a temporary bridge. I happened to be the last one to go across, and had nearly gained the other bank when I lost my balance. Not being able to use my left arm as a counterpoise, for this held the eagle, I fell to the right into the stream with a tremendous splash that almost knocked the breath out of my lungs and loosened my grip on the eagle. It flew off at once at great speed, as though a posse of devils were after it. I followed it with my eyes for a long distance, knowing that I had as much chance of getting my hands on it again as a snowflake in a bonfire.

A ducking in icy water at the end of a chilly winter's evening is not a very pleasant experience at the best of times. The loss of the eagle made it still more painful to bear. As I splashed out of the shallows, I simply could not understand the way all my companions kept laughing. Sympathetically, though still grinning very hard, my uncle said, 'Don't be too unhappy. It was only a serpent eagle, not used in falconry, and in any case all this stuff about hawks and eagles is bound to keep your mind off your studies, and you will have to go back to school in a few days.' I was obliged to grin and bear all this as best as I could, and to suppress many an angry retort. Some day, I thought, I am going to catch that bird again.

Almost a year later a man came to me and rather insolently said that he had an eagle for sale. He said he had brought the bird with him, and straightaway demanded fifty rupees for it. I told him I preferred to see the eagle first and fix the price afterwards. Thereupon he produced a large gunny sack, untied the neck and fished out an object which proved to be an eagle. It had been secured with bits of string, cord and leather thongs so mercilessly that it was impossible for it to make even the slightest movement. The bare yellow face, and short thick powerful toes with scales in place of feathers on the tarsus, made identification quite easy. There was no mistaking the serpent eagle. As I stood watching the unfortunate bird, so helpless and in such great agony, I decided to rescue it if I could from the clutches of the rascally birdcatcher, without of course in any way rewarding him. Aloud I said, 'This eagle is going to die very soon, and as far as I am able to make out, I fear that it has one wing broken or injured beyond relief. It cannot fly any longer

and is of no use to me. Should it be able to fly even for a short distance, and this you will have to demonstrate, I will certainly give you fifty rupees for it.'

The fool swallowed the bait and the next moment found him busily engaged in uncoiling the leather thongs and bits of string that held the eagle. As soon as the cord fell away from its claws, the eagle grabbed the birdcatcher's hand. He let out a scream and dropped the bird. This loosened the last restraining strands of binding material and it immediately flew away to freedom. 'Quickly,' I said, 'run after the eagle and bring it back. I am prepared to let you have fifty rupees for it.' Nursing his injured palm, it slowly dawned on the birdcatcher how foolishly he had acted. He stood looking at me with hate written all over his face, and after giving me the dirtiest look he was capable of displaying, he walked slowly away, an angry and I hope a wiser man.

These encounters with the serpent eagle had been purely accidental, but at last I was lucky enough to have the opportunity of studying these birds very closely, in great detail and almost at will. In 1953, on my return from Afghanistan, I started work in the most famous and beautiful part of the eastern Doon jungles. It was mainly reclamation work close to the old Satyanarayan Temple that lies between Raiwala and Rishikesh. The area had once been cultivated. Sunken brick walls, fragments of a marble statue, and a disused well testified to a once flourishing village. No attempt had been made to restore the tumbledown village or the surrounding fields since Song Ji and Susuwa Ji (the two rivers that drain into the sacred Ganga) had decided, in one of their fits of turbulence more than eighty years ago, to burst their banks and carry away before them all impediments offered by man, the most foolish of God's creatures. Gone were the men who had so audaciously challenged the rivers and the wilderness. No more would be heard the conch of the pujari calling devotees to prayer. The simple village folk who dwelt not far from the ruins assured me that on some evenings one would still hear the wail of conches from where stood the tumbledown temple, while benighted shikaris, and fishermen on their way back to camp, sometimes heard the clash of phantom cymbals and the chanting of mantras, as shadowy forms foregathered on moonlit nights within the temple ruins.

I must admit that such wondrous sights and musical sounds were denied to me. On many a summer's evening I have sat till late in the night, but save for the occasional hoot of an owl, the drumming of a nightjar, the rustling of leaves in the breeze, and the most unmusical ping of mosquitoes, the silence was unbroken. Only rats scurrying about in the undergrowth conveyed the impression of lost souls bent on some unknown purpose. And I would continue to sit in the penetrating calm of the evening till, without any warning, from far within the government forest would be heard the tiger's call. Then would come

the mocking call of the great horned owl, *bu-bu*, and deep in the forest a chital would bark and a sambar proclaim his love like some cracked bell. A train passing the station at Raiwala would whistle: the last train from Dehra I would think, with sleep-laden mind. That would be the signal for me to end my vigil. So have I waited patiently on many a night to watch the congregation of shadowy folk. Beautiful nights under a star-decked sky, or with the hunter's moon flooding the forest with light. In the hedges glow-worms flashed their tiny lamps, and far to the east Ganga Ji gurgling with pleasure flowed headlong to the sea.

In such lovely surroundings I was at the serpent eagle's door. Land reclamation was mainly confined to a strip roughly two miles broad and three miles long. On the western boundary, the tall trees of the government forest made an excellent windbreak. To the north the Song river, meandering, splitting into many channels, and joining again before mingling with the waters of the holy Ganga, showed the limit of our territory. To the south there lay the placid waters of the beloved Susuwa, reflecting the changing faces of the sky. The rushes growing thickly on either bank, trembling in the slightest breeze, and the pampas grass swaying in the wind seemed to convey a perpetual welcome to the visitor.

The whole country was full of big and small game, and was in consequence a veritable paradise to the naturalist. In addition to many other predatory birds, there was also a pair of serpent eagles. These birds I got to know intimately. On several occasions I was obliged to shoo them away from my peregrine falcon but they afforded me many happy hours of birdwatching. Only when the falcon was being flown did I not appreciate their company. They were always ready to chase the peregrine, whether as prelude to an attack or merely to drive it away from their territory, I am unable to say. It could have been both. The superior speed of the peregrine and her great manoeuvrability did not give the eagles much chance of success, but the encounter always left my falcon very much perturbed, and it would take me a long time to get her to stoop to the lure afterwards.

It was never very difficult to locate the eagles at any time of the day. I knew exactly where to look for them. They had established outposts all along the banks of the river Susuwa. Even when soaring, the eagles would announce their presence by repeated and persistent calls of *kek kek kee*. I have seen them take frogs from the many ponds in the area, and lizards, as well as snakes of many kinds. Only very rarely would the eagles swoop from the sky to capture their prey, in the manner of other hawks. They preferred to hunt by stealth and cunning. They would scrupulously observe nature's unwritten law of silent movement. Perseverance is their greatest asset. For many long hours, perched on some tree above a creek, or any other place where small rodents or snakes are likely to appear, the serpent eagle patiently watches and waits.

From this elevated platform, the moment it sees a likely prey, it stoops with amazing speed to capture its prize. Our eagles on the farm were quite unafraid of man and I could walk up to the tree they were perched on without alarming them in the least. Whenever the bulldozer was at work clearing virgin territory, the eagles would appear, attracted by the beat of the engine. They would take up positions on nearby trees and keenly watch the movements of the machine. When the blade of the dozer unearthed a nest of field rats, the eagles would dash after the poor scurrying creatures and would often fly triumphantly away with a rat dangling from their claws.

One day I witnessed a curious sight while clearing operations were in full swing. As I watched bushes being razed to the ground, three cobras jumped out of a demolished patch. One was immediately decapitated by the dozer's blade. Another one managed to glide to the safety of the closest bush. The third brute seemed to bear a charmed life. It crawled over the deadly blade and did not rest till it had gained a good seat on the bonnet of the machine. There with dilated hood it challenged the operator. Never have I seen anyone jump out of the driver's seat in greater haste. In a flash the driver was on the ground and the next instant I found him running like smoke. The dozer crept forward with the snake at the controls. Then for no apparent reason, the snake slid forward, fell off the bonnet and was immediately reduced to pulp under the tracks of the machine. Our friend the driver thereupon nimbly jumped to his seat and resumed command.

On one occasion I witnessed a most unusual display by one of the eagles. I was watching a pool in which small fish were jumping. A kingfisher repeatedly attempted to catch one of the leaping fish but did not seem to be having much luck. In its last attempt, it made a crash dive into the pool, and tried to leave the water by vigorously beating its wings as soon as it surfaced. While it was helplessly thrashing the water I saw an eagle come down like a bolt from the blue and snatch the ill-fated kingfisher. I think it was the female serpent eagle that thus carried off the kingfisher. The serpent eagle is comparatively a slow bird. It therefore watches and waits, and when it finds the prey at a decided disadvantage, it strikes.

The pool of water just mentioned used to be a favourite haunt of deer and peafowl, and I would amuse myself watching the visitors arrive and depart. This way I got to know most of the animals that came to the pool, some drank daily, and a few arrived precisely at the same hour every day. Peafowl mixed freely with the deer and I did not see any fight amongst the bucks either. Once however there occurred a very interesting incident. Some time previously I had disturbed a snake on the edge of this pool. The snake was almost brown in colour and as big as an ordinary cobra, and I thought it had come to the edge of the

pool in quest of frogs. Therefore on this second occasion I was much surprised to find it surface right in the middle of the pool. With its head held high above the surface, carrying a small fish, not more than six inches long, in its mouth, it looked like a miniature Loch Ness Monster.

It was the first time I had seen a snake catch a fish, and I felt very pleased with my discovery. Later I was told that such a thing is not at all uncommon as even cobras are recorded to have taken to fishing at certain times. Not knowing much about snakes, I was at that time unable to label this one correctly, though I guess it could have been the common rat snake, plentifully available in the Doon valley. Had one of the eagles been around, I am sure some action would have followed. It would have been the case of snake eating fish and eagle eating snake—for such are the mysterious ways of Providence.

I once killed a Russell's Viper, and placed it in an open field directly in front of the tree on which one of our serpent eagles was perched. In less than five minutes the eagle had flown down to sample the offering but no sooner had it landed than it took off again. It did not even touch the dead snake. I have yet to know the reason for this extraordinary behaviour. That these birds take poisonous snakes is well established, so why was a dead viper not considered consumable?

Years ago I tried to train a serpent eagle. To get it to jump to the fist was not all difficult, but try as I would I could never fully trust it with game. At first it would not even look at any live bird offered to it, and it was a very long time before it would grab a pigeon. I fear it would be almost impossible to make these eagles hunt birds instead of snakes. As Sadi said :

How can a man make a good sword from bad iron ?

An ignoble man becomes not, O Philosopher, noble by education.



Osman, S M. 1972. "The Crested Serpent Eagle." *The journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 69, 461–468.

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