

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Dear Friends and Supporters:

I hope you attended our December meeting and saw Shannon Perry's great program about the birds of Uganda. Join us on January 14 when Vera Markham will show some of her favorite bird photos. If you come early at 6:30, you can see a live Merlin. SAS Board member Andrea Nesbitt holds education permits from both the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department, which allow her to exhibit rehabilitated birds. Please come and learn more about these small, migratory falcons, which are not commonly seen in Arizona.

Speaking of birds of prey, I had an opportunity to learn more about eagles while on a recent trip to Minnesota. I visited the National Eagle Center, located in Wabasha, MN, a small town with a population of only 2,500 residents. The 2-story interpretive center is right on the river bank and is a great place to see eagles in the winter. The fast current at the confluence of the Chippewa and Mississippi Rivers prevents the water from freezing and provides excellent fishing for the wintering eagles. Unfortunately, I didn't see any eagles while at the Center, but four bald eagles flew overhead just a few minutes into my drive back to the hotel, which was great!

The Eagle Center is home to four bald eagles and one golden eagle, all of which were injured and can't be returned to the wild. Naturalists give presentations three times each day while feeding the eagles. The eagle I met is named Was'aka which means "strength" in the Dakota language. He was found in Jacksonville, Florida, and is blind in one eye. It was a new experience for me to be just a few feet from such a large bird and watch as he tore into a fish tail.

I recommend visiting the National Eagle Center if you are ever in southeastern Minnesota, near the Wisconsin border. Wasaba is only about 90 minutes from the Twin Cities.

www.nationaleaglecenter.org

Last, thank you for the many contributions we received in response to our annual appeal letter we sent in December. Your financial support ensures we can continue to rent our meeting space, provide Girl Scout badge workshops, and produce many public outreach and education materials. I hope you're receiving Constant Contact e-mails from Sonoran Audubon Society and are using our updated and revised website. Please let me know if you have any questions or suggestions.

See you on January 14th,

Haylie

[haylie.hewitt \[AT\] cox.net](mailto:haylie.hewitt@cox.net)

Who's Hunting the Hyrax?

By Jerry Theis, SAS Director-at-Large

A Rock Hyrax is a well-furred, rotund (4.5-11 lb.), short-tailed, rodent-like mammal (actually related to elephants!) that lives in high-elevation rocky terrain. Rock Hyrax (*Procapra capensis*) is one of 4 hyrax species worldwide, and all are found in Africa and the Middle East. On my recent trip to South Africa, we saw many of these animals browsing, sleeping, sunbathing, etc., and nearly always a sentry was visibly posted on a lookout rock. What was making the hyraxes so nervous? Were they being hunted by a stealthy predator we couldn't see?

The answer was Verreaux's (Black) Eagle (*Aquila verreauxii*). Verreaux's Eagles are large birds of prey of hilly and mountainous regions of southern and eastern Africa, and found very locally in West Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and the southern Middle East. The 59 species of eagles world-wide are divided into Fish/Sea, Booted/True, Snake/Serpent, and Giant Forest categories. The Verreaux's Eagle is a type of booted eagle. It is the sixth-largest eagle in the world (the Philippine Eagle is the largest) and the seventh or eighth heaviest living eagle (the Harpy and Steller's Sea-Eagle are the heaviest). Verreaux's Eagle males weigh 6.6 to 9.3 lbs., and the larger females weigh 6.8 to 15.4 lbs.

Adults are mostly jet-black in color. The yellow coloration of the cere, eye-ring and "eyebrows" stand out in contrast. Even more prominent on flying birds when seen from above is the white on the back, rump and upper-tail coverts and part of the scapulars, which forms a V-shaped patch. Adults also have conspicuous white windows on the wing quills at the carpal joint. The bill is stout, the head is prominent on the relatively long neck, and the legs are fully feathered. No other black-colored raptor in its range approaches this species' large size, nor possesses its distinctive white patterns. The flight profile of Verreaux's Eagle is also distinctive, as it is the only *Aquila* species other than the Golden Eagle to soar in a pronounced dihedral, with the wings held slightly above the back and primaries upturned at the tip to make a V shape. We were fortunate to view an adult eagle exhibiting this flight pattern.



Photo: Athol Merchant

Verreaux's Eagle is one of the most specialized species of raptor in the world, with its distribution and life history revolving around its favorite prey species, the Rock Hyrax. The only raptors as specialized to hunt a single prey family are the Snail Kite and the Slender-billed Kite which prey only on *Pomacea* snails. When hyrax populations decline the eagles can survive with mixed success on other prey, such as small antelopes (even Klipspringers, a small rock-jumping antelope per our local guide), hares, Meerkats, mongooses, squirrels, cane rats, bushbabies, lambs, monkeys and other assorted vertebrates, as well as avian prey including guineafowl.



All species of hyrax are highly wary, which explains why we frequently saw sentinels on lookout duty. To counter their wariness, the eagle has developed an effective hunting strategy. The eagle searches for hyrax in a low-level quartering flight, then uses a rapid, twisting dive of a few seconds to knock the hyrax off the cliff, ultimately finishing the kill on the ground. Verreaux's Eagle has a foot pad that is 20% wider than the Golden Eagle, possibly an adaptation to taking bulky, broad-backed prey such as a hyrax.

Verreaux's Eagle has precise habitat requirements and is rare outside of its particular habitat type. It lives in kopjes, which are dry, rocky environments in anything from rocky hills to high mountains amongst cliffs and gorges, often surrounded by savanna, thornbush and sub-desert. Despite a high degree of specialization, the Verreaux's Eagle has fared relatively well from a conservation standpoint. Its habitat is mostly non-vulnerable to human destruction. They rarely partake of carrion, thus they are unlikely to eat carcasses of animals that were poisoned. The greatest concern for their survival is local hunting of hyrax for food and skins, causing the eagles to switch to other, less-favored prey.

The Verreaux's Eagle is considered an "obligate cainist," that is, the older sibling normally kills the younger one. Even so, a family of three (two adults and their one offspring) consumes around 400 hyrax each year, making the hyrax as popular with the Verreaux's Eagle as it is for us as a crossword puzzle clue.