


SPOTLIGHT *Species*



Martial Eagle— *Polemaetus bellicosus*

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Photos by Scot Mangum.

COMMON NAME(S): Martial Eagle, Aigle Martial

CLASS: Aves

ORDER: Falconiformes

FAMILY: Accipitridae

GENUS: *Polemaetus*

SPECIES: *bellicosus*

DESCRIPTION

The adult Martial Eagle is a very large, crested eagle with long, broad wings and a short tail. The head, neck, back, wings and upper breast are dark brownish grey-black. The lower breast, belly, thighs, and under-parts are white with conspicuously spotted dark brown-black. The flight feathers are indistinctly barred and the tail is brown-black barred with grey-black. The eyes are bright golden yellow; the cere and feet dull yellow-green to a blue-grey color. The males and females are minimally sexually dimorphic, the female being slightly larger with bolder spotting on the breast.

Juvenile and immature birds have generally paler brown upperparts, face, and throat while having a white throat that lacks spotting on the underside. The eyes are brown; the cere and toes are whitish or grey. This plumage is maintained through several molts for four or five years. It is at this time they molt into their adult plumage almost completely within one molting season, with a very brief intermediate stage.

SIZE/WINGSPAN

The Martial Eagle is the largest of all the African eagles. Being a bird of the open country, it has a much more impressive wingspan when compared to other large eagles, that anywhere between 6.5 to 8.5 feet (2.1 to 2.6 m). The Martial Eagle can reach heights of nearly 31"–34" (79 to 86 cm) and weights between 11–13.7 lbs. (5000 and 6200 g.)

HABITAT/RANGE

Martial Eagles span a vast range across the continent of Africa from the savannas of tropical and southern Africa, north to Senegal, and east to Somalia. They are much less common in western tropical Africa than in East and southern Africa, where they

are widespread throughout. Martial Eagles are found frequenting riverine forests, dry bush, and lightly wooded savannahs. They also frequent any type of more or less open country from forest edges mixed with cultivation to broad-leaved woodland, acacia savanna, grass plains, thorn bush, and semi-desert with low scrub—even true desert along watercourses. They are found mainly in drier areas at low to medium elevations, but occasionally to 9800 ft. (3000 m) on high mountains. Being a large eagle it requires a large home range which average about 60-80 sq. miles (150-200 km²) in an optimum habitat.

BEHAVIOR/ADAPTATIONS

The most aerial of any large African eagle other than the Bateleur (*Terathopius ecaudatus*), the Martial Eagles usually lives singly or in pairs and can be very shy and elusive. They soar at great heights as they search out prey. These eagles may observe prey at a great distance (up to 3–4 miles or 5–6 km) and attack in a long slanting stoop, suddenly surprising prey, and braking violently with spread wings and tail to make a kill. Martial Eagles will not normally crash into vegetation after prey. This far-ranging hunter seems never to kill close to its eyrie, and they do not dismember and cache a kill in trees as some other eagles do, however they will return for up to five days to feed off a single kill. Occasionally the martial eagle will hover in flight while hunting like a huge kestrel. Adults are normally sedentary in their home ranges year-round. Immature birds may wander, but have no regular movements.

Although generally silent, Martial Eagles do have some vocalizations. The most common call is a low, mellow, whistling 'hlueeeoh,' or 'queeeor.' They may also utter a musical ringing koweeo-koweeo-koweeo, as well as a loud clear klee-klee-klee, klooe, klooe, klooe. In display flight a very high call, such as 'fiu-wirr' and 'fwee-fwee-fwee' is made.



SOURCES and LINKS

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- <http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu>

LIFESPAN

At a 75% mortality rate before sexual maturity (at around 4 to 5 years of age), the average adult life span would be 16 years. The total average life span in the wild is about 20–22 years altogether, in captivity it could be significantly longer.

CONSERVATION STATUS

More partial to domestic livestock than other large African eagles, the Martial Eagle is persecuted by Europeans and resented (and sometimes killed) by Africans. Their numbers have decreased due to destruction of habitat, invasion of woodlands by small-scale cultivators and some direct persecution. They are probably not yet threatened except locally. They are able to survive in cultivated areas if the human population is not too dense. They are still considered to be widespread and reasonably common.

REPRODUCTION

The mating display is not very spectacular; mainly soaring and calling over a nest-site. The large stick nest of these eagles, lined with green leaves, is frequently rebuilt and used year after year. One site in Kenya was continuously occupied for 31 years in a row, but pairs may often, even annually, build new nests. These nests are large basin-shaped structures of thick sticks, at first broad and shallow, 5 ft (1.5m) across by 1.6 ft deep (0.5m), but with repeated use may reach 6.6ft (2m) across by 4.3 ft (1.3m) deep.

Only one rough-textured, large egg is laid. The egg is greenish white or pale greenish blue in color, variously, often heavily marked with brown and grey under markings, chiefly at the broad end. The female does most of the incubating and brooding. The incubation period lasts 50–53 days, and the young bird is fledged and making its first flights at 95–110 days. Young Martial Eagles may return to the nest to roost for some days after first flight, thereafter roosting near the nest for up to three months. The young are fed in the nest or on trees nearby by the female for up to three months.

Laying dates vary according to region, ranging between March and November and peaking June through August.

DIET

A very wide range of mammals, birds, and reptiles make up the diet of these birds, varying according to availability and area. In East Africa, its diet consists mainly of game birds (francolin, partridge, and guinea fowl), hyrax, and other mammals up to the size of an Impala calf or duiker. Through their entire range, Martial Eagles feed on large birds (including geese, storks) and medium sized mammals, which occasionally include carnivorous mammals as large as Caracal, and some small adult antelopes.

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