

## **Neotropical Birds of Prey—Biology and Ecology of a Forest Raptor Community.**

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## BOOK REVIEW

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**Neotropical Birds of Prey—Biology and Ecology of a Forest Raptor Community.** Edited by David F. Whitacre. Foreword by J. Peter Jenny. 2012. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York. 412 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-4079-3. Cloth. 102 color plates (23 pages). \$75.00.—The Peregrine Fund's Maya Project was and currently still is the largest full-scale study conducted on forest raptors in the neotropics (the biogeographic region extending from the Tropic of Cancer in Mexico, the Caribbean Islands, south to Tierra del Fuego of South America), which was one of the least known raptor communities until the Maya Project and other raptor research projects. With 20 forest species studied and observations made on numerous other species and taxa, this project was the greatest advancement in neotropical raptor research and conservation. Anyone who has studied forest raptor species can appreciate what an achievement this research and book are. Upon the inception of the Maya Project, cofounded by the late Bill Burnham and Peter Jenny, this daunting task of learning about neotropical forest raptors set sail in the mid-1980s and continued through the early 1990s.

Long overdue is the publication of all their findings in this book, *Neotropical Birds of Prey*, now the primary resource for any neotropical raptor researcher for many years to come. It is a must-have for any serious raptor scientist, but will also be essential reading for bird enthusiasts wanting to learn more about the ecology of raptors in the neotropics. More than 15 yr of research are condensed into this 412-page, 8- × 11-inch hardcover book. This is by no means a field guide, and therefore should be used as a reference text.

The meat of the book is full chapters dedicated to each species with information on what was known about the species prior to the Maya Project and what was learned from this research. In the introduction of each of the species accounts, the authors give a personal anecdote they witnessed while in the field, which I enjoyed. Spending many years in the forests of this region, I appreciated each of these stories, and if you have spent time searching for these elusive

species, you will appreciate them as well. Approximately half of the material presented in this book has not been published anywhere else, making this an invaluable source for the scientific community. The authors' literature review is extensive and complete, which makes this book the single best source for literature related to neotropical raptors. To make this a strong scholarly resource, each of chapter was peer-reviewed, and statistical analyses are presented throughout. The authors also included 102 beautiful photographs, including many rare nest photos, in the center of the book.

Each species account is broken into categories, which include geographic distribution and systematics, morphology, previous research, research in the Maya forest, diet and hunting behavior, habitat use, breeding biology and behavior, vocalizations, behaviors of adults, spacing mechanisms and population density, conservation and highlights, with small variations for each species depending on which data were collected. Each species account makes up one chapter, with two additional chapters introducing the Maya Project and Maya Forest, and one final chapter on the ecology and conservation of Tikal's raptor fauna.

The authors and editor had the daunting task of conducting a literature review on each of the study species, but they did a stellar job. The detailed accounts for each species are well done. The most helpful and interesting section for each species account, in my opinion, is the conservation and highlight section. Most of these species were studied for the first time in this project, so there were many new discoveries for each species; these discoveries were the focal point of the highlight accounts at the end of each chapter. A critical portion of each species account was the conservation section. With many little-studied species, researchers try to collect basic natural history information and often cannot assess the species' conservation status; but here, with solid baseline data, the authors were able to do so. It is well known that in the neotropics, habitat loss and degradation are the leading causes of species declines, but in areas like the Petén of Guatemala and Belize, which have large contiguous tracts of forest remaining, those threats and conservation strategies may not be as clear. With the help of these

data, management and conservation action plans can be better implemented based on scientific data.

The book contains numerous helpful figures and tables. Tables include not only raptor data, but also information on the characteristics of reptiles, amphibians, and mammals in the Tikal region, as well as comparisons of species richness in temperate and tropical zones. Other interesting tables include detailed morphometric measurements for 31 species found in Tikal National Park and the region; these data are presented as a helpful quick reference guide in the appendix, so the reader does not have to shuffle through the text. I appreciated that the authors do not skimp on the tables and figures, making the text visual and easy to understand. The figures and tables vary from species to species, depending on the results that were obtained. In many raptor books, the raw data are lost, but that is not the case in this book. The tables are concise and thorough, making this a more scientific resource. For example, in Chapter 13 on the Crested Eagle, Table 13.1 takes up an entire page and a half to list the prey items and biomass for two nests studied.

If I were to have one complaint, it would be that the photos could have been better formatted so there was less white space. However, I appreciate

that none of the photos were altered to fit the space. Also, it would be nice to have the photos for each species within the chapters, so that you have that visualization as you are reading the accounts, instead of having to flip to the photos in the middle of the book.

This book is a comprehensive account on the raptor species of the Petén forests of Guatemala and will be a reference guide for neotropical raptors for many years. This book will elevate raptor research and conservation in the neotropical region. I commend the Peregrine Fund for their dedication to raptor research and in building local capacity in conservation, and for creating such a comprehensive guide to raptor research in a habitat within which it is difficult to conduct research. Many researchers, therefore authors, in this book, took part in this project. Numerous Guatemalans and international biologists were trained in raptor biology as a result of this project, and now quite a few of these field assistants work for various agencies and non-governmental organizations. This book is a must-have for all raptor biologists or enthusiasts.—**Ryan A. Phillips** ([belizeraptorresearch@gmail.com](mailto:belizeraptorresearch@gmail.com)), **Belize Raptor Research Institute, P.O. Box 110234, Campbell, CA 95011 U.S.A.**