

# Concern over targeting of birds of prey

Those who shoot endangered birds, if they are caught, they should be prosecuted by the laws that protects the wildlife of this country, says raptor specialist

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People who are shooting birds of prey should be prosecuted, says FreeMe Wildlife, who are on a mission to protect the raptors amid a rise in their killings.

Tammy Caine, a raptor specialist at FreeMe Wildlife, said they have recently had two birds of prey — an African harrier hawk and a spotted eagle owl — come in with pellets in their wings.

“While the African harrier hawk is still in care, the spotted eagle owl sadly had to be euthanised. The pellet, embedded in the wrist joint of the wing, could not be surgically removed, and continued to cause immense

inflammation and necrosis to the surrounding tissue until, eventually, the joint became immobile, and the owl was clearly suffering a great deal," she said.

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She added that while this might be happening in South Africa, it is not unique to the country. "Birds of prey are protected in many countries, including South Africa, because of active persecution. There is a myriad of reasons, not least of which is that, as a predator, they are seen as a threat to domestic livestock and pets.

"Birds of prey are obligate carnivores. They have to eat other animals from the time they hatch to the time they die. This is the way nature has designed them, and they cannot change that. Unlike humans who can decide what their dietary requirements are, birds of prey cannot.

"There is no such thing as going 'vegan' for a raptor. They also have absolutely no understanding of ownership, protection and boundaries," she said. She added that raptors have to exist in a natural system and humans often create constraints for the animals.

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It is humans who have turned the world artificial and have set rules that exist for no other species but our own. But the victims of this persecution are sometimes quite innocent

"The general public's inability to correctly identify raptors, or understand anything about them, is often so limited that any bird of prey is identified as a potential threat and shot just in case it might 'attack' pets or livestock.

"In so many instances, there was absolutely no reason to vilify the raptor in the first place, other than a human's misguided fear and ignorance. Unfortunately, the bulk of these persecutions also happen now in the winter months.

"Many of our resident raptor species breed in the winter, so it is a time when they are most active, spending more time hunting and foraging for their young," Caine said.

She added that these killings often affect the hatchlings as well as the parents. "This makes these shootings even more tragic, knowing that in many cases, it is not just the parent bird that is killed, but the same senseless act of violence condemns their young to starvation in the nest," she said.

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She added that those who shoot endangered birds, if they are caught, they should be prosecuted by the laws that protects the wildlife of this country.

Merlyn Nomusa Nkomo, who is a PhD candidate in conservation biology, in the field of ornithology, said that raptor biologists are aware of human-wildlife conflict regarding birds of prey and people.

"This happens often due to the perceived and sometimes real threat they pose to small livestock like poultry and lambs. However, how common or widespread this is, is unknown," she said.

"Training people as well in identifying raptors and knowing their conservation threat status will prevent misdirected fears and persecution of vulnerable species like vultures that do not prey on livestock anyway," she said.

- Merlyn Nomusa Nkomo is an expert listed on Quote This Woman, which is a database of women sources for media practitioners with the aim of increasing gender diversity in the media.