

Hawk Migration Association (HMA) Position Statement on Illegal Shooting of Raptors

HMA strongly opposes the illegal shooting or hunting of raptors and supports groups and activities focused on environmental education to raise awareness about raptors, this problem, and the impacts of shooting on raptor species.

Historically, shooting was one of the most common human-raptor conflicts and continues to be one of the primary threats to raptors in the Americas (Thomason et al. 2023a). Studies have shown that along power lines in the American west between 60 to 70% of raptor deaths are caused by shooting, and it is the main cause before electrocution or any other known causes (Thomason et al. 2023b). In a study carried out Idaho in 2021 and 2022, most cases of illegal hunting of raptors coincided with places and times of peak legal recreational shooting of game species (Thomason et al. 2024). In the United States, it has been estimated that shooting is the leading cause of death for Golden Eagles from all anthropogenic factors (Millsap et al. 2022). Despite legal protection and regulations in most countries, illegal shooting is still common in the Americas and around the world.

There are many reasons why raptors continue to be hunted or shot, mainly related to a bad perception of them. Some of the most common conflicts involve protecting livestock, as raptors are considered a threat or competition (which also occurs, for example, in fish farming areas with Osprey), viewing them as competition in game hunting, in traditional belief or medicine, or simply for sport (Thomason et al. 2023a). Some shot raptors recover after being treated in rehabilitation centers, but many cannot be returned to the wild, and many die (Desmarchelier et al. 2010).

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, there were bounties offered by the United States government on some species of raptors because they were perceived as harmful species (Thomason 2023a). The establishment of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Pennsylvania played an important role in raising awareness about conserving raptors and leading to legal protection within the United States (Senner 1984). Despite legal protections, illegal shooting continues in some regions, as documented in other countries across the Americas, such as Colombia, Chile, and Argentina (Jimenez 1986; Sarasola et al. 2006; Restrepo-Cardona et al. 2020). These studies documented similar human-raptor conflicts where, despite current protections and regulations, the situation persists.

There are many initiatives in different countries across the Americas aimed at reducing illegal raptor hunting (e.g., Tropicos Colombia, early education efforts by Veracruz River of Raptors, and others) focusing efforts on environmental education activities to change people's perceptions about raptors. It is known that some migratory raptors, such as Broad-winged Hawk and Swainson's Hawk which migrate in large concentrations, are vulnerable to being shot while passing through roosting areas in Tolima and western Cundinamarca, in Colombia, resulting in fewer individuals returning to breeding sites (Vallejo, 2023). Similarly, in Colombia, fish farm owners kill Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) under the belief that they deplete fish production. By doing so, they may be reducing the juvenile population of the species, as first-year juveniles remain in non-breeding areas for more than a year before returning to their breeding grounds (Bechard & Márquez, 2003). Migrants using farmland in migration throughout Central America and Mexico may also be vulnerable to rural landowner persecution. Therefore, it is necessary to work together across the different regions where raptors are distributed.

Recommendations

HMA recommends the following to discourage the illegal shooting or hunting of raptors:

Education and Awareness

- Carry out environmental education activities to raise awareness of raptors, their importance and value in the food chain and ecosystem.
- Use social media and local media to bring awareness about raptor natural history and importance.

Legislation

- Measure the effectiveness of education and outreach, and adaptively modify programs to improve their effectiveness.
- Share with legislators ecotourism values and relevant information about raptors and when and where raptors are being most affected, and promote legal protection and heightened patrols or policing of migration bottlenecks to enforce laws and regulations and reduce illegal shooting.

Cooperation between countries

- Promote awareness across the Americas and promote cooperation between countries located in key migratory routes.
- Contact major bird conservation groups active in the region including National Audubon-International division, BirdLife International, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure awareness of key issues is widely known.

Propose alternative activities

- Promote ecotourism focused on raptors to encourage further conservation (used by Hawk Mountain effectively).

Investigation

- Carry out raptor monitoring and persecution monitoring programs and support existing monitoring sites.
- Record data on proportion shot and survival of migrants and share widely.
- Study when, where, and how illegal shooting occurs.
- Take conservation measures and create media based on research.

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