

Papers - General

Raptor relocation from Durban International Airport in KwaZulu–Natal

James Wakelin

*Scientific Services, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, P O Box 13053 Cascades 3202
KZN, South Africa. James@kznwildlife.com*

Introduction

Air-strikes between birds and aircraft are well known and the airport companies spend a considerable amount of money, on an annual basis, dealing with bird strike mitigation. The mitigatory methods used at the Durban International Airport (DIA) include the use of specialist dogs, sirens and thunder flash explosives as bird scare tactics, but also includes removing problem birds using firearms. Raptors are only one group of birds that cause concern for the airport management authority at the DIA.

A co-operative partnership between Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the KZN Crane Foundation and the Airports Company of South Africa (ACSA), has enabled large birds such as cranes and raptors to be targeted and removed alive from the airport. The captured birds are ringed, transported and released at suitable sites away from the airport.

The main raptor species of concern at the airport are Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus*, Steppe Buzzard *Buteo buteo* and Jackal Buzzard *Buteo rufofuscus*. The birds perch for much of the day on wind-socks and lighting structures, but when the day warms up and thermals build up from the tarred runways, the raptors utilize them for soaring, often within the required airspace of landing and taking off of aircraft.

Methods of bird capture

Zap nets, noose mats and Bal-chatri traps are used to catch raptors at DIA with most birds being caught using the Bal-chatri

traps. All raptors caught are ringed and certain species with easily visible tarsi (e.g. buzzards), are also colour-ringed (Fig. 1.), except for the falcons as they have the habit of sitting upright against their tarsus and hence reduce the opportunity for re-sightings. Wing notching was also used to mark buzzards when colour-rings were not available. This involved removing certain secondary wing feathers to identify individual birds (Fig. 2). Wing notching was not combined with colour ringing.

Adult Lanner Falcons and Long-crested Eagles *Lophaetus occipitalis* are resident at the airport and are ringed solely with a metal ring and released on site. Only immature birds of these two species are removed if caught. The reason for this is that we do not wish to remove “learned” adult birds that are surviving in their territories at the airport (i.e. not colliding with aircraft), as these experienced birds will simply be replaced with younger nomadic birds that are unfamiliar with the hazards of aircraft and could pose an increased threat. The *modus operandi* is therefore to remove only young birds until we get evidence that the adults are also involved in collisions. All Jackal Buzzards and Steppe Buzzards are being removed as they are not resident at the airport and occur only as seasonal or occasional visitors.

The main reason for colour-ringing the re-located birds from DIA is to allow us to determine whether or not previously trapped birds were returning to their capture sites and undermining the value of the relocation project of problem birds. However, what still remains to be ascer-



Figure 1. Colour ringed immature Jackal Buzzard *Buteo rufofuscus* about to be released in Howick, KZN (Wakelin, 2004)



Figure 2. A wing notched Steppe Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (Fronemann, 2004).

tained is what the most appropriate release distance from the capture site is that deters raptors from returning.

Interim results

On 12 February 2004 a Steppe Buzzard was trapped at DIA, wing notched and was boxed for transport to a large portion of suitable untransformed habitat near the Durban Pavilion, a straight line distance of 12 km from the airport. The bird returned within 24 hours and was seen perched on the very same windsock from which it was captured the previous day. Clearly this release site was too close.

Almost a year later, on 11 February 2005, an adult Steppe Buzzard was seen perched on the same windsock from which the first and only wing-notched Steppe Buzzard was trapped almost exactly a year ago. The Bal-chatri trap was put down for the bird, but the bird showed no interest. This lack of interest led us to scrutinise the bird more closely and further observations revealed that the buzzard was already ringed but with a metal ring only (Fig 3). We assume that this was the wing-

notched Buzzard trapped from the same windsock perch during 2004.

During 2004, six immature Lanner Falcons were present at the DIA. Before all six birds were caught, two were involved in collisions with aircraft and were killed. The remaining four birds were successfully trapped and released in Howick, a straight line distance of 87 km from the airport. None of the released birds have subsequently been re-sighted again at DIA.

Acknowledgements

ACSA is thanked for their commitment to conservation in their attempt to find alternatives to managing the birds of prey at Durban International Airport. Albert Fronemann especially thanked for supporting this partnership and providing some of the images used. Marius and Melissa, the wildlife control officers at Durban airport are thanked for their time and dedication to raptor conservation. Brent Coverdale from the KZN Crane Foundation is also thanked for assistance in this project.



Figure 3. Ringed Steppe Buzzard *Buteo buteo*, at Durban international airport KZN (Fronemann, 2004).