



The legendary  
giant raptor  
of the Amazon

## IN THE NEST OF THE HARPY EAGLE

LUCAS BUSTAMANTE HAS A RARE ENCOUNTER WITH  
THE WINGED TERROR OF SOUTH AMERICAN SKIES

— The Harpy eagle *Harpia harpyja* is a neotropical species of eagle. It is the largest and most powerful raptor found in the Americas, and among the largest extant species of eagles in the world. Harpy eagles are 86.5–107 cm (2 ft 10 in–3 ft 6 in) long and have a wingspan of 176 to 224 cm, with females typically weighing from 6 to 9 kgs (13 to 20 lb).

■ The Harpy eagle usually inhabits tropical lowland rainforests in the upper canopy layer. Destruction of its natural habitat has caused it to vanish from many parts of its former range, being nearly extirpated in Central America.



TEXT AND PHOTOS  
BY LUCAS BUSTAMANTE

I really love to visit Tambopata Nature Reserve in the rainforest of the Peruvian Amazon. The place is perfect for taking wildlife pictures because there it is very easy to find large animals such as capybaras, peccaries, macaws, jaguars, etc. However, when I recently arrived at Refugio Amazonas, one of the three lodges from Rainforest Expeditions, I found the exotic surprise that a family of the seldom seen and severely endangered Harpy eagles were

in their nest! It was definitely an opportunity that few people have had. Together with Jaime and Jeff, two friends of mine, we climbed a 40-meters tall tree very close to the nest and we spent two whole full days up there, on a small platform. What an unforgettable experience! The mother and father brought different preys to the clumsy chick: a porcupine and a sloth, respectively, were on the menu during those two days. And how could we ever forget the

call of the female? In the undisturbed rainforests of Ecuador, there lives an Amazonian tribe called the Huaorani. They believe they are the descendants of the jaguar and the Harpy eagle, so they worship these two animals as their gods. As for myself, when I found myself in the jungle face to face, in this case, with the Harpy eagle, it was too like being in front of a griffin, the legendary creature symbol of divine powers. ●



■ The female Harpy eagle lays two white eggs in a large stick nest, which commonly measures 1.2 m (3.9 ft) deep and 1.5 m (4.9 ft) across and may be used over several years. Nests are located high up in a tree, usually in the main fork, at 16 to 43 m (52 to 141 ft), depending on the stature of the local trees. The Harpy often builds its nest in the crown of the kapok tree, one of the tallest trees in South America. In many South American cultures, it is considered bad luck to cut down the kapok tree, which may help safeguard the habitat of this endangered species.

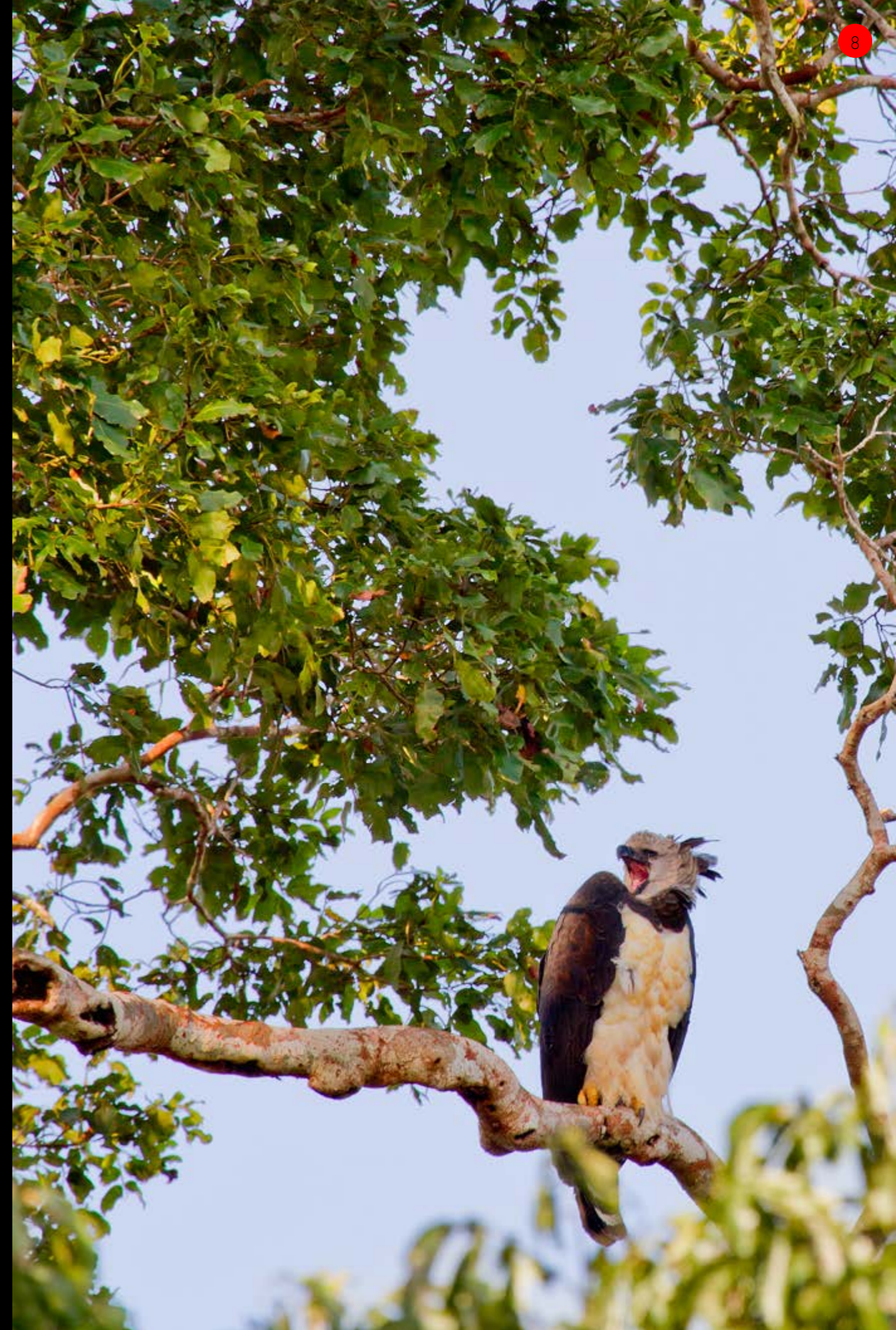




A pair of Harpy eagles usually only raises one chick every 2–3 years. After the first chick hatches, the second egg is ignored and normally fails to hatch unless the first egg perishes. The egg is incubated around 56 days. When the chick is 36 days old, it can stand and walk awkwardly. The chick fledges at the age of 6 months, but the parents continue to feed it for another 6 to 10 months.



■ Although the Harpy eagle still occurs over a considerable range, its distribution and populations have dwindled considerably. It is threatened primarily by habitat loss due to the expansion of logging, cattle ranching, agriculture, and prospecting. Secondly, it is threatened by being hunted as an actual threat to livestock and/or a supposed one to human life, due to its great size. Globally, the Harpy eagle is considered Near Threatened by IUCN and threatened with extinction by CITES (appendix I).





The harpy eagle is an actively hunting carnivore and is an apex predator; adults are at the top of a food chain and have no natural predators. Its main prey are tree-dwelling mammals and a majority of the diet has been shown to focus on sloths and monkeys.



■ Harpy eagles routinely take prey weighing more than 7 kg (15 lb). They possess the largest talons of any living eagle and they have been recorded as lifting prey up to equal their own body weight. That allows the birds to snatch a live sloth from tree branches, as well as other huge prey items. Males usually take relatively smaller prey, with a typical range of 0.5 to 2.5 kg (1.1 to 5.5 lb) or about half their own weight, while the larger females take larger prey, with a minimum recorded prey weight of around 2.7 kg (6.0 lb). Adult female harpies regularly grab large male howler or spider monkeys or mature sloths weighing 6 to 9 kg (13 to 20 lb) in flight and fly off without landing, an enormous feat of strength.

