

THE BLACK-AND-CHESTNUT EAGLE

A RARE BIRD INDEED

LUCAS M. BUSTAMANTE PHOTOGRAPHS A STRIKING AND VERY UNCOMMON RAPTOR OF THE SOUTH AMERICAN MOUNTAIN FOREST

*The Black-and-Chestnut Eagle *Spizaetus isidori* is a South American species of bird of prey in the Accipitridae family. Also occasionally called Isidor's eagle, it is often placed in the monotypic genus *Oroaetus*.*



TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY LUCAS M. BUSTAMANTE

It was in September 2015, as I was travelling with two companions on the road which links our capital Quito to the Amazon region of Ecuador, that I was able to photograph for the first time one of the most emblematic birds of prey in South America: the Black-and-Chestnut Eagle *Spizaetus isidori*. As we neared a little town named Baeza, sited on the eastern slopes of the Ecuadorian Andes, we were alerted by a local birdwatcher guide of the presence of a pair in the vicinity, and after spending an hour climbing a steep 70° mountain slope we could finally view it on its nest. For me, this was like a prize, after a very difficult climb without a clear trail and carrying all the photo gear (I used my Canon 100-400mm zoom to shoot the photos). But all the efforts were worth it! When one is in front of massive top-predators, it is easy to feel intimidated. The magical call and the mesmerizing eyes of this powerful raptor will be in my memory forever. In addition to being a gorgeous eagle, this is an Endangered species according the IUCN Red List, mainly because of habitat loss (i.e. logging, mining) and hunting that has dramatically decimated their populations. A sad reality faced today by many large predators worldwide!

This species is found in humid montane forests, normally at elevations between 1.800 and 2.500 meters, in the Andes from northern Argentina, through Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, to Venezuela, with isolated populations in the Venezuelan Coastal Range, Serranía del Perijá and Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. It is however generally local and considered rare.





This is a fairly large eagle at 63–74 cm (25–29 in) long with a wingspan of 147–166 cm (58–66 in). As an adult, this species is glossy black on the head and the back and a streaky chestnut on the underside, the wing primaries and legs.



This eagle is known to prey on woolly monkeys, porcupines, coatis and other mid-sized arboreal mammals. Large birds such as guans are also taken. It frequently has much abraded tails by plunging after prey through the branches. It overlaps in range with several other large forest eagles, including the Solitary eagle *Buteogallus solitarius* and possibly other *Spizaetus* eagles, but no interactions have been reported and the Black-and-Chestnut Eagle is believed to be normally the top avian predator in its range.

