

Beauty of the Beast



THE CHANGEABLE HAWK-EAGLE

**WINGED
TERROR
OF ASIAN
SKIES**

A fierce raptor of forest and open woodland and a favourite subject of wildlife photographers thanks to its stunning looks and widespread distribution



Nisaetus cirrhatus

The Changeable Hawk Eagle or Crested Hawk Eagle *Nisaetus cirrhatus* is a large, ferocious-looking bird of prey species belonging to the family *Accipitridae*. It was formerly placed in the genus *Spizaetus*, but studies pointed to the group being paraphyletic resulting in the Old World members being placed in *Nisaetus* (Hodgson, 1836) and separated from the New World species.

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Nisaetus cirrhatus

The fierce looks of the Changeable Hawk Eagle make a wonderful photographic subject of it. This is a juvenile.

Changeable (or Crested) Hawk Eagles are large, imposing raptors with varying color morphs and several subspecies that occur in southern and southeast Asia, throughout forested areas. They belong to the family *Accipitridae*, genus *Nisaetus*, species *N. cirrhatus*, further subdivided in the subspecies *andamanensis*, *ceylanensis* (Ceylon Hawk Eagle), *cirrhatus*, *limnaeetus* and *vanheurni*. Genus *Nisaetus* was formerly lumped with *Spizaetus*; however, molecular studies showed Asian hawk eagles to be part of a different lineage than that of New World hawk eagles (*Spizaetus*), and therefore were split into the new genus *Nisaetus*.

Changeable Hawk Eagles reach a length of 57-79 cm with a wingspan of 127-138 cm and a weight of 1.3-1.9 kg, and come in a range of crested, crestless, dimorphic (having a pale and a dark morph), and monomorphic (having only one morph) forms, depending on the subspecies. *N. c. cirrhatus*, the nominate species, has a long crest up to 10-14 cm long and one morph form. *N. c. andamanensis* is smaller, also monomorphic, and has a short crest around 5 cm long. *N. c. ceylanensis* is also small in size, has a single morph form, but its crest is around 10 cm long. *N. c. limnaeetus* is dimorphic with a very short crest 1-3 cm long. *N. c. vanheurni* is the smallest of all the subspecies, has no crest, and is

monomorphic. In general, dark morph Changeable Hawk Eagles have brown wings tipped with black with 4-5 darker bars. The breast and underside are streaked with brown, and the undertail and thighs are thinly barred with white. The floppy crest is long, consisting of around 4 feathers. The chin and throat are white, and the eyes are yellow. The legs are long and feathered, and the long tail has thin bars. Pale morphs - existing only when the bird is dimorphic, such as subspecies *N. c. limnaeetus* - are dark brown from above with pale wing coverts. The head and neck are rufous with some black streaking, and the underside from the chest to the belly and flanks is white to buff with black and dark brown streaks. Changeable Hawk Eagle calls are shrill, repetitive screams. Predictably, they are more vocal during the breeding season. These powerful and impressive birds of prey live in deciduous, semi-evergreen, and logged forest, along with savannah woodland, tea plantations, cultivated regions, and even along the edges of suburban areas, from 0-1,500 meters above sea level, but are known to occupy habitat as high as 2,200 m. Pairs remain in the same territory all year, although they do not hunt together. Changeable Hawk Eagles are found throughout southern and southeast Asia, in India, Sri Lanka, the Andaman Islands, Philippines, Borneo, and the Indonesian islands Sumatra, Java, and the Greater Sundas.



Fierce, powerful raptors, the Changeable Hawk Eagle is the terror of Asian skies - large individuals have been known to attack and kill adult peahens *Pavo cristatus*. Here a Sri Lankan individual *Nisaetus cirrhatus ceylanensis* is tearing to pieces and swallowing a large Bengal monitor it has just killed.

Changeable Hawk Eagles take a range of prey, including birds up the size of peacocks, small mammals, snakes, monitors and lizards. They perch in an exposed location to hunt, usually high up; occasionally they choose someplace lower, such the crown of a tree. They then swoop down to catch their prey on the ground, although birds are sometimes caught in trees.

Breeding displays consist of soaring and calling, although they do not have the elaborate sky dances of some other raptors. The breeding season is from November-May in southern India and January-February in the Himalayan foothills. The nest - a rather large and untidy affair - is 95 cm - 1.05 m across, and 35 cm - 1.2 m deep. It is made of sticks and lined with leaves, and often placed in the fork of a tree. One white, rufous-spotted egg is laid and incubated for 35 - 44 days. Fledging takes 65 - 70 days.

Crested Hawk Eagles are the most widespread and common Asian hawk eagle, but the individual subspecies have much smaller ranges and are under threat from shooting and habitat loss. Subspecies *N. c. andamanensis* may have a range of less than 6,475 km², and *N. c. vanheurni* only 1,600 km². *N. c. ceylanensis* inhabits 65,000 km², however, and *N. c. cirrhatus* and *N. c. limnaeetus* even larger areas. The entire species has been evaluated as Least Concern by BirdLife International. ●



Nisaetus cirrhatus



Brown above, white below with barring on the undersides of the flight feathers and tail; black longitudinal streaks on the throat and chocolate streaks on the breast. Some subspecies have a crest of four feathers, but this is absent in others. The sexes are similar in plumage, but males are smaller than females. The underparts and head of juveniles (left) are whitish or buff with few dark streaks.

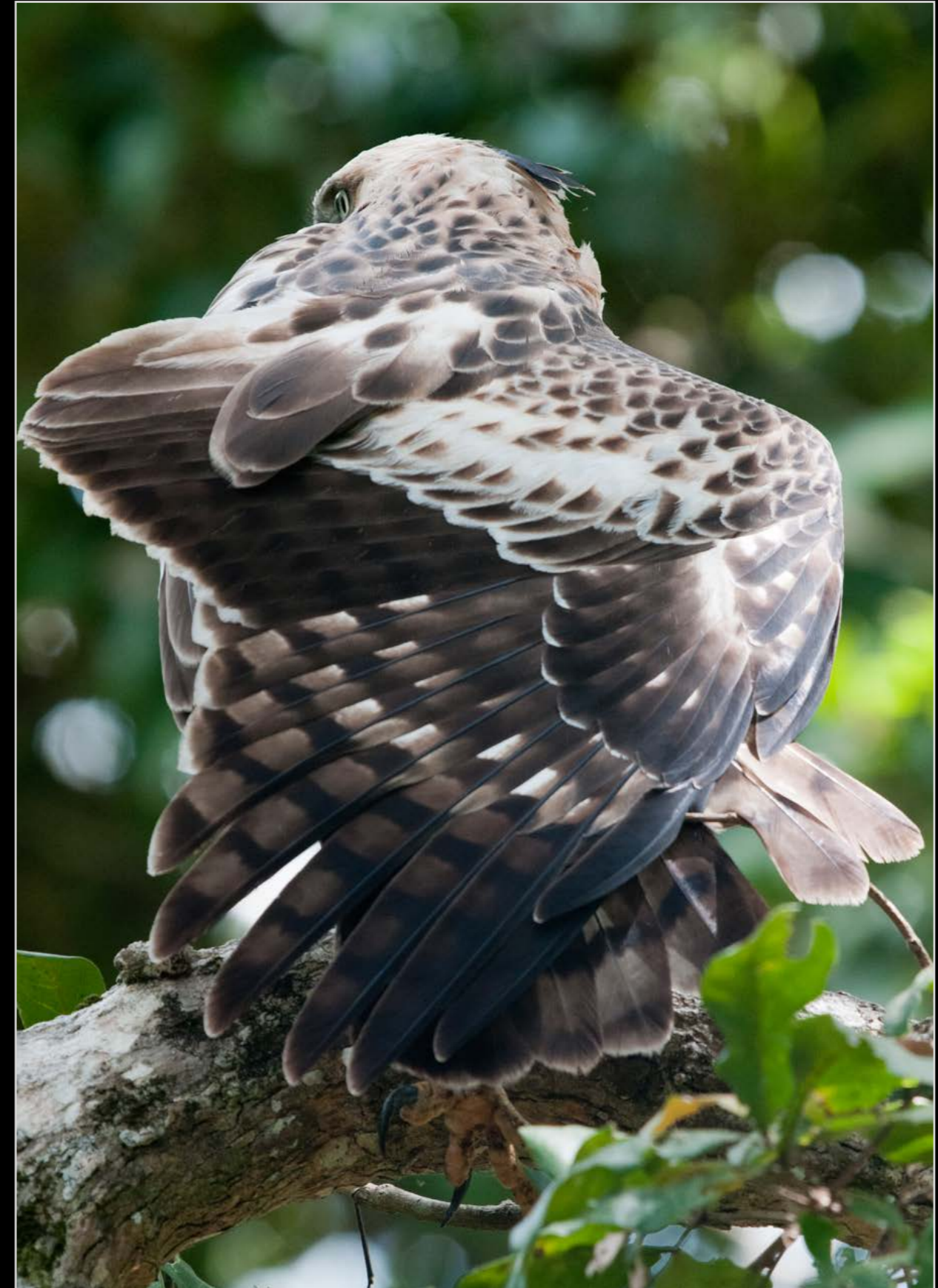


Nisaetus cirrhatus

Changeable Hawk Eagles eat mammals, birds, and reptiles. They keep a sharp lookout perched bolt upright on a bough amongst the canopy foliage of some high tree standing near a forest clearing. There, they wait for junglefowl, pheasants, hares, and other small animals coming out into the open. The bird then swoops down forcefully, strikes, and bears the prey away in its talons.



Nisaetus cirrhatus



Changeable Hawk Eagles breed in the Indian subcontinent, mainly in India and Sri Lanka, and from the southeast rim of the Himalaya across Southeast Asia to Indonesia and the Philippines. This is a bird occurring singly (outside mating season) in open woodland, although island forms prefer a higher tree density. It builds a rather untidy, large stick nest in a tree and lays a single egg.



The Changeable Hawk Eagle *Nisaetus cirrhatus* is a medium-large raptor at about 60–72 centimetres (24–28 in) in length with a 127–138 centimetres (50–54 in) wingspan, and a weight ranging from 1.2 to 1.9 kg (2.6 to 4.2 lb). It is a relatively slender eagle of open woodland with some subspecies (especially *N. c. limnaetus*) being dimorphic, giving the name "changeable".



Changeable Hawk Eagles are ferocious predators (the one on the left has killed and partially consumed a juvenile Ibis, the one above has caught and is eating another unidentified large bird), but when perched they are very often mobbed - as can be seen in both images - by several much smaller and quite fearless birds, notably Fantails *Rhipidura* sp.

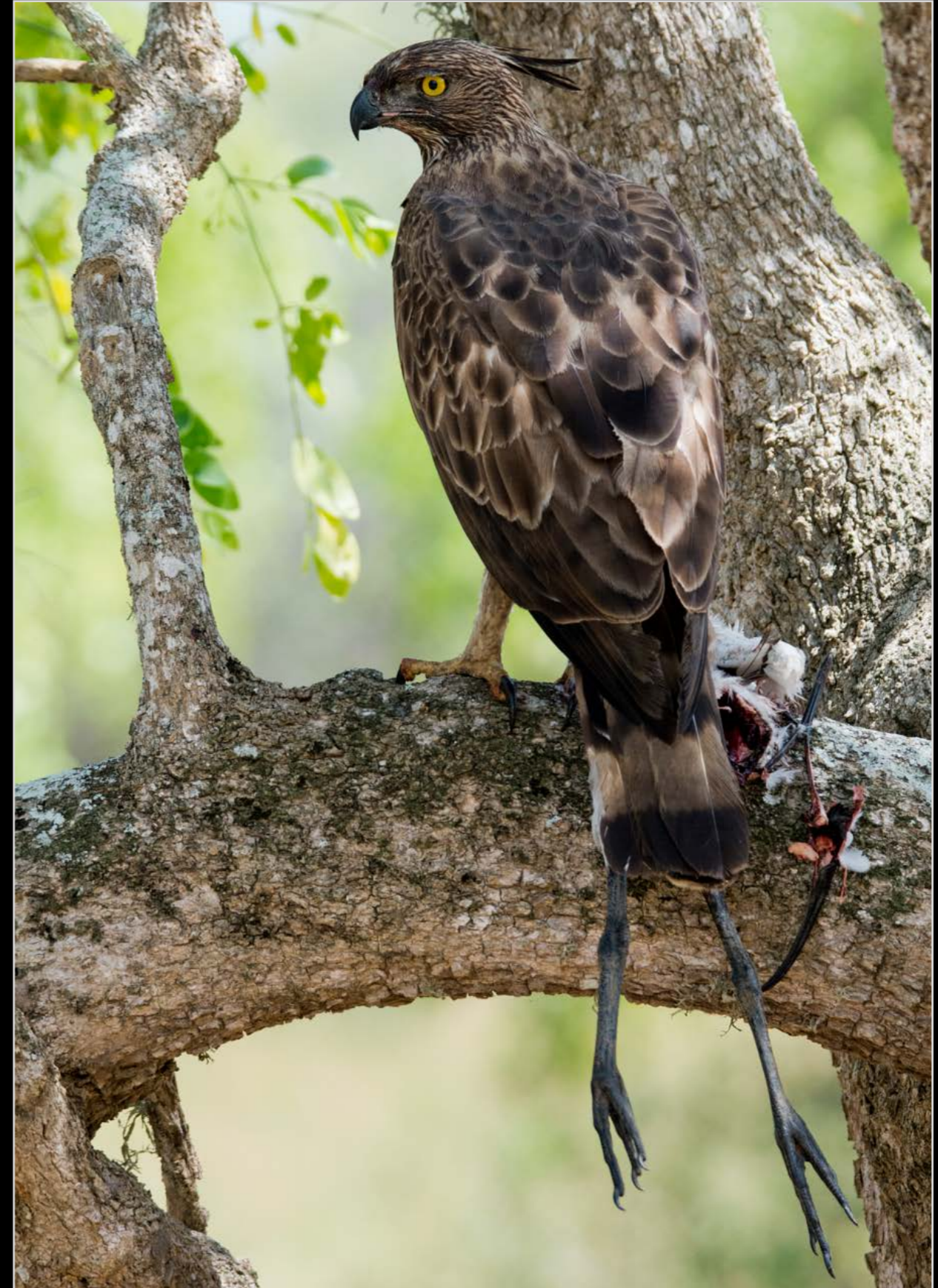


The unmistakable crest, bright yellow eyes and huge hooked beak are easily recognized diagnostic features of the species.



Nisaetus cirrhatus

Like several other large raptors, the Changeable or Crested Hawk Eagle has a distinct “personality” thanks to its piercing yellow eyes, its showy crest and its habit of standing upright on branches. The best place to photograph them - often at relatively close range - is probably Sri Lanka, where the strongly marked subspecies *ceylanensis* can be often admired in several National Parks.



The global population size has not been quantified, but the species is suspected to be declining locally owing to habitat destruction and increased human disturbance. The Crested Hawk Eagle is the most widespread and common Asiatic Hawk Eagle species, but some of the individual subspecies have small ranges and are probably under considerable threat from habitat loss.



Nisaetus cirrhatus

Crested Hawk Eagles are found throughout southern and southeast Asia, in India, Sri Lanka, the Andaman Islands, Philippines, Borneo, and the Indonesian islands Sumatra, Java, and the Greater Sundas. Pairs remain in the same territory all year, although they do not hunt together. They are irruptive or local migrants, and juveniles disperse from their parents' breeding areas.



The wings of this imposing bird of prey are long and parallel-sided, and are held flat in flight, which helps to distinguish this species from the similar Mountain Hawk Eagle. In overhead flight, comparatively rounded wings (upturned at tip), longish tail, white body (spotted with brown) and grey underside of wings (streaked and spotted) are leading pointers for identification. Once perched, however, the species is unmistakable.