



THE MARTIAL EAGLE
**TERROR OF THE
AFRICAN BUSH**

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH A NEAR-LEGENDARY
AND SEVERELY THREATENED PREDATOR

The martial eagle is a very large eagle. In total length, it can range from 78 to 96 cm (31 to 38 in), with a wingspan from 188 to 260 cm (6 ft 2 in to 8 ft 6 in).



■ The martial eagle is one of the world's most powerful avian predators. Prey may vary considerably in size but for the most part, prey weighing less than 0.5 kg (1.1 lb) are ignored, with the average size of prey being between 1 and 5 kg (2.2 and 11.0 lb).

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

During a lifetime of explorations we have met and photographed the huge, intimidating martial eagle *Polemaetus bellicosus* quite a few times - despite being currently severely threatened and not really common anywhere, it still is relatively easy observing one in the African plains. This bird is a large eagle native to sub-Saharan Africa and the only member of its genus - as a species of the booted eagle subfamily *Aquillinae*, it has feathering over its tarsus. One of the largest and most powerful species of booted eagle, it is a fairly opportunistic predator that varies its prey selection between medium-sized

mammals, large birds and reptiles. An inhabitant of wooded belts of otherwise open savanna, this species has sadly shown a precipitous decline in the last few centuries due to a variety of factors as it is one of the most persecuted bird species in the world. Due to its habit of taking livestock and regionally valuable game, local farmers and game wardens frequently seek to eliminate martial eagles, although the effect of eagles on this prey is almost certainly considerably exaggerated. Currently, the martial eagle is classified with the status of Vulnerable to extinction by the IUCN, so watching one up close as we did on this

occasion - while it was gorging itself on a fresh duck or goose kill by a waterhole in Etosha NP, Namibia - was rather special. Luckily most martial eagles don't seem too shy when feasting (if properly approached, of course - we had already photographed another eating a mongoose in Kruger NP), and this big adult obliged us with a variety of beautiful poses, staying put even when a light but bothersome drizzle started. Nothing particularly rare or unusual, as we already said - simply a collection of interesting images of this imposing and endangered species, which we are glad to share with our readers. ●

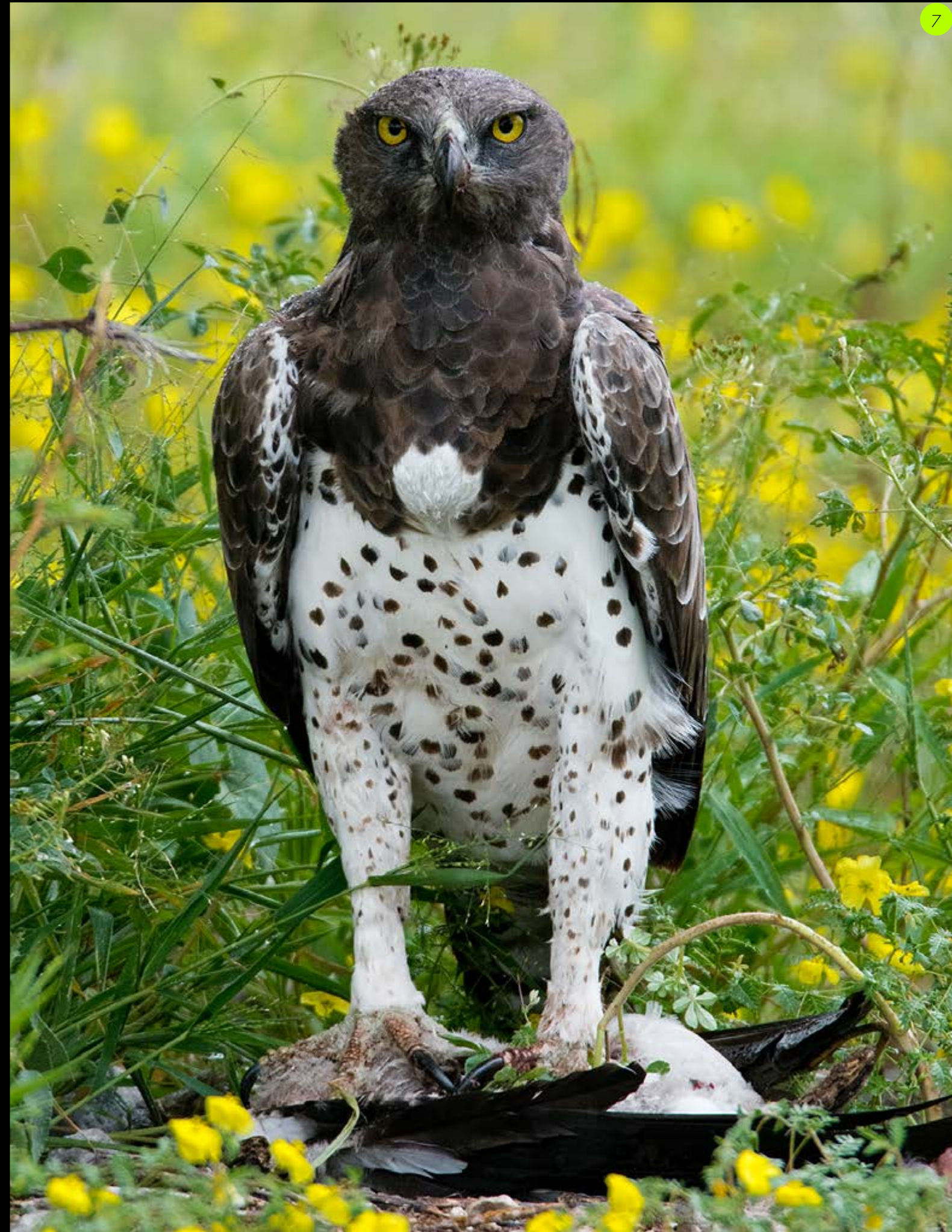


The martial eagle is probably naturally scarce in the wild due to its requirement for large territories and low reproductive rates.





This species has ■ been experiencing a major decline in numbers in recent years, due largely to being directly killed by humans. Its conservation status was uplisted to Near Threatened in 2009 and to Vulnerable in 2013, with another uplisting already expected.





■ The martial eagle continues to be strongly disliked by farmers and shot at on sight. The preservation of this species depends on education of farmers and other local people, and the increase of protected areas where the species can nest and hunt without excessive disturbance.



The morphology of the martial eagle - large wing surface areas, pronounced sexual dimorphism and relatively long toes - shows that the species is at least partially specialized to hunting avian prey. More than 50 bird species have been identified as the prey of martial eagles.





The martial eagle ■ tends to hunt in a long, shallow stoop. The speed of descent is controlled by the angle at which the wings are held above the back. At the point of impact, it shoots its long legs forward, often killing victims on impact.