

A rare case of golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) destruction for use in traditional medicine, Wakhan, Afghanistan

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On August 14, 2006 I discovered the carcass of an immature golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) in the poplar plantation of Mr Wali Jon in Goskun, Wakhan, Afghanistan. Although the carcass was dry and old, the plumage was intact and it was easy to identify the species (Plate 1). The bird was probably 3–4 years old. I noticed that all the claws had been removed (Plate 2).

The day after, I had the opportunity to thoroughly question the older son of Mr Wali Jon on the subject, with the help of Mr Ali Madad Rajabi and Mr Hafizullah Ziauddin, two graduated students from the college of veterinary science in Kabul seasonally employed by the WCS Wildlife Ecosystem Health Project. After a long discussion, it appeared that Mr Wali Jon's son, who is around 18 years old, had shot the bird himself earlier this year in spring with a 22' rifle. The eagle had apparently been present in the area for a couple of days, preying on chukar partridges (*Alectoris chukar*) in the cliffs near their house.



Plate 1 — Carcass of an immature golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), Wakhan, August 14, 2006



Plate 2 —Left foot of the golden eagle carcass showing missing claws

We initially thought it could have been a retaliatory killing, the eagle perhaps competing with local hunters for partridges, but Mr Wali Jon's son firmly denied this hypothesis. Nevertheless, it was difficult to obtain a clear and acceptable reason for the killing of the eagle. He first pretended that he had shot the bird for fun only. As for the missing claws, he said that the carcass was old and that the claws had fallen off the carcass, a hypothesis highly dubious as I told him in view of the overall good preservation of the carcass. Eventually, after twenty minutes of contradictory responses, he admitted that he had killed the bird to collect its gallbladder and claws.

After collection, the gallbladder was dried, reduced to powder and consumed with a beverage. In local traditional medicine, gallbladder of the golden eagle is supposed to be a remedy against stomach and heart illnesses. According to Mr Wali Jon's son, the golden eagle is among the 'purest' raptor species, as it only consumes live animals and not carrions, unlike many other raptor species, and for this reason the quality of its gallbladder is outstanding. His answer testified that he had some knowledge about the feeding habits of the species, giving some credit to his explanations. To our knowledge, destruction of a golden eagle for traditional medicine has not previously been reported in Wakhan.



Plate 2 — Claws of golden eagle tied in pairs with a colorful piece of fabric are used in Wakhan as home amulets (scale bar=1 cm)

The claws were removed to be used as amulets. Unlike the use of golden eagle gallbladder for traditional medicine, the use of eagle claws as amulets against ‘bad eye’ has already been observed in the Wakhi community. According to Mr. Inayat Ali (15 August 2006, pers. comm.), Wakhis in the Shimshal area of Pakistan used eagle claws against ‘bad eye’ as recently as 30 years ago, but younger generations have completely given up this practice. In the present case eagle claws were tied in pairs with a colorful piece of fabric and suspended in the house, presumably to deter ‘bad-eye’ from home (Plate 3). During a socio-economic survey of the Wakhi community of Wakhan in summer 2006, Dr. John Mock, a WCS consultant, met one man in the village of Shelk (lower Wakhan) who was wearing a single claw of eagle as a necklace amulet. However Dr. Mock remarked that the

claw was white with dark striations, and thought it had not been bleached. Because golden eagles typically have dark claws, it is possible that this claw belonged to another raptor species (Dr. Mock, 2 September 2006, pers. comm.).

Although the present reports confirm that raptor claws are currently used in Wakhan as amulets, the use of gallbladder of eagle for traditional medicine seems atypical. It is still unclear whether the son of Mr Wali Jon killed the golden eagle in order to collect its gallbladder or whether this was a post-hoc decision. Whatever his first intention was, he expressed no concern and no regret to have killed such a large bird of prey. Significant efforts are certainly required to raise awareness among local people that, apart from the flagship Marco Polo sheep, other wild species, such as the golden eagle, could also contribute to value their environment.

It is important to note that Mr Wali Jon's son had no intention to trade or sell the gallbladder and claws to someone else.