



# EAGLES

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**EAGLES** (Ar. and Pers. *ʿoqāb*; also obsolete Pers. *dāl* < Mid. Pers. *dālman*; also obsolete Pers. and Mid. Pers. *āloh*), large, diurnal, raptorial birds of the family *Accipitridae* in several genera (45-90 cm long, wingspan 110-250 cm).

*i. Species in Persia and Afghanistan.*

*ii. The eagle in Persian literature.*

## i. SPECIES IN PERSIA AND AFGHANISTAN

Ten species of eagles occur at least seasonally in Persia, nine of which also occur in Afghanistan. Eagles have strong, hooked bills and powerful talons adapted to their flesh-eating mode of life. They catch their prey with their feet and the claws of the rear toe and the central of the front three toes close together powerfully, killing their victims. The length of the toes and claws is more closely correlated with the size of the prey than with the size of the eagle itself. The fish-eating, white-tailed eagle has barbs on its toes. The “true” eagles of the genus *Aquila* feed on mammals, including small predators, and have feathered legs, which presumably protect the leg from struggling, sharp-toothed and clawed prey. The short toes and claws of the short-toed eagle provide a more effective grip on its reptilian prey, especially snakes. Some eagles, such as the golden and Bonelli’s, are used with greyhounds to hunt gazelles in the deserts of the South. But while these feeding adaptations and preferences



distinguish several species, most supplement their diets with reptiles, amphibians, birds, small mammals, and carrion.

The flight of eagles is powerful and often soaring; a few, such as the short-toed and white-tailed eagles, may hover. Some that take their prey on the ground, swoop down on it from hunting perches on cliffs or branches. Like other raptors, eagles regurgitate pellets containing undigested feathers, hair, and bone fragments; ornithologists use these to study the birds' feeding habits in a particular region.

Many, including the golden and Bonelli's eagles, nest on ledges or inaccessible cliff faces; others, including the short-toed eagle, nest in trees. The female, usually larger than the male, chooses the nesting site and does most of the building. Eagles tend to renew old nests, adding only twigs and lining; such nests may be used year after year and for many generations. Most eagles lay two to three eggs. Incubation begins with the laying of the first egg, so that the firstborn is older and larger than its siblings; often the older chick kills the younger ones, although abundance of prey and adequate provisioning by the male may enable nesting pairs to raise two or three offspring in good years.

Eagles, like other birds of prey, have been hunted for sport and trophies and because they endanger newborn livestock—particularly sheep and poultry—and because they are believed to compete with human hunters for game. In fact, many species take large numbers of rodents and hares and thus reduce populations of agricultural pests. In many areas of the world, eagle populations have declined along with other predatory and insect-eating birds because of secondary poisoning by pesticides, particularly the fat-soluble organochlorines, which become increasingly concentrated at higher levels of food chains and reach doses that interfere with the reproduction of top predators, like eagles and other raptors. As most eagles are migratory, even those which nest far from agricultural areas become vulnerable to these poisons in the course of their travels.

The following species are known to occur in Persia and Afghanistan: Pallas's fish eagle, *Haliaeetus leucoryphus* (*oqāb-e daryā'ī-e pālās*), ranges throughout Asia, is vagrant in Persia, eastern Arabia, and Oman, and is probably a winter visitor in western Afghanistan. It breeds from the Caspian to central China and Mongolia. Its habitat is inland lakes and rivers, though it occasionally winters in coastal regions (Scott et al., p. 78; Paz, p. 54; Hollom et al., p. 49; [Plate L](#)).



The white-tailed eagle, *Halişetus albicilla* (*oqāb-e daryāʔ-e dom-safīd*) ranges throughout the trans-Palearctic, from Greenland through Europe into Asia. Adults reside and breed on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea and winter in northern and western Persia, the Persian Gulf coast, and the Sistān basin. The young often disperse in winter, occasionally reaching Egypt, Israel, Iraq, and southern Persia. The bird is presumably a passage migrant and winter visitor in Afghanistan. Its habitat is wetlands, rivers, lakes, and coasts. It nests in trees or on cliffs (Scott et al., p. 79; Paz, p. 54; Hollom et al., p. 49).

The short-toed eagle, *Circaetus gallicus* (*ʔoqāb-e mārkor*), ranges throughout southern and eastern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, India, and Central Asia; it resides in Persia along the Persian Gulf; it breeds as a summer visitor throughout Persia, and is a passage migrant in Afghanistan. As a summer visitor, it also breeds in Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Libya, and perhaps Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. Few winter in Arabia. Its habitat is arid stony foothills, semidesert, and open or lightly wooded plains. It nests in trees (Scott et al., p. 95; Paz, p. 58; Hollom et al., p. 53; [Plate LI](#)).

The lesser spotted eagle, *Aquila pomarina* (*ʔoqāb-e jangalī*), is a breeding summer visitor in northwestern Persia and on the Caspian coast as well as in eastern Germany, Russia, the Balkans, and Turkey. It breeds in moist wooded plains and dry mountain woods. It winters in East Africa from southern Sudan to Zimbabwe, and occasionally in the eastern Mediterranean, and nests in trees (Scott et al., p. 91; Paz, p. 65; Hollom et al., p. 58).

The spotted eagle, *Aquila clanga* (*ʔoqāb-e tālābī*), is a resident of the south coast of the Caspian Sea, a winter visitor throughout Persia, and a passage migrant or winter visitor in Afghanistan. It breeds from eastern Europe to Manchuria. Its western Palearctic population winters in northern Italy, the Balkans, Turkey, Iraq, Persia, Israel, and the Nile delta. Its habitat is usually near water, especially in marshes with some trees (Scott et al., p. 90; Paz, pp. 65-66; Hollom et al., p. 64; [Plate LII](#)).

The steppe eagle or tawny eagle, *Aquila rapax orientalis* (*ʔoqāb-e daštī*), mainly resides in breeding areas; the subspecies *A. r. orientalis* breeds east of the Black Sea through the high steppes of Central Asia to Mongolia; most winter in tropical Africa. It is resident in southern Baluchistan, a winter visitor in southwestern Persia, and a passage migrant or winter visitor in Afghanistan. Its habitat is dry regions in mountains or plains and rubbish dumps in desert towns. It nests on mounds, ruins, or small trees (Scott et al., pp. 89-90; Paz, p.



66; Hollom et al., p. 64).

The imperial eagle, *Aquila heliaca heliaca* ('oqāb-e šāhī), breeds from the Balkans to Central Asia; is a resident in the eastern Alborz Mountains and western Kopet Dag; is a partial migrant; winters in Afghanistan, Turkey, Persia, Iraq, Egypt, Israel, Oman, Yemen, and central and eastern Saudi Arabia; and is a vagrant in Syria, Libya, and Morocco. Its habitat is parklike plains, steppes, and marshes; it builds substantial nests in large trees (Scott et al., pp. 91-92; Paz, pp. 66-67; Hollom et al., p. 65).

The golden eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos* ('oqāb-e telā'ī), ranges across the Holarctic. Found in Europe, Asia, and North America, its range in the Palearctic region extends from the Sahara and the shores of the Mediterranean to the tundra of northeastern Asia. *A. c. homeyeri* is distributed from Spain and North Africa east through Turkey and Persia; is a resident in mountainous and upland areas of western and northern Persia; and also breeds in highland Turkey, isolated areas of North Africa, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Israel, and possibly Afghanistan. Its habitat is barren mountainsides, and locally it can also be found in upland and lowland forests, and on plains and semideserts with trees. It nests on rocky ledges, sometimes in trees (Scott et al., p. 92; Paz, pp. 64-65; Hollom et al., p. 65).

The booted eagle, *Hieraaetus pennatus* ('oqāb-e parpā), breeds as a summer visitor in North Africa, Spain, southern Europe, Turkey, Iraq, northern Persia, southern Russia, and Mongolia, and probably in Nūrestān, Afghanistan. It winters in sub-Saharan Africa and India; a few winter in Yemen, and occasionally eastern Arabia, the eastern Mediterranean, and North Africa. Its habitat is deciduous and pine forests with clearings; it is seldom found far from trees. It usually nests in trees but also on cliffs; it breeds in broadleaf forests and in mixed woodland on the slopes of mountains (Scott et al., pp. 84, 89; Paz, p. 68; Hollom et al., p. 66; [Plate LIII](#)).

Bonelli's eagle, *Hieraaetus fasciatus fasciatus* ('oqāb-e do-barādarān), is a resident in North Africa, the Mediterranean basin, India, and southern China, but shows some dispersal. It is also a resident throughout Persia, except the northwest and the Caspian coast, and is a vagrant several places in eastern and northwestern Arabia. It breeds in scattered mountainous regions of Turkey, Persia, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Arabia, and North Africa; it is recorded from Afghanistan (Paludan, 1959, p. 19). Its habitat is rocky, mountainous country, but seldom at great altitudes; it descends to the plains and



semideserts in winter and nests on precipitous rock-faces, occasionally in trees (Scott et al., p. 89; Paz, pp. 67-68; Hollom et al., p. 66; [Plate LIV](#)).

See also [BIRDS IN IRAN](#), [BĀZDĀRĪ](#).

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(STEVEN C. ANDERSON)

## ii. THE EAGLE IN PERSIAN LITERATURE

The eagle (*ʿoqāb*) is used frequently by poets as an image of soaring flight, speed, power, nobility, and independence. Šahīd of Balk compares a horse (?) with an eagle because of its abilities to traverse mountains and heights (Lazard, I:65, II:30). Masʿūd-e Saʿd-e Salmān (*Dīvān*, p. 30) describes the pace of a horse as making an eagle seem slow. Moʿezzī (*Dīvān*, p. 58) says his horse descends slopes as swiftly as an eagle. Another horse is as rebellious and independent (*sarkeš*) as an eagle (*ibid.*, p. 55). The eagle is the king of birds (*ibid.*, p. 69), and like a ruler it is at the apex of a hierarchy of power: *Nehīb-e kaḷq ze mīrān nehīb-e mīrān zū / balā-ye kabkān bāz o balā-ye bāz ʿoqāb* (Qaṭrān, *Dīvān*, p. 37). The eagle's (and the ruler's) power is emphasized by contrast with the weakness of its prey: *Šavad be amn-e to āhū bara nadīm-e hožabr / šavad be farr-e to tīhū-bača qarīn-e ʿoqāb* (Moʿezzī, p. 61). These qualities of the eagle are summed up in P. N. Kānlarī's poem "Oqāb" (*Māh dar mordāb*, pp. 107-16). An aging eagle laments his approaching death and asks a crow why crows live many years while his life must be short. The crow attributes its longevity to keeping close to the ground and to eating carrion. Tempted by the crow to try these remedies, the eagle becomes disgusted by the carrion and disappears into the sky, declaring that if he must die in the skies, he cannot abide living in squalor and eating carrion (for Kānlarī's "Oqāb," see also [CROW](#)).

With all its noble qualities, the eagle is also seen as arrogant and proud. Nāṣer-e Kōsrow's version of an old fable (*Dīvān*, p. 499) beginning *rūzī ze sar-e sang...* portrays an eagle which is shot down by an arrow fletched with an eagle's feather. The message of the poem is in the words, now a proverbial expression, *az mā'st ke bar mā'st*. (For earlier versions of this fable, see Aeschylus, II, p. 425; Aesop, p. 110). In the poem "Joğd-e jang," M.-T. Bahār (*Dīvān*, I, pp. 796-99) uses the *ʿoqāb-e āhanīn* ("iron eagle") as a powerful image of a Western bomber dropping bombs on Eastern peoples.



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