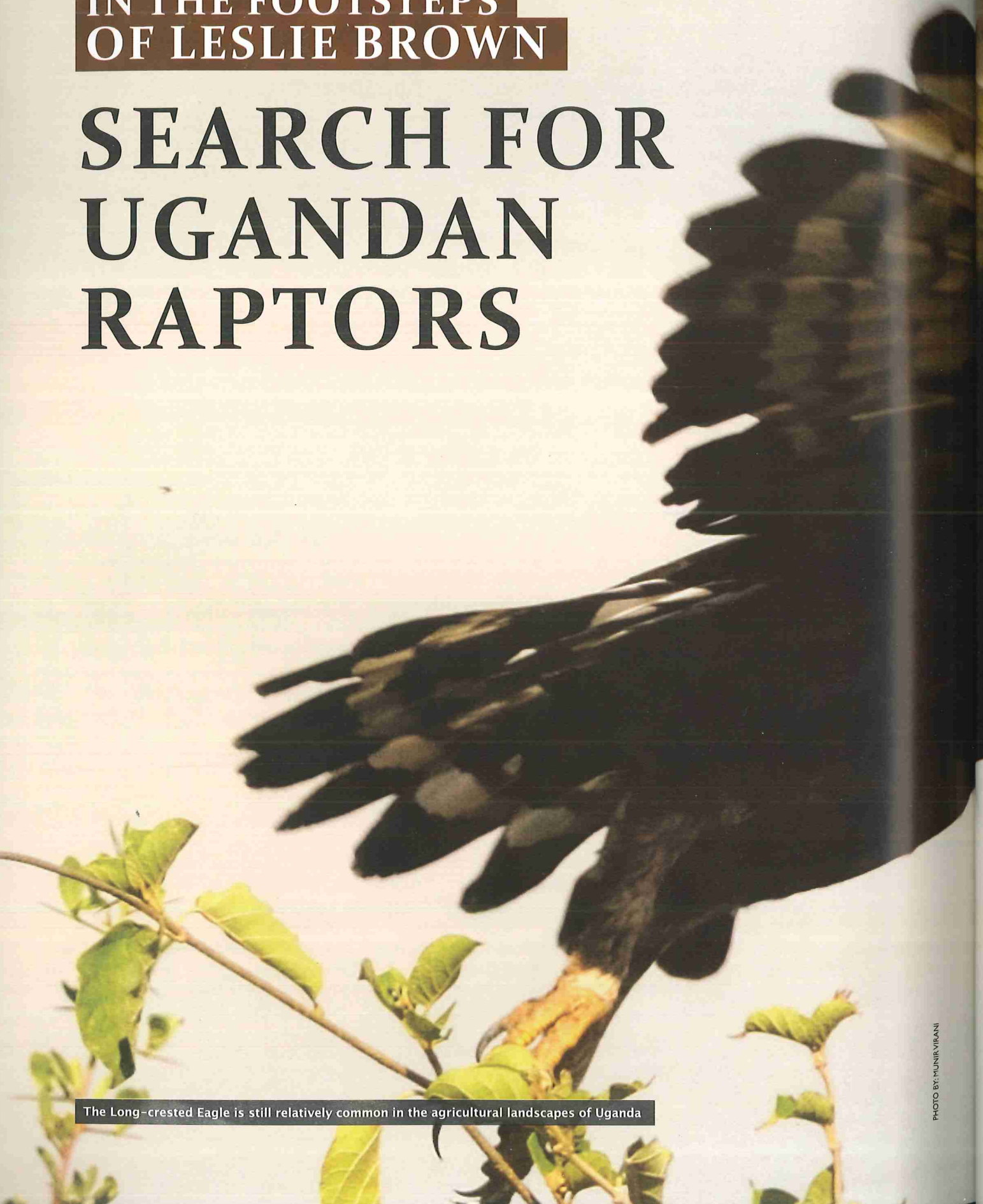


SPOTLIGHT

IN THE FOOTSTEPS
OF LESLIE BROWN

SEARCH FOR UGANDAN RAPTORS



The Long-crested Eagle is still relatively common in the agricultural landscapes of Uganda

THE AUTHOR



DEREK POMEROY has had a long interest in conservation, and in recent years has initiated a number of studies of raptors in Uganda. He is a retired professor who still does research in the Department of Biological Sciences at Makerere, tropical Africa's oldest university.

Leslie Brown, a professional agricultural officer, wandered Uganda's wild spaces to log the birds of prey he loved and cherished. He later published a landmark book about his travels.

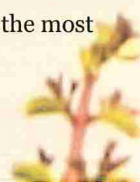
Since 2007 a group of raptor and birding enthusiasts has been following in his footsteps to see how these wonderful animals have survived in the 21st century.

Birds of prey are a very diverse group, including as nocturnal owls (of

which there are no less than 18 species recorded from Uganda) and the eagles, falcons, hawks and many others that hunt by day and are commonly known as raptors. Seventy-nine raptor species are on the Ugandan list. But whilst owls are hard to see, most of the diurnal raptors are easier, at least those that are not too rare or live in forest. As with much larger wildlife, national parks are good places for seeing raptors, and of Uganda's 10 parks, Murchison Falls and Kidepo Valley are particularly good,

each with over 50 species recorded. Within these parks, the Buligi circuit in Murchison and the Narus Valley in Kidepo are hotspots for raptors – and on the Buligi circuit you may also see a Shoebill, so added value! This richness of species reflects the variety of habitats in these parks, and that in turn results in there being a wide selection of potential prey – a measure of good health of the ecosystem.

Raptors are also quite common in farmed areas, one of the most



characteristic of them being the Long-crested Eagle, as well as in pastoral areas, which make up large parts of the drier areas in the country.

In Africa as a whole, the numbers of raptors have been declining for many years, and we were keen to know if this is also true for Uganda. We are fortunate in having some raptor counts from the 1960s made by Leslie Brown, by profession a colonial agricultural officer but by inclination a passionate fan of raptors (and flamingos, but that's another story). In early 1967, Leslie Brown (or LB as I shall now call him) took some members of the Fauna and Flora Protection Society – now Flora and Fauna International – on a tour that included Murchison Falls National Park. He took the opportunity to count all the birds of prey that he saw, between Entebbe airport and the park, and then on various game drives within the park. Two years later

BIRDS OF PREY ARE A VERY DIVERSE GROUP, INCLUDING AS NOCTURNAL OWLS (OF WHICH THERE ARE NO LESS THAN 18 SPECIES RECORDED FROM UGANDA) AND THE EAGLES, FALCONS, HAWKS AND MANY OTHERS THAT HUNT BY DAY AND ARE COMMONLY KNOWN AS RAPTORS. SEVENTY-NINE RAPTOR SPECIES ARE ON THE UGANDAN LIST.

he did a similar thing, but this time the destination was Queen Elizabeth National Park. He summarised what he saw in his book *African birds of prey*, whose second edition was published by Collins in 1972.

Since 2007, every January, a group of us, mainly from the Uganda Wildlife Authority and Nature Uganda, have followed LB's routes, so far as we know

them, making counts of birds of prey. We were helped in doing this by some support from The Peregrine Fund and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Along the way, we have had some interesting sidelines. Firstly, the records in LB's book give no details of which routes he followed in the parks, only how many miles he covered. There are not so many popular tourist routes,



Hooded Vulture taking off.

PHOTOS BY MUNIR VIRANI



A Verreux's Eagle in flight.

so we deduced the ones that were most likely, and which made up the right numbers of miles. Then we discovered that LB's original diaries were in the Edward Grey Library in Oxford, and through the kindness of the librarian, were able to get all the details we needed – except for the critical one of how he made the counts. We assume that, as a tour leader, he sat beside the driver in the front of a minibus. We don't know, but if we do assume that to be correct, then he will have had a restricted view – not overhead, in particular – and presumably his passengers would soon have lost patience if he kept stopping to check the identities of the more distant birds. Incidentally, we also found that he had made several mistakes in copying numbers from his beautifully-written field notes to the manuscript for his book.

We decided to make an experiment, with two of us on the roof rack of a Land Rover and myself (driver) and a keen observer inside. By recording

independently, we found that the outside people, with their all-round view and greater height, recorded about two-and-a-half times as many raptors as those of us inside! So if today we record 50 raptors along 100km of roads, compared to LB only getting 20, in all probability the numbers have not really changed.

What do we actually find? Using a more conservative estimate of LB, sitting inside, getting only half of those that an outside observer would have logged, we find that, for National Parks our numbers for raptors overall are about two-thirds of LB's, counted 40 years earlier. For vultures and falcons, we had half, for eagles (including the wonderful Bateleur) we were about the same as LB. Outside Protected Areas, and comparing the routes used by LB to and from Entebbe, we again had about half as many as he did.

So although raptors are still relatively plentiful in Uganda, our best guess is that they have declined, except

perhaps for eagles, and hence, as almost everywhere else, we need to be concerned.

It is easy to make a case for raptor conservation – they are magnificent birds, they are at the top of their various food chains and thus tell us about environmental health, and so on. Doing something, as everywhere, is another matter. Obviously we need to keep our national parks in good order. As well as that, do we put our faith in improved education, if that is in fact happening? Banning harmful chemicals? Law enforcement? It has to be the first, because at present banning and all other legal activities are ineffective, for all sorts of reasons. If it is true that 'united we stand', then as many conservation organisations as possible need to develop collective policies, especially on environmental education, for the benefit of us all. ●