

The African Fish Eagle - *WEEAH KYOW-KOW-KOW*

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It sounds as though the euromillions ticket has landed – if only.....!!

But this yowl is followed by a ringing laugh earning it the subspecies name *vocifer*, in this case *Haliaeetus vocifer*: the

African Fish-Eagle. This noisy cry is used both perched and in flight, always with the head thrown back, and is so far-carrying that it is clearly audible even when the bird is flying so high and distant that it is an almost invisible tiny speck. It is also voluble in duetting, when the male's high-pitched treble sounds more shrill than the female's mellower contralto, as well as in pair contact and territorial defence.

So, from a tiny island in the last edition of 'Flight' to the vast expanse of a continent: from a threatened species to a threatening one – at least to its piscine prey. The African landmass contains four countries, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe which have chosen this very distinctive bird as their national symbol.

Through the ages many cultures have used the eagle as a symbol as, unsurprisingly, it is seen as the king among birds and the eagles, in turn, are associated with gods and royalty.

The Sumerian king, Etana, wanting a son, was sent an eagle by the sun god, Shamash. The eagle carried Etana to heaven where the goddess Ishtar granted his wish, so founding the first Sumerian dynasty.

In Native American mythology the Eagle takes pride of place as the symbol of the Sun and Sky god and, concomitantly, as the Thunderbird with the wings causing thunder and the eyes flashing lightning. In the old world, the top of the Norse World Tree was home to the eagle who understood the workings of the universe.

Classical mythology would be somewhat sparse without the eagle!! The eagle was the bird of Zeus (head honcho on Olympus) so it was the only bird allowed to live there. Handy really, as the poor bird had to fetch and carry the thunderbolts hurled by Zeus at his enemies. Further, it had to multitask. One foray was to abduct Ganymede, the beautiful son of the King of Troy, back to Olympus to be Zeus' cupbearer (Was he under 18 at the time? If he was, Zeus should have known better!!). Then this winged servant had to play the enforcer for Zeus when Prometheus stole fire from heaven. For this presumption, Zeus had him chained to a rock and condemned him to the everlasting torment of having his heart pecked out daily by the eagle – what were the overtime rates on that one???

Not to be outdone, the Romans were also strong on eagles. It was sacred to Jupiter with the usual thunder and lightning connotations and, at the funeral pyre of the god-king Augustus, it was said that an eagle had risen from the flames and taken his soul to heaven. Those Romans were never ones to miss out on a good stroke of PR, so ever afterwards when a Roman emperor died, a live eagle was released into the sky to bear his soul on high.

However, with human cynicism, it took but a small step to subvert the power of the eagle, initially heavenly, to become earthly and political. Pliny records that, in 104 BC during the second consulship of Marius, the latter selected it as the figurehead for the standard for all Rome's legions to be borne aloft on its long pole into every battle. The *aquifer* became known as the 'standard bearer' although its literal Latin translation is 'eagle carrier'.

Whilst not the largest of the eagle family, the African Fish Eagle is an iconic predator in what can be an unforgiving sub-Saharan African landscape.



Left: S.G. 615, 1980

In Malawi, the Fish-eagle appears on its coat of arms with a pair of wavy blue lines separated by white bands. The bird, the lines and the bands together are symbolic of Lake Malawi which is the third largest body of fresh water in Africa and one of the deepest lakes in the world. It is really an inland 'sea' 365 miles long and 52 miles wide and, according to Malawi Tourism, there are more African Fish-eagles at Lake Malawi than anywhere else in the world. Even should another country wish to dispute this, it would be very difficult to do so as Lake Malawi is renowned for its piscine diversity with over 1000 different fish species – as a Fish-eagle, why would you want to be anywhere else?



S.G. 674-8, 1983

The African Fish-eagle has not always been Namibia's national bird. At one time the beautiful Crimson-breasted Shrike (*Laniarius atrococcineus*) held this honour. However, it is reputed that the Shrike was removed from its position on the grounds of national sensitivity because its colours resembled those of the German flag, black, red and gold: Namibia had been part of the former German Empire. Now the eagle is depicted on the coat of arms above a pair of oryx and flying with outspread wings which is said to be symbolic of the farsightedness of the country's leaders.



S.G. 814, 1998

It was introduced when the country became independent of South Africa in 1990. It also appears on the President's flag, the national seal and, very importantly, it is the emblem of Namibia's national rugby union team. In 1998 the African Fish-eagle was one of the birds on a set of stamps (SG 814) depicting the flora and fauna of the

The African Fish Eagle (2)

Caprivi area of Namibia. Designed by Mary Jane Volkmann, the Caprivi stamps won first prize in the geographical category of the 1999 Stamp World Cup competition as the most beautiful stamps in the Africa and Middle East class and third prize overall for the most beautiful stamps in the world. In its year of issue, the individual stamp of the eagle was voted Namibia's most popular stamp.



The African Fish-eagle became Zambia's national bird when the former Northern Rhodesia gained its independence in 1964 and is shown in flight on the Zambian flag and coat of arms.

Left: S.G. 229, 1975

The best location to see the bird in Zambia is the Chembe Bird Sanctuary in the Copperbelt near Kitwe: Chembe is the local Lamba name for the bird. The sanctuary is an area of wetland, grassland and woodland which surrounds a small lake.



Right: S.G. 289, 1979

Left: S.G. 368, 1982



The site was formerly used as a reservoir to service local mining activity before it became a bird sanctuary in 1973 and has had official protection status as a national park for over 35 years.



Left: S.G. 647, 1984

In Zimbabwe, the former Southern Rhodesia, the national bird is often depicted as more stylised than natural. Its origins date back to the ancient Shona city of Great Zimbabwe in which 10000 – 20000 people are believed to have lived from the 11th to the 15th

centuries. These impressive stone ruins are a World Heritage Site near Masvingo in south-eastern Zimbabwe. When the site was excavated in the late 19th century, academics believed that eight Zimbabwe Birds carved on soapstone columns symbolised royal authority. The Shona people have long been known for their bird and other stone art – a tradition continued by craftspeople in modern day Zimbabwe. The Shona regard their *Chapungu* to be a bird of good omen and a messenger of the gods.



Above: Part of the SAPOA Sheet, 1994

What's in a name? Well, FISH, actually, and naturally indicative of its staple diet. However, these birds are recorded as taking mammals (hyraxes and monkeys), reptiles (crocodile hatchlings, terrapins and monitor lizards), amphibians (they appear to be particularly partial to bullfrogs) plus small birds and large insects. They rarely eat carrion but are very piratical, harrying all sorts of birds, including other African Fish-eagles, until they drop their prey.

The most responsible for this behaviour are the females robbing males – well, a girl has got to eat, hasn't she?



Left: S.G. 962, 1997

The breeding season is both variable and extended: around the equator it is almost any month but in southern Africa it is April to October, in the coastal east June to December and in the west October to April. The nesting sites are usually as close to water as possible and are constructed of sticks and papyrus and lined with heads of papyrus, reeds and bulrushes and sometimes weaver birds' nests – without or with the contents if a quick snack is fancied.

The normal offspring level is two chicks after an incubation period of 42-45 days. These fledge after 9-10 weeks and are dependent on their parents for about two months but are not truly adult with the distinctive white, chestnut brown and black plumage until their fifth year when they weigh around six to seven pounds with a two foot six wingspan.

Whilst on the IUCN list as of 'Least Concern' with a stable population of some 300,000 mature adults, studies have calculated that around 95% of young fail to survive to adulthood which indicates that adults must live to between 18 and 24 years to maintain the population. So, if you make it through the school scuffles and teenage troubles, your habitat will provide you with fishy, gourmet goodies for many years.

