



Encyclopedia of Life

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## Raptors of Beijing Podcast and Scientist Interview

*Asio otus; Aegypius monachus*

In a Beijing green space larger than New York's Central Park, biologist Bao Weidong is scanning the trees, looking for a shy bird that's increasingly scarce: the long-eared owl. There used to be dozens of them across the city, but they're vanishing. On the other side of the city, a wildlife rescue center is working to save other raptors that have run afoul of the city's many perils. Can the raptors of Beijing stage a comeback, in the face of runaway development? Will the people of Beijing make room for raptors?

### Transcript

**Ari:** From the Encyclopedia of Life, this is One Species at a Time. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

Like most of Beijing, the streets surrounding the city's ancient Temple of Heaven are choked with traffic. It's hard to imagine that nature still has a place in Beijing. But head into the park, and the urban hum fades away. This is one of the largest remaining green spaces in all of Beijing... and one of the few places where you might still catch a glimpse of large birds like owls.

Bao Weidong stops beneath a tall pine and peers through the branches with his binoculars. Bao is a zoology professor at Beijing Forestry University. He often comes here in search of *Asio otus*, or long-eared owls – birds with two tufts of pointy feathers atop their heads.

**Bao:** Several years ago we found nine birds at this tree.

**Ari:** Nine long-eared owls in that tree?

**Bao:** Yes, but now it's empty. Yeah, it's empty.

**Ari:** Those owls are gone. And the number of owls is declining across Beijing. Back in 2004, Bao counted about 60 owls at three sites in the city. Today, he thinks there might be 25. The

biggest problem is the loss of habitat. Beijing keeps expanding into what was once farmland. And the owls can't find food.

**Bao:** If the land is used or cultivated for crops or farmland, there are some small mammals: the rodents. So the food resources disappeared, then the owls disappeared.

**Ari:** In a sterile white room across town, a large bird with an intimidating beak and feathers the color of milk chocolate is held by a couple of people wearing surgical masks. This is the Beijing Raptor Rescue Center. And the bird is a cinereous vulture, or *Aegypius monachus*...with badly injured feet.

**Loeffler:** The city is a very, very dangerous place for these birds.

**Ari:** Kati Loeffler is the veterinary advisor at the Center.

**Loeffler:** Beijing happens to lie on quite an important migration route for raptors and many other species of birds. The big buildings mostly are causes of injury: birds flying into glass, that kind of thing.

**Ari:** The Center cares for up to 350 injured raptors a year. There are owls, hawks, buzzards, falcons, merlins, eagles and vultures. Some stay for months... make a full recovery and can be released. Others have to be euthanized. Loeffler says today's patient... the big vulture... is in pretty bad shape.

**Loeffler:** Oh, baby, I know. I know, sweet pea... The lesions on his toes look very serious. He's losing all of his nails together with actually the last joint. A vulture can't survive in the wild without its claws.

**Ari:** Loeffler isn't sure what's wrong with this bird. It might be an infectious disease. Another threat raptors face in Beijing is residents who capture the birds as pets and clip their wings. But many raptor enthusiasts prefer to capture the birds in photographs. Ari: In their small apartment, Beijing residents Liu Meng Rong and Zhang Yong unzip their camera cases and show off their gear. As the city grows, the distance they've gotta go to photograph wild raptors keeps growing too.

**Liu:** <Chinese: Eee ban mon ching ta wee sa...>

**Ari:** Liu says birds of prey usually live where there aren't that many people. You won't find them in densely populated areas.

**Zhang:** <Chinese: Eee pan ne ching lee ha wo me...>

**Ari:** Zhang says they go to the outskirts of Beijing 3 or 4 days each week to observe wild animals and birds, and to become closer with nature. But recently, Liu and Zhang had to do more than just observe. They spotted a sea eagle lying on its side on a frozen lake. They captured the bird, and drove it to the Rescue Center. Liu cradled the bird in her lap during the ride.

**Liu:** <Chinese: Ta dong she ye mei yao nega...>

**Ari:** She says that you could see the call for help in its eyes. She was afraid it would struggle because it's a fierce bird. So she talked to it: "Please be quiet," she said. "We are determined to save you, to take you to the sky and let you fly again." It turned out the eagle had been poisoned. Kati Loeffler says it was probably an all-too common accident.

**Loeffler:** Farmers in these rural areas, they cast out poisoned seed for ducks to kill ducks and sell them. But then what happens is that raptors will eat the poisoned birds and themselves succumb to it.

**Ari:** The story of this particular bird has a happy ending. After two weeks, the poisoned eagle was released into the hills outside Beijing, and it flew again. It's an increasingly rare story for Beijing's raptors. Loeffler says that as the city booms, she sees no effort being made to carve out space for the birds. Back at the Temple of Heaven, the falling number of long-eared owls certainly doesn't bode well. But as he scans the park for even one feathery resident, zoologist Bao Weidong remains hopeful.

**Bao:** Probably the owls will come back again.

**Ari:** Our series, One Species at a Time, is produced by Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

## Meet the Scientist

Meet veterinarian Kati Loeffler who was featured in our Raptors of Beijing podcast:



*Kati rescuing a dog after the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008. Photo Credit: IFAW*

**Where do you work?** I work at the The International Fund for Animal Welfare.

**What do you study?**

My work is principally capacity building in veterinary medicine, animal husbandry and general care of animals to ensure the wellbeing of both animals and people. I work with domestic animals as well as with captive wildlife throughout the world.

**What are three titles you would give yourself?** Veterinarian, animal health manager, scientist.

**What do you like to do when you are not working?**

Work. Read about disappearing and suffering animals. Rant at anyone who can be asked to care.s!).

**What do you like most about science?** The need to do it.



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