



THE SECRETS BEHIND THEIR ASTONISHING SUCCESS



find out more

RAPTORS

Written and directed by **Matt Hamilton**
Executive producers: **Martin Mészáros, Sabine Holzer**
2 x 50 min., 4K, 5.1 + Stereo



Birds of prey are our planet's greatest hunters. United by a hooked beak, taste for flesh and razor-sharp talons, they have conquered the globe. This two-part series tells the story of raptor's unparalleled success: from familiar favourites to entirely new characters, we reveal the latest discoveries alongside extraordinary behaviours. We discover how birds of prey perfect the art of the hunt and how they adapt to the toughest environments. And we also ask what the future holds for these remarkable birds in a rapidly changing world.

From distant lands to our own backyards, this series is an insightful and spectacular celebration of the world's top predators.

Episode 1: Meet the Raptors

Our first episode reveals the ways in which birds of prey have come to dominate the planet, kill for a living and inspire both fear and wonder. Alongside astonishing visuals, insights and behaviours, we even introduce you to a new, rather surprising, member of the raptors.

Birds of prey are an exceptionally diverse group. There are over three hundred different species. We begin with the most powerful of all. With talons the size of a grizzly bear's claws and a grip more powerful than a Rottweiler's jaws, the African crowned eagle hunts vervet monkeys and small antelope. It can take prey weighing sixty pounds. There is even evidence it once hunted us! On the other end of the scale, we meet the black thighed falconet, a raptor no bigger than a soda can. Twisting and turning through the jungle, it picks off butterflies and other insects with ease.

What is a bird of prey? Despite immense differences in size, diet, habitat and lifestyle, they all share three common traits: a hooked beak, a taste for flesh and a set of razor-sharp talons. Their talons are as varied as the birds themselves. Want to know what a raptor eats? Just look at its talons. The short talons of owls that crush rodents; the long talons of hawks to snatch flying prey; or the curved talons of a fish-eagle, quite literally a fistful of fishhooks.

These common traits help raptors conquer almost every habitat. However, life as a top hunter is not as easy as it seems! Our film takes us through a raptor's year, revealing the challenges they face as the seasons change. A young golden eagle battles for scraps in the depths of the Finnish winter. A burrowing owl uses bison dung to help raise his family in South Dakota. Fledgling sparrowhawks sharpen their hunting skills during autumn in Norway. Over a million Amur falcons fill the skies as they pass through Nagaland, India, on one of the greatest of all avian migrations. Top predators face many difficulties, but birds of prey seem to overcome any challenge that comes their way.

What secrets lie behind this astonishing success? We explore the different superpowers that set raptors apart. Most are masters of the sky. We meet a goshawk as she twists and turns through dense woodland. In the high Arctic, a gyrfalcon reaches the fastest level flight of any bird of prey, almost seventy miles per hour, perfect for chasing down other birds over distance. Power of flight, however, needs super senses to match. In the boreal forest, great grey owls can hear voles buried beneath the snow, courtesy of an enormous facial disk. Golden eagles, equipped with the some of the sharpest vision of any vertebrate, scan the open mountains for unsuspecting targets. Curiously, turkey vultures rely on an extraordinary sense of smell to find food that can't be seen or heard...prey that's already dead.

With such varied superpowers and lifestyles, the question still remains: what exactly counts as a bird of prey? How are they connected? A new scientific definition has the answer and, what's more, it even welcomes a new raptor to the flock. The new definition describes raptors as birds that live on land, evolved from vertebrate eaters and still eat vertebrates to this day. This one definition covers all the birds most of us might recognise as raptors. However, it does add some curious new members, the seriemas. These strange birds, descendants of meat-eating terror birds, have a unique way of neutralising prey; repeatedly picking it up and throwing it to the ground until completely immobilised. Not a pleasant end.

Episode 2: Extreme Lives

Birds of prey are our planet's greatest hunters – but there is another side to their story. This film reveals the astonishing and extreme ways in which raptors adapt to the toughest places on Earth, taking on deadly prey. We visit frozen wastes, tangled jungles, baking savannahs and remote, storm-battered isles. We reveal stories of drama, tragedy and hope as the



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world's top predators battle the odds to survive. Alongside a mix of new and familiar faces, we also consider what the future holds for raptors in a rapidly changing world.

Winter is coming in the high Arctic. Temperatures can fall to -60°C and icy winds scour the frozen land. This is no place for any living creature. And yet, for a young snowy owl, it is home. We follow her on the endless journey she must take in search of unpredictable prey. Her nomadic lifestyle is the only way to survive the frozen north and is one that occasionally brings her into a strange world, our own.

Whether it's a snowy owl enduring the Arctic winter or group of honey buzzards breaking into hornet nests in the mountains of Taiwan, raptors have adapted to face almost every challenge thrown their way. Some, like the secretary bird, are highly adapted to specific habitats. Their long legs, used to strike at prey with forces five times greater than their body weight, are perfect for stalking the African savannah. However, the limited choice of nest sites for such a savannah specialist cause problems when raising chicks. Exposed to the hot sun on top of a thorny acacia tree, we reveal parents bringing water back to a chick. It is the only way to keep the chick hydrated and alive in the baking daytime heat.

Extreme physical adaptations help raptors conquer different habitats and prey, but in the very toughest places, little-known powers help. Tawny owls rely on a mental map of their territory to find their way to hunting perches in complete darkness. Striated caracara in the Falkland Islands rely on their intelligence to survive. We follow a young caracara as he joins a gang and fights for a penguin carcass, as well as discovers an unlikely source of food...elephant seal

snot. Staying resourceful, inquisitive and social is the key to success when castaway on a remote island with limited resources.

It takes unique abilities to thrive in the harshest environments. But some raptors adopt a different approach, by staying extremely flexible. None more so than the gymnogene, whose double-jointed legs reach inside nest holes and pluck out unsuspecting chicks. A flexible, generalist approach allows birds of prey to take advantage of different opportunities, like the spectacle of 20 million bats leaving Bracken Cave, Texas, or dozens of Steller's sea eagles benefitting from fishing and tourist boats in Hokkaido, Japan.

No matter how extreme the challenge, birds of prey seem to find a solution. Though what does their future hold in our rapidly changing world?

Habitat loss, climate change, persecution and pollution have left one third of all raptors at risk of extinction. But there are stories of hope. In Florida's wetlands, snail kite beaks and bodies grew as much as twelve percent in a decade after a new, giant snail replaced their usual quarry. And we follow an African crowned eagle chick growing up in the city of Durban, South Africa. While losing ground across Africa, the world's most powerful raptor has found an unlikely home in the city, thriving on the abundant supply of vervet monkeys. So much so that Durban is now home to the highest density of nesting crowned eagles anywhere on the continent.

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