

Harpy Eagle

The sharp-eyes of the local guide from your jungle lodge have pointed out a cornucopia of rainforest birds you would have never noticed on your first bird watching trip to Ecuador. Manakins displaying in the undergrowth, glittering jacamars with needle-like bills, and yelping toucans in the canopy are just a few of the amazing experiences from this memorable day. As a troop of Capuchin Monkeys make barking alarm calls, your guide freezes. He gets excited when the monkeys oddly take to the ground by literally jumping out of the trees. Staring into the canopy, he suddenly points and whispers, “*Harpia!*” High up in the canopy you make out a large bird with broad wings. Quickly lifting your trusty binoculars to your eyes, you find yourself focusing on a massive Harpy Eagle; it grasps a young Capuchin in its talons and stares back at you, its searching, predatory eyes giving you the chills.

Identification

The Harpy Eagle is fairly easy to identify due to its very large size as it dwarfs the other raptors of its rain forest home. No other bird in the Amazon rainforest shares the huge head, bill, and talons of this monstrous eagle. Adults are plumaged in dark gray above, white below, have a black chest band, and a distinctive bifurcated crest. The only similar species is the Crested Eagle; another large, rare eagle that occupies the same habitat. Young Crested Eagles look very much like young Harpy Eagles but have smaller bills and legs.

Behavior in Ecuador

The Harpy Eagle hunts for sloths, monkeys, macaws, toucans, and other large prey items in the canopy of the rain forest. The Harpy will also attack prey on the forest floor, including animals as large as Brouck Deer! Like a cat, the Harpy Eagle stalks its prey and prefers to attack by surprise. This is why it rarely if ever soars, preferring to remain hidden in the forest canopy. Such a large bird requires a very large territory and has a very low reproductive rate of around one chick every three years.

Habitat and distribution in Ecuador

In Ecuador, the Harpy Eagle is restricted to remote areas of the Amazon Rainforest. Healthy populations occur near some of the jungle lodges although these birds are very difficult to see away from their nests. When a nest is located, the Harpy Eagle is easy to watch as adults can often be seen bringing prey to their young.