

# Survivor: Philippine Eagle Sinabadan

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The IUCN “critically endangered” Philippine eagle (*Pithecophaga jefferyi*) is endemic to the Philippines where it is the national bird. No more than 400 adult pairs are estimated for my country’s top forest predator, which is restricted to only four major islands of the archipelago, namely Luzon, Leyte, Samar and Mindanao. Of these four islands, more than half of the extant population is believed to be on Mindanao, Southern Philippines.

Historical deforestation destroyed more than 80% of the original Philippine forest cover. Being highly forest dependent, massive habitat decimation resulted in outright losses in numbers. Population decline was made even more abrupt by shooting, hunting, and trapping as a result of more human and eagle encounters than when the forests were still vast and intact. Being slow reproducing (only a single young reared every two years) and late-maturing (young reach sexual maturity at 5–6 years) makes the species even more susceptible to extinction.

Representative of this species’ current troubles is the story of one immature Philippine eagle living in Mindanao on Mount Apo, the country’s tallest mountain.

Meet Philippine eagle “Sinabadan,” namesake of the Indigenous Bagobo Tagabawa people’s organization who works with the Philippine Eagle Foundation (PEF) to conserve eagles and their forest habitat at Mt. Apo. Sinabadan is over two years old now, but the eaglet lost her father when she was only 7 months old. For another year, her parents would have taken turns feeding her until she became fully independent.

Unfortunately, a gunshot took the life of the male eagle parent. Field biologists from the PEF, a conservation organization dedicated to saving the eagle from extinction, trapped the male eagle in 2014 and tagged it with an LC4 GPS satellite transmitter. But in August of the same year, satellite fixes showed that all of his latest GPS locations clustered in just one place. Ten days later, the same



Photo by Ron Taraya and PEF

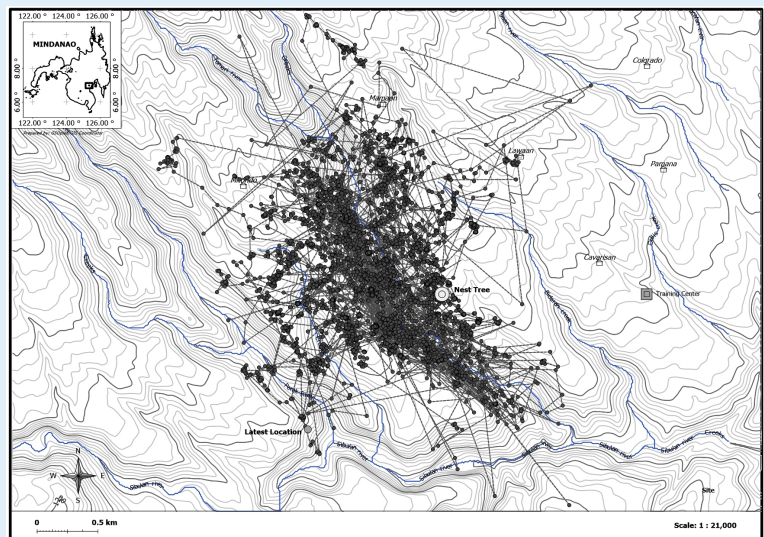
The 7-month old eaglet with GPS transmitter left fatherless by the death of the adult eagle at Mt. Apo.

clustering was observed. When the field crew investigated, they found the bird already dead and decomposing. A necropsy later showed that its keel bone had a crack, presumably from a gunshot.

We were worried Sinabadan would not survive. We had two choices — take her from the wild and to the Philippine Eagle Center where she would join the rest of our captive birds, or attempt food provisioning to augment whatever prey her mother provides. We chose the latter. But interestingly, neither the young nor the female eagle took the supplemental food (rabbit) we had tethered. Remarkably, the female eagle seemed to have doubled her hunting effort. The adult female eagle was also instrumented with an LC4 GPS unit and so we were able to track her too.

Sinabadan survived the post-fledging period, but not without the challenges of living in a remnant forest inhabited by people.

Our field crew re-captured her in December 2015 to replace her transmitter with a 70g solar-powered GPS/GSM unit. The trapping attempt was providential as the bird also had a nylon rope, about a meter long, dangling from one finger of her right foot. It appeared the young eagle was caught in a



Philippine eagle Sinabadan's movements from September 2014 to March 2016.

native noose trap intended for birds and small mammals. The finger that caught the thin rope was slightly swollen, apparently from the limited blood flow to the digit. Previously, we had one case concerning a satellite-tagged eagle that died from getting strangled in a noose trap intended for wild pigs and deer.

Sinabadan was also observed snatching domestic piglets from her human neighbors along forest edges. This happened on few occasions when wild prey was apparently scarce. But because we have provided rural livelihood assistance to the community, local families do not mind the bird taking pets and livestock as food once in a while. Part of the campaign by the Indigenous Bagobo Tagabawa forest guards, who watch over the eagles, is to remind households to keep their domestic animals safe. The forest guards also demonstrate how the locals can safely drive the eagle away whenever she comes close to livestock and pets.

We have effectively combined active patrolling by our indigenous forest guards and remote tracking through the bird’s GPS/GSM unit in monitoring the health and survival of eagle Sinabadan. As of the last monitoring, she has moved within 1000 hectares of forest, with the furthest point she has reached being 4 km away from the nest. Thanks to remote surveillance offered by modern tracking technology, we are making a difference in the life of this single, but equally precious, Philippine eagle at Mt Apo.



Photo courtesy of PEF

Jayson with eagle.