

Raptors

Module 10 · Online Birding Enthusiast Course · curriculum by Joe Grosel (1966–2021)

Raptors are where birding becomes art. 83 species in southern Africa. The apex predators of the sky — and the most endangered group on the continent. This is the final module of your foundation.

10.1 What is a raptor

Diurnal birds of prey. Hooked beak, sharp talons, binocular vision. Hunt vertebrate prey or scavenge. Includes eagles, hawks, buzzards, kites, harriers, falcons, vultures, secretarybird. Owls are nocturnal raptors (separate order).

10.2 Eagles

8+ species in SA. Verreaux's (cliffs, hyrax specialist), Martial (open bushveld, largest in Africa), African Crowned (forest), Wahlberg's, Tawny, African Hawk-Eagle, Brown Snake-Eagle, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, Bateleur.

10.3 Buzzards

Steppe Buzzard (migrant, Oct-Mar), Jackal Buzzard (resident, rocky), Augur Buzzard (eastern escarpment), Forest Buzzard (montane forest).

10.4 Kites

Yellow-billed Kite (migrant, common), Black-winged Kite (resident, hover-hunts), Black-shouldered. Easy mid-level ID.

10.5 Harriers

Slim, long-tailed, low quartering flight over grassland. African Marsh-Harrier, Black Harrier (endemic), Pallid Harrier (migrant), Montagu's Harrier (migrant).

10.6 Goshawks & sparrowhawks

Short broad wings, long tail, ambush hunters in cover. African Goshawk, Little Sparrowhawk, Black Sparrowhawk, Ovambo, Gabar Goshawk.

10.7 Falcons

Pointed wings, notched beak that kills with bite. Lanner (resident, fast), Peregrine (cosmopolitan), Amur (migrant), Red-necked, Rock Kestrel.

10.8 Vultures

SIX species. White-backed (commonest), Cape (cliffs), Lappet-faced (largest), Hooded (smallest), White-headed (critically endangered), Palm-nut (riverine). Bearded Vulture is mountain-only.

10.9 African Harrier-Hawk

Long-legged raptor with double-jointed leg — reaches into cavities to extract chicks, eggs, lizards. Unique.

10.10 Secretarybird

Long-legged terrestrial raptor of open grassland. Stamps on snakes. Endangered.

10.11 Conservation crisis

African raptor populations have crashed by 70% in 50 years. Lead poisoning, electrocution on powerlines, intentional poisoning (cattle protection), habitat loss, traditional medicine trade. Every birder is now also a guardian.

Key Terms

Raptor	Diurnal bird of prey (Falconiformes & Accipitriformes).
Talon	Curved, sharp claw used for catching prey.
Crop	Storage pouch in throat — visible in fed raptors.
Thermal	Column of rising warm air — used by soaring birds.
Kettle	Group of soaring raptors in a thermal.
Sky-dance	Aerial courtship display of eagles and other raptors.