



see SOAR

ANDREW JENKINS (2)

Eddie the Eagle takes flight

On a crisp, blustery morning in July 2015, I met Kevin Farr of the Two Oceans Slope Soarers at a point along the road above Slangkop Lighthouse at Kommetjie, outside Cape Town, for a momentous occasion. Kevin is an avid builder and pilot of remote-controlled gliders and, together with fellow Soarers, flies a wide variety of these amazing machines at designated locations within the Table Mountain National Park.

I first met Kevin one weekend some years ago when members of the club were flying their gliders off Chapman's Peak Drive. At the time I was struck by the strong similarities in the aerodynamic performance of the remote-controlled craft and the montane raptors that I have spent much of my life studying. These parallels are quite clear to the glider guys too, as they often find themselves sharing the updrafts on their selected slopes with a variety of birds of prey. Hugely to their credit, the Soarers have been prompted by this raptor link to generously donate funding to raptor research at the FitzPatrick Institute, presented each year at their Black Eagle Powered Scale Soaring Festival.

Early on in my association with Kevin, we hatched the idea of building a life-sized Verreaux's Eagle replica glider. I think Kevin was mainly driven by the considerable challenges posed by this task, while my interest was in the utility of such a model in surveys of smaller, elusive raptors that might be duped into mistaking an eagle-glider for the real thing and prompted to mob it. If such a response were reasonably predictable, the glider could ultimately prove to be a very useful tool for the BirdLife South Africa Taita Falcon Survey Team, in its efforts to search new areas for resident pairs and nest sites of this hyper-rare, Globally Vulnerable species.

Since then, Kevin has worked tirelessly to develop the first prototype of 'Eddie the Eagle', basing his efforts on a Bald Eagle glider design obtained from the States (in fact, our glider should be named Eddie II, as the original US version was also named after the famously determined British Olympic ski-jumper, Eddie Edwards). While Kevin had taken the glider out for a couple of exploratory launches (with limited success) earlier in the year, today's flight was the first formal launching, and the first time

On its maiden flight, remote-controlled glider Eddie the Eagle drew territorial responses from species such as White-necked Ravens.

that I would see Eddie fully built and operational.

With a typically stiff Cape winter north-westerly blowing up the Slangkop slopes, Kevin got the eagle airborne with remarkable ease and, while it definitely has some vestigial 'sea-eagle' attributes, the glider's action in the air and Kevin's excellent paint job present this new, South African Eddie as a very convincing Verreaux's Eagle.

After a couple of impressive eye-level fly-bys, Kevin flew the glider higher up the ridge, which immediately drew out the resident pair of White-necked Ravens, and soon thereafter a Jackal Buzzard, a bunch of Pied Crows and (briefly) a passing Peregrine Falcon, all of which made aggressive passes at the glider, suggesting that this was an intruder that they took seriously.

Overall, this was a very encouraging debut for Eddie, and after Kevin has corrected a couple of lingering design faults, we will do further testing on both the practicality of flying the glider in various landscapes and wind conditions, and on the defensive responses to the eagle-glider of Peregrines and Rock Kestrels at known sites on the Peninsula. If all goes according to plan, the glider could become an integral part of the Taita Falcon Survey initiative by mid-2016.

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