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Compact, Consumer Off the Shelf Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (COTS-RPAS) in Observing *Haliastur indus*, the Kali, or Brahminy Kites

Michael Armand Canilao¹

¹ University of the Philippines Manila

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Abstract

The paper demonstrates how small, compact consumer off the shelf remotely piloted aircraft systems (COTS-RPAS) with zoom capability is an effective remote sensing platform in observing Brahminy Kites due to its non-intimidating nature, which arguably minimizes disturbance of the kites. The paper through this remote sensing platform was able to document some key play, cooperative fishing, behaviors of the raptors as well as draft a distribution map of sightings within the raptors range utilizing the compact -COTS-RPAS in tandem with Geographic Information Systems. Use of COTS-RPAS opens a new window or point of view (POV) to avian observational and behavioral studies especially because we are now given horizontal near orthogonal and orthogonal views of the avian species while in flight. Most documentation of birds in flight typically show the underwing and underbody parts but now with the aid of COTS-RPAS we see the upper wing and upper body while in flight

Michael Armand P. Canilao, MA MA MA PhD

Associate Professor 4

Department of Behavioral Sciences,

College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Philippines Manila

migscanilao@gmail.com

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Introduction

The paper demonstrates how small, compact and lightweight consumer off the shelf remotely piloted aircraft systems (COTS-RPAS, compact COTS-RPAS) with zoom capability are promising remote sensing platform in observational

studies of raptors. The Brahminy kite through the lense of COTS-RPAS is presented here as a specific case study.

Haliastur Indus or Brahminy kite (see Figure 1) is a raptor that is called locally as Kali or Dialombog. Other common names include Red-backed sea eagle and Singapore bald eagle. The Kali is considered to be the manifestation of the angel Garuda the vehicle of Vishnu in Buddhism in many parts of Asia. The Kali occurs throughout the Philippine islands. The Kali range that has been documented in this research is within my home province of La Union. the hotspot of the sightings appear to be along the Baroro River, which is one of the notable drainage basins in the province and in Northwestern Luzon Island (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). It is presently a site for aquaculture in its near coastal river channel (NCRC). Upriver also drains some patches of steaming Luzon Rainforests characterized as tropical and subtropical moist broadleaf forests (TSMF). The Baroro NCRC features a diverse palimpsest of flora and fauna. Avian fauna includes resident, migratory, nonmigratory, endemic, and non-endemic species.



Figure 1. Taxonomic details Brahminy kite (Kali Photo by Author using DJI Mavic 2 Pro).

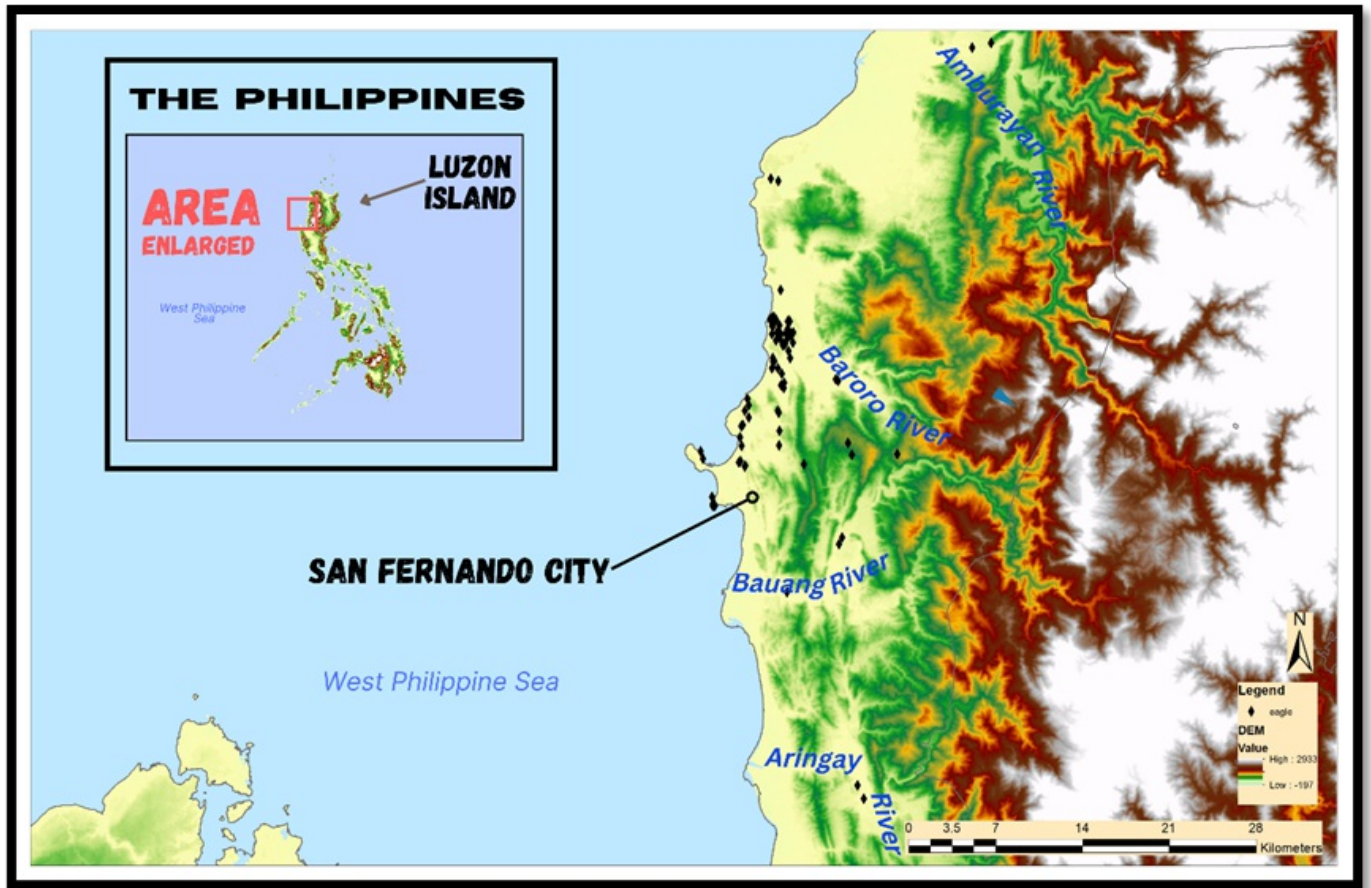


Figure 2. Research Area, Map showing sightings of Kali (SRTM is a product of NASA).

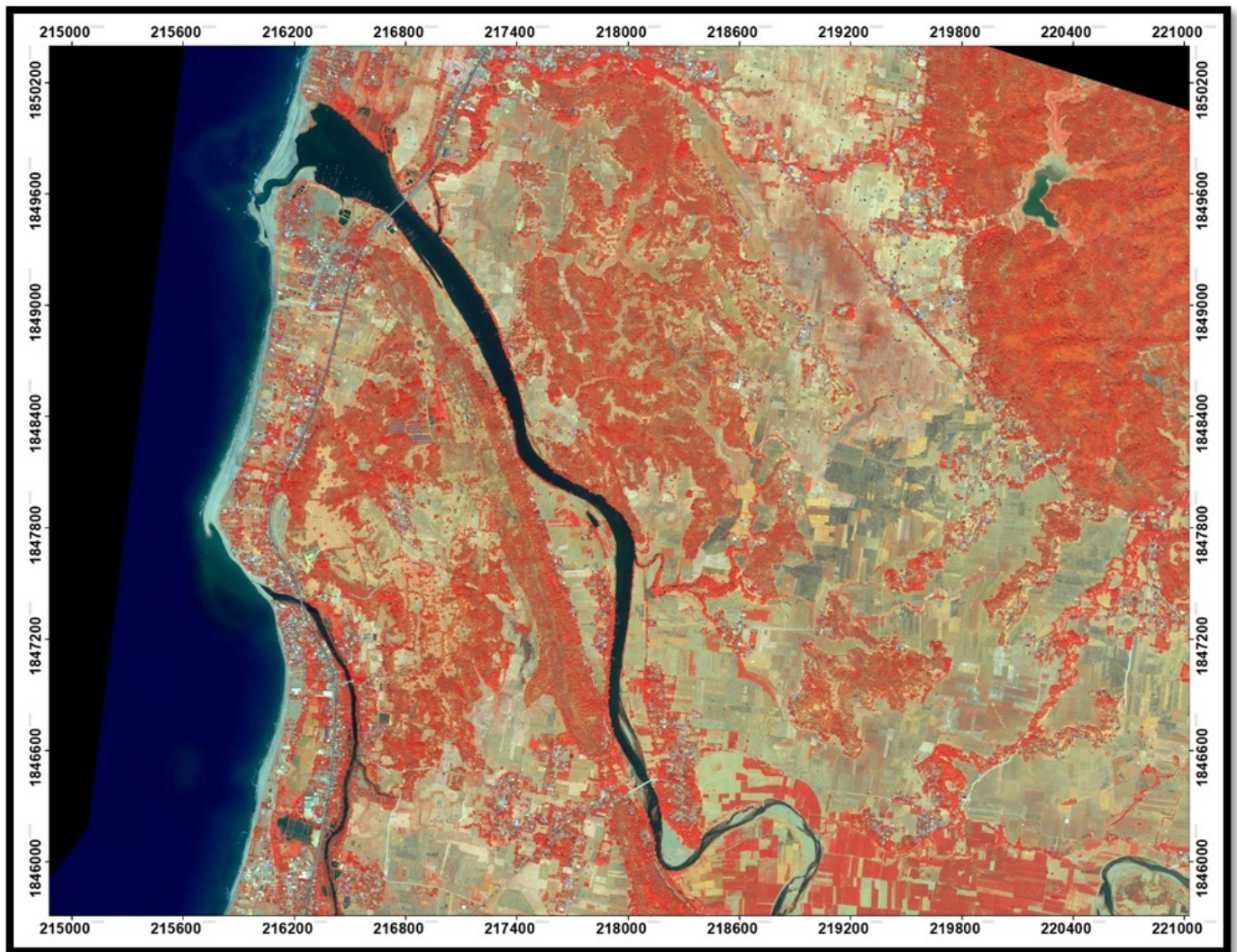


Figure 3. World View2 satellite imagery of hotspot area of Brahminy kites in La Union. Deeper reds denote denser vegetation- bambusa (sp.). Vegetation combination (Near Infrared 2, yellow, Red Edge) (WV2 imagery courtesy of DigitalGlobe Foundation)

The Kali is arguably the most conspicuous fauna in the Baroro River NCRC. Based on studies by Encisa-Garcia, et.al. 2021, Encisa-Garcia, et.al. 2020, Ramirez, et.al. 2019, Tolentino 2017, and Cruz, et.al 2014 the forest cover of the Baroro watershed is threatened by fragmentation due to conversion to agricultural and residential lands. Pascua, Chelo and Enrico C. Paringit (eds.) also used light detection and ranging (LiDAR) to model possible impact of rising flood waters due to sedimentation in the Baroro River which is a secondary effect of deforestation in the headwaters. While the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has labelled the Brahminy kite as “Least Concern,” locally in the Philippines the raptor is threatened by illegal wildlife trade (DENR-BMB 2019) and deforestation.

Method

This observational research on wild populations of the Brahminy kite was conducted in adherence to Bird watching Guidelines (Technical Guidelines 2017 No. 2) issued by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources

Biodiversity Management Bureau (DENR-BMB). Sighting reports were also forwarded to the regional field office of the DENR. The research is also in conformity to Unmanned Aerial System laws (UAS Laws / RPAS Laws) promulgated and enforced by the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines (CAAP). While the author attempts to show the immense utility of using small, compact and lightweight consumer off-the-shelf unmanned aerial system (COTS-RPAS) in remote sensing wildlife including avian fauna, it should be clearly stated that anyone who intends to use COTS-RPAS *should get the prerequisite formal training and experience (flight hours)* in using COTS-RPAS *prior to attempting to document wildlife* their natural habitat and should also consult applicable Local RPAS laws and regulations. On top of these, any encounter between the COTS-RPAS and wildlife should be carefully executed in order to have minimum disturbance to the latter (i.e., COTS-RPAS maintains safe distance, careful COTS-RPAS aerial maneuvers).

In this research the main tool used is the COTS-RPAS operating in both the micro and meso scale. The micro scale features raptor behaviors such as preening, feeding, play, rousing, mating, among others. The meso scale then contextualizes this behavior in the immediate environment and acts as a force multiplier in terms of the avian survey, providing real time aerial imagery of larger tracts of terrain. The meso scale environment includes place learning information, biodiversity information, threats and opportunities for the raptor species among others. Two COTS-RPAS were used in the research, What I will emphasize is the light weight and compact size of these two COTS-RPAS's. Released in 2018, the Mavic Pro 2 take-off weight is less than 1 kilogram. Released in 2020, the Mavic Mini 2 take-off weight is a quarter of a kilo or 250 grams. When fully charged both COTS-RPAS s have approximately 30 minute loiter time. The size of an adult Kali averages between 43 to 51 cm. The Kali seems bigger in size on a one-to-one scale with the COTS-RPAS's. Arguably, the COTS-RPAS appears like a smaller bird to the Kali (for the mini2 perhaps appearing crow-sized, pigeon-sized). The COTS-RPAS appears non threatening especially if careful aerial maneuvers are undertaken during contact. Some Kali juveniles are even documented flying closer to COTS-RPAS out of curiosity.

There are strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats or SWOT analysis on the use of COTS-RPAS in species monitoring. In summary, the debate has centered on the disturbance introduced by the mechanical nature of a drone (see Mulero-Pázmány Margarita, Susanne Jenni-Eiermann, Nicolas Strebel, Thomas Sattler, Juan José Negro, Zulima Tablado 2017). This is true for earlier, heavier RPAS but arguably this has been largely mitigated with the advent of COTS-RPAS. The introduction of Mavic pro 2 and Mavic mini 2 In 2018 and 2020 consecutively features reduction in rotor blade noise as well as overall improved imagery payload with zoom and battery capacity. Overall, the strengths outweigh the weaknesses and the opportunities outweigh threats with the availability of the compact COTS-RPAS.

As early as 2015 three years before the advent of COTS-RPAS, the potential of the COTS-RPAS in behavioral studies has already been pointed out by Linchant et al. As early as 2012 the utility of light COTS-RPAS for field ornithologists working in difficult to access areas was pointed out by Sarda- Palomera et.al.Sarda-Palomera et.al commented that,

"...UAVs are just a new tool that opens new perspectives about data collection. At the end, the user must be who decides when and how to apply it according to scientific objectives, field conditions and the sort of the level of detail and kind of information required..." (2018:6).

Indeed, later that year the Mavic 2 Pro was introduced. Mulero-Pázmány et al. say that "...the careful use of COTS-RPAS might be a valuable alternative for methods such as bio-logging, on-foot, and manned aircraft censuses used in biological studies..." (2017:8). As I have argued earlier the COTS-RPAS allows for us to access the meso scale and microscale and in a multiscale platform the mesoscale allows us to cover vast tracks of terrain that would have taken longer using transect methods.

Results/Discussion

While the package itself is non-threatening to the Kali it is important to emphasize that skillset and training will play a vital role in making the encounter safe and successful. The operator of the COTS-RPAS should mitigate disturbance by maintaining safe distance, maneuvering carefully in the air, and advancing very slowly in small increments

New Observational Perspectives of the Bird: the near Orthogonal and Orthogonal

Use of COTS-RPAS opens a new window or point of view (POV) to avian observational and behavioral studies especially because we are now given horizontal near orthogonal and orthogonal views of the avian species while in flight. Most documentation of birds in flight typically show the underwing and underbody parts but now with the aid of COTS-RPAS we see the upper wing and upper body while in flight. When documenting in such position it is important to maintain safe distances of in excess of 20 meter Euclidean distance from the Kali.

See Figure 4 where in horizontal to near orthogonal view of the Kali is afforded. Note that there is a safe distance between the COTS-RPAS and the Kali. Zoom function is enabled in situ or can be done postproduction. It was also common for the author to see inquisitive flybys of the Kali near the COTS-RPAS. This is especially seen with the juveniles. The Kali will double back and fly towards the COTS-RPAS. When such behavior is noticed, the COTS-RPAS must remain stationary and will simply pan its camera to follow the Kali.

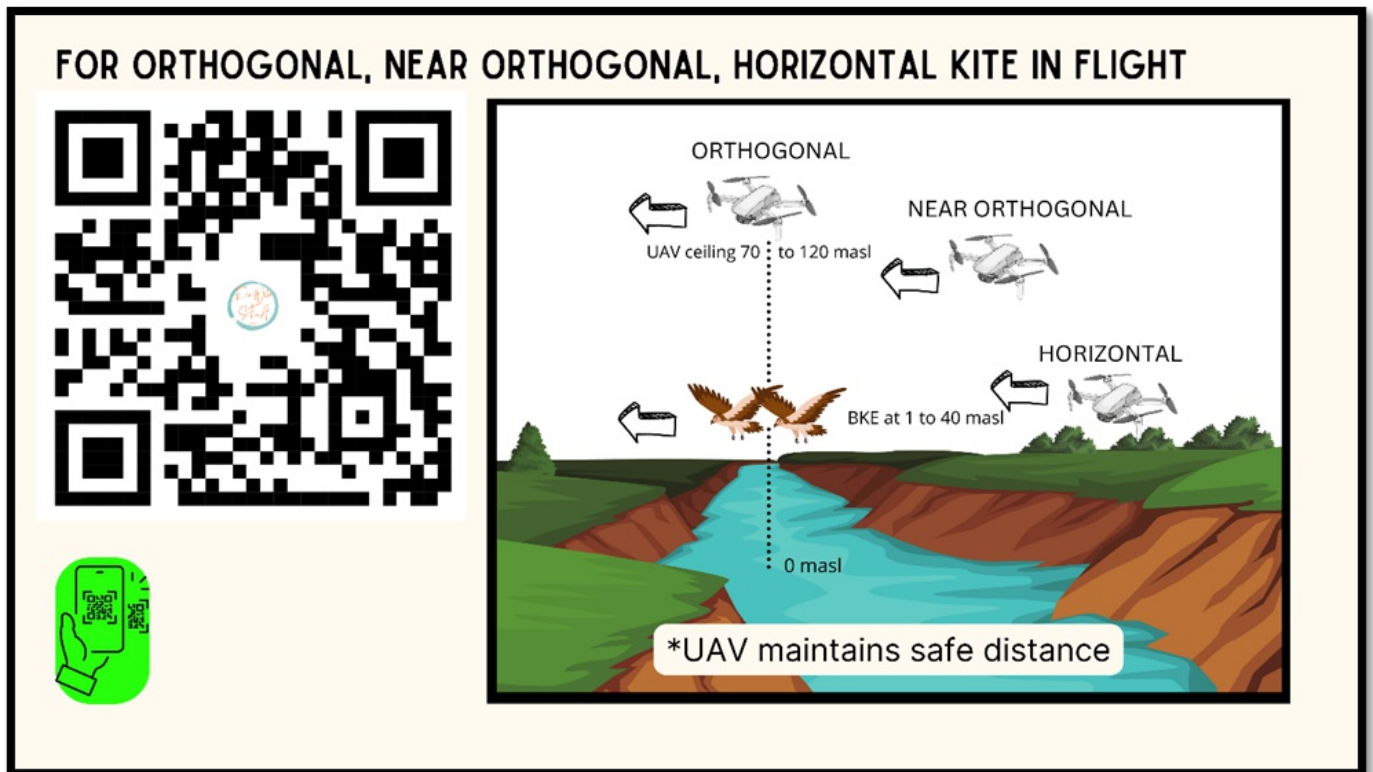


Figure 4. Compact UAS position documenting a Kali in flight. The remote sensing platform now gives access to orthogonal and near orthogonal views of the raptor.

The Kali are often seen perched on trees or bamboos and in such setting, the COTS-RPAS will approach the Kali very slowly and in small increments. If panicked or threatened movements are observed COTS-RPAS will stop at its position and remain stationary. Operator should re-assess whether to proceed if the behavior improves and back away if it deteriorates further. If the Kali behavior has improved proceed very slowly until the 20 meter threshold at which distance the COTS-RPAS zoom function can be engaged. In breaking the engagement the COTS-RPAS backup slowly and increases altitude in a clear airspace otherwise the COTS-RPAS will do an about-turn and exit slowly from the scene. Here is a Figure 5 wherein the COTS-RPAS documents perched Kali.

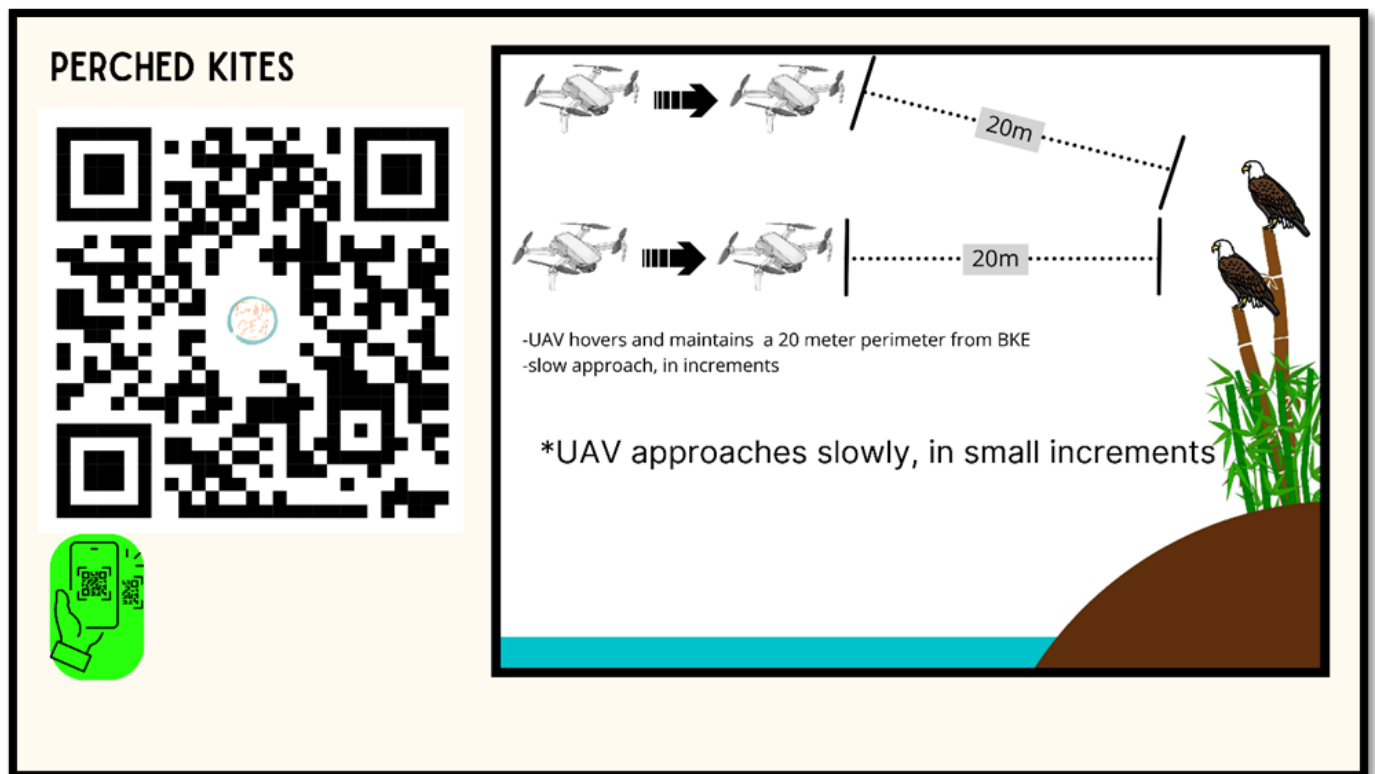


Figure 5. Perched Kali and the position of a compact UAS. Typical raptor behaviors observed at this position including, grooming, preening, sunning, eating, and calling.

Observed Behaviors of the Brahminy Kite using Compact COTS-RPAS

What was just presented are some of the important guidelines to initiating the encounter with the Kali. There may be case to case variability however and there is an important rule also to avoid at all cost approaching nesting sites since the Kali pair may try to protect their nestlings or eggs from the COTS-RPAS. Once again you may refer to Bird watching Guidelines (Technical Guidelines 2017 No. 2). It is important to carefully assess the situation always considering how to minimize disturbance on the Kali.

Emphasis is once again given to the need for training and accumulated flight hours. The careful maneuvers that have been proposed translates to using up most of the UAV battery before a good distance within zoom range is achieved. It is important to be able to estimate and balance the opportunity versus the current conditions of the Kali, the COTS-RPAS and the immediate vicinity of encounter. This is where training and accumulated flight hours matter.

Overall the researcher was able to collect data on Kali behavior. What follows are highlights of some that were observed through the COTS-RPAS. Figure 6 is a footage of a group of Kali taking turns to tap a floating object on the water. This is possibly a fishing-skill enculturation process that has been documented. Another interesting behavior is shown in a footage of a Kali initiating a Split S aerial maneuver to surprise an older Kali behind the back. The subadult is moving towards an adult who is at a lower altitude. At the right timing, the subadult executes a 180 degree roll followed by a half loop with a precision timed level exit exactly at the back of the adult. The contact causes them to spin momentarily but they both recover and head towards the original direction of the adult.

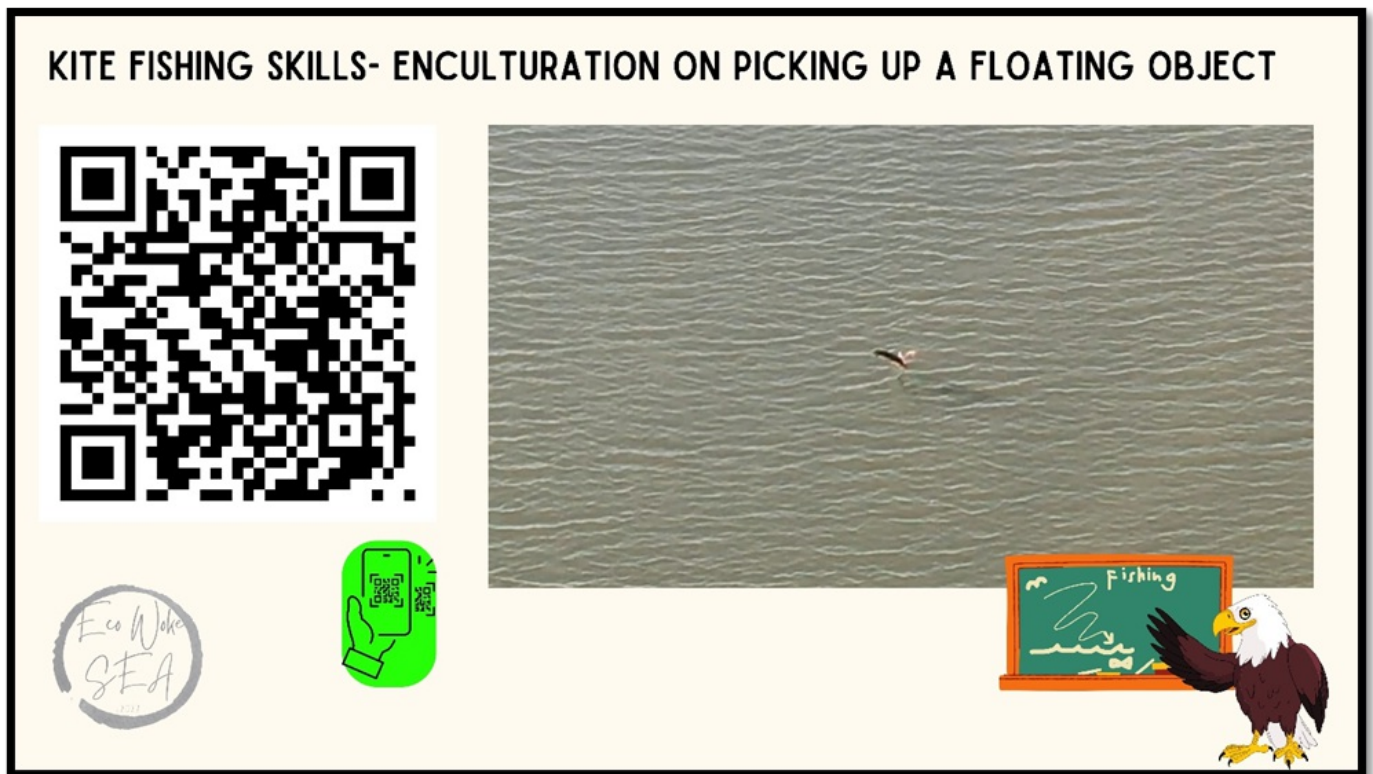


Figure 6. possible Kali fishing skills enculturation (Frame from video by author DJI Mavic 2 Mini). The documentation of this behavior shows the brood (adults and juveniles) circling the floating object and coordinating turns to tap the object.

The author also witnessed a Kali food pass. This behavior is commonly observed among raptor parents who take turns foraging for food for their nestlings. The first Kali picks up the fish from the river then meets the partner head on, the partner executes a pitchback and tails behind to snatch the fish midair in the middle of the pass (see Figure 7).

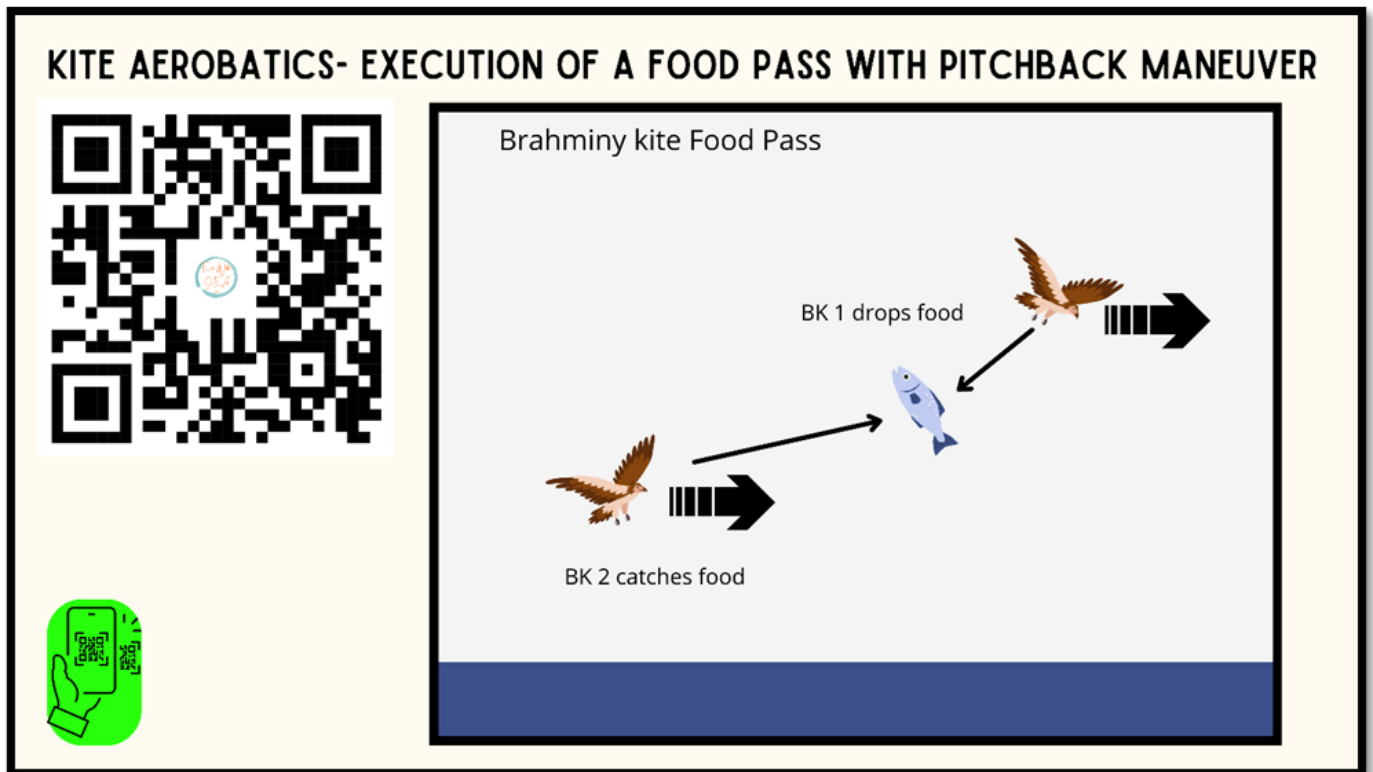


Figure 7. A pair of Kali (possibly parents with nestlings) executing a food pass.

There are also several occasions wherein Kali's were documented fishing and feeding. In one occasion a Kali was eating her/ his meal in the company of four migratory Grey herons who were nonchalant as well to the COTS-RPAS. Kali grooming was also commonly documented. Several footages show the Kali seems cleaning her/ his beak after a meal.

Another spectacular display that was remote sensed by the UAS is a series of play behavior among Kali's. See Figure 8 to see a video of two Kali engaging in aerial acrobatics and synchronized flight patterns.



Figure 8. A pair of Kali possibly engaging in courtship aerial maneuvers (Frame from video by author using DJI Mavic 2 Pro).

Finally, another advantage of the COTS-RPAS is to be able to document the raptor's place-learning skillset (see Gibson 1979 on affordances), specifically the choice of hiding places from what they perceive as threats specifically humans. Interestingly the Kali will spend time perched in hidden places that are hard to access on foot that are easy to access for the COTS-RPAS. In one instance two juvenile Kali's sunning while perched at a reclining bamboo stalk high from the ground, bordered by a cliff to its South and walls of tall bamboo in its other flanks. This location is indeed a refuge and a perfect hiding place.

The preceding is very preliminary and is in no way presupposes that it is a comprehensive study of the Kali's behavior. What is important to highlight is the new horizons in raptor observational and behavior studies that the technology of compact COTS-RPAS has to offer.

Conclusion

The introduction of compact COTS-RPAS specifically the Mavic 2 Pro and Mavic Mini 2 in 2018 and 2020 has introduced COTS-RPAS platforms that has reduced mechanical noise or rotor blade noise as well as improved imaging payload and flight loiter time. These innovations address many of the issues pointed out previously (i.e., see Linchant et.al 2015) about the weaknesses and threats to using COTS-RPAS in ornithology. The compact COTS-RPAS itself appears as a "little bird" and is non-threatening to the Kali. The technology if and only if (iff) combined with the right training and skillset indeed promises plenty of opportunities in behavioral studies. It is important to be able to estimate and balance the remote

sensing opportunity versus the on-site conditions of the Kali, the condition of the COTS-RPAS and the immediate vicinity of encounter (i.e., weather conditions). Perhaps, this is where training and accumulated flight hours matter.

In wrapping up the paper, Fisher and Hicks writing in 2006 says about the Kali that,

The striking Asian raptor occurs throughout the islands ...where it can be seen either perched on a tall tree or soaring high in the air. It has been heavily persecuted especially for the pet trade.

Even in the 2019 publication of the DENR-BMB, the Kali has been listed as illegally traded and threatened especially the juveniles. This paper together with the blog Eco Woke SEA wants to generate concern in the conservation and protection of the Kali in its natural habitat. There is much more to learn about this fascinating raptor or bird of prey. We have to protect them for the appreciation of our children and later generations.

Another threat to the Kali is the problem of deforestation with data showing that forested area in the Philippines between 1575 to 2015 was greatly reduced from 27.5 million hectares to just 7.01 million hectares in 2015 (La Vina, Carnivel, Reyes 2021). At a more localized level, deforestation per se is not the only issue but it is the fragmentation of whole forest systems into micro forest patches. These micro forests patches will not be able to support biodiverse ecosystems compared to continuous forest wholes. In one La Union watershed alone, the data shows that forest reduction was 96.4 % over the last 28 years (Ramirez et al 2019: 10, 13 [emphasis mine]). Addressing this issue will tackle with SDG 15. We need to look for solutions to deforestation and its corresponding destructive outcome of biodiversity loss, keeping in mind that the mere presence of raptors out in the wild beacons the presence of biodiverse ecosystems.

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Statement

Observational Study complies with Technical bulletin no 2017-02 Bird watching Guidelines issued by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources Biodiversity Management Bureau (Non-commercial) (<https://elibrary.bmb.gov.ph/elibrary/books/birding-guidelines-in-the-philippines-technical-bulletin-no-2017-02/>) and RPAS laws of the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines (<https://caap.gov.ph/rpas-regulation/>). Competing interests: The author declares there are no competing interests. Funding: WorldView 2 Satellite imagery provided free of charge by the DigitalGlobe Foundation. All data are available for access in the personal blog/ science blog

<https://www.facebook.com/ecowokesea/>

Dataset

Canilao, Michael Armand P. 2022. Eco Woke SEA: Pagsaliksisk sa sinerhiya ng Kultura at Kalikasan [exploring the synergy of culture and nature] [COTS UAS post processed video]. Data repository.

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