



Wildlife and power lines

Guidelines for preventing and mitigating wildlife mortality associated with electricity distribution networks

Editors: Justo Martín Martín, José Rafael Garrido López, Helena Clavero Sousa and Violeta Barrios



INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CONSERVATION OF NATURE



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IUCN is pleased to acknowledge the support of its Framework Partners who provide core funding: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland; Government of France and the French Development Agency (AFD); the Ministry of Environment, Republic of Korea; the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad); the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida); the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the United States Department of State.

This publication has been made possible thanks to the funding from the MAVA Foundation as part of the project 'Safe Flyways: reducing energy infrastructure-related bird mortality in the Mediterranean' 2020–2022.

Published by: IUCN, Gland, Switzerland

Produced by: IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation, Málaga, Spain

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Recommended citation: Martín Martín, J., Garrido López, J.R., Clavero Sousa, H. and Barrios, V. (eds.) (2022). *Wildlife and power lines. Guidelines for preventing and mitigating wildlife mortality associated with electricity distribution networks*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN.

Individual chapters within this report should be referenced as:

Last name, Initial(s). [of chapter authors] (2022). Title of chapter. In: Martín Martín, J., Garrido López, J.R., Clavero Sousa, H. and Barrios, V. (eds.). *Wildlife and power lines. Guidelines for preventing and mitigating wildlife mortality associated with electricity distribution networks*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN.

ISBN: 978-2-8317-2219-1 (PDF)
978-2-8317-2220-7 (print)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.CH.2022.10.en>

Cover photos: Front: Short-toed snake eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*). ©Justo Martín;
back: Power lines in Spain. ©Daniel Burón.

Layout by: N2-NT Estudio

Printed by: SOLPRINT S.L.

The text of this book is printed on 125 gsm environmentally friendly paper.

Contents

Foreword	viii
Executive summary	x
About these guidelines	xiv
Contributors	xviii
Acknowledgements	xxiii
Glossary of key terms used in this publication	xxiv
Acronyms	xxx
<hr/>	
1. Introduction	1
1.1. Context	2
1.2. Target audience and objectives	12
<hr/>	
2. Energy and power lines	16
2.1. Energy production and transmission	17
2.2. Components of an electric power line	22
2.3. Types of supports	34
<hr/>	
3. Power lines and wildlife	38
3.1. Effects of power lines on ecosystems	40
3.2. Power lines and birds	43
3.3. Power lines and mammals	54
3.4. Power lines and other species	59

4. Collisions 60

4.1. Factors that influence and determine the risk of collision	61
4.2. Power lines posing a high collision risk	68
4.3. Anti-collision measures (preventative, mitigating and corrective)	70
4.4. Effectiveness of anti-collision measures	75
4.5. Recent advances in line marking and monitoring	80

5. Electrocutions 84

5.1. Causes of electrocution risk	85
5.2. Factors that influence and determine the risk of electrocution	90
5.3. Birds susceptible to electrocution	91
5.4. Other vertebrates susceptible to electrocution	95
5.5. Power lines posing a high electrocution risk	98
5.6. Anti-electrocution measures (preventative, mitigating and corrective)	101
5.7. Effectiveness of anti-electrocution measures	111

6. Diagnosis and assessment of injuries or deaths of animals due to power lines 120

6.1. Signs of collision on the bodies of injured birds	121
6.2. Signs of electrocution on the bodies of injured animals	122
6.3. Diagnosis of the cause of death	128
6.4. Assessment of mortality caused by electric power lines	133

7. Collection and analysis of data on dangerous power lines	138
7.1. Baseline information	139
7.2. Species and priority areas	143
7.3. Sensitivity and risk maps	146
7.4. Priority lines and supports	148
7.5. Data collection	151
7.6. Database and map creation	158
7.7. Importance of sharing data and information	159
 8. Bases for power line action plans and their incorporation into general conservation strategies	 162
8.1. Information on power lines, sensitive species and fatalities	165
8.2. Priority sites and planning processes	169
8.3. Specific legal framework and agreements	173
8.4. Cross-sector collaboration and stakeholder participation	175
8.5. Awareness raising and training	176
8.6. Mainstreaming wildlife conservation in spatial planning and general policies and strategies	178
 9. Case studies from around the globe	 182
9.1. Africa	183
Case study 1. The impact of power lines in Morocco	183
Case study 2. Mitigating large mammal impact on wooden distribution poles in the Kruger National Park, South Africa	186

9.2. Americas	188
Case study 3. Power lines and wildlife in South America	188
Case study 4. Biodiversity loss due to power lines and actions to address the problem in Costa Rica	194
Case study 5. Power lines and birds in the USA	197
9.3. Asia	200
Case study 6. Avian electrocution in China	200
Case study 7. Power lines and wildlife in India	202
Case study 8. Birds and power lines in Iran	206
Case study 9. Impact of transmission lines in Japan	209
Case study 10. Raptor electrocution in Mongolia	211
9.4. Europe	214
Case study 11. Birds and power lines in Hungary	214
Case study 12. Birds and power lines in Russia	216
Case study 13. The Spanish story	220
Case study 14. The Andalusian Wildlife Analysis and Diagnosis Centre	224
9.5. Oceania	227
Case study 15. Managing bird interactions with power distribution assets in Australia	227
9.6. Other case studies	230
Case study 16. Primate electrocutions	230
Case study 17. Reconciling power line developments with the conservation of soaring bird species: the importance of early planning and spatial mapping tools	232

References	237
Appendices	278
Introduction	279
Appendix A: Power lines and birds: safe and dangerous designs and recommendations for preventative and mitigating measures	282
I. Support configuration and electrocution risk	283
II. Typology, risk levels and recommended corrective measures	290
III. Photo gallery: Examples of support types and anti-electrocution measures	331
IV. Recommendations for anti-electrocution measures	340
V. Recommendations for anti-collision measures	344
Appendix B: Power lines and forest wildlife: prevention and mitigation of impacts in forest environments	346
I. Preventative measures for making substations and transformer stations safe	348
II. Preventative measures for making supports and wires safe	350
a. Barrier-type protection devices	351
b. Accompanying measures: artificial aerial bridges for arboreal wildlife crossings	356

9.2. Americas

CASE STUDY 3

➔ Power lines and wildlife in South America

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Power line impacts on wildlife are a global conservation issue. In Europe and North America, wildlife collisions and electrocutions on power lines have been extensively addressed and are recognised as a growing threat to biodiversity. However, this problem has been largely overlooked in other parts of the world, such as South America. As a result, and with few exceptions, there is a lack of systematic assessments of the impact of this source of mortality on wildlife populations in these areas (Lehman et al., 2007; Bernardino et al., 2018).

One of the groups of animals most frequently affected by electrocution on power lines is raptors, due to their behaviour and size. South America harbours almost a third of the globally recognised raptor species (Sarasola et al., 2018), but recorded electrocution incidents are anecdotal, with few events in Chile, Brazil and Argentina (Valenzuela, 2009; Alvarado-Orellana & Roa-Cornejo, 2010; Ibarra & De Lucca, 2015; Sarasola & Zanón-Martínez, 2017; Galmes et al., 2018; Gusmão et al., 2020; Sarasola et al., 2020). In these countries, electrocutions mainly occur on three-phase medium-voltage (12–13.2 kV) distribution lines. Additionally, in central Argentina incidents have also been reported on single-phase low-voltage (7.2 kV) lines, even though these are less common (Figure 188 C). Electrocution incidents are also linked to poles and crossarms made of conducting materials (e.g. steel-reinforced concrete or metal), and with jumpers above the crossarms. On these lines, birds perch directly on the top of the grounded pole with little clearance between themselves and a jumper wire attached to the top of the pole (Galmes et al., 2018; Sarasola et al., 2020; Figure 189 E).

In Argentina, species affected by electrocution on power lines include at least two parrots, one owl and five diurnal raptor species: black-chested buzzard eagle

(*Geranoetus melanoleucus*), variable hawk (*Buteo polyosoma*), turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*), black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) and Chaco eagle (*Buteogallus coronatus*) (Sarasola & Zanón-Martínez, 2017; Galmes et al., 2018). The Chaco eagle (Figure 188 A and D) is the only species of conservation concern in South America for which electrocution is considered a major threat to its populations, due to the high number of incidents in comparison with local abundances (Galmes et al., 2018) but also with regard to its global population size (Sarasola et al., 2020).

In Chile, apart from a single mention of an owl species, avian electrocution events are restricted to the black-chested buzzard eagle (Valenzuela, 2009; Alvarado-Orellana & Roa-Cornejo, 2010), which is also the species most affected by electrocution in Argentina (Ibarra & De Lucca, 2015; Sarasola & Zanón-Martínez, 2017). Notably, in both countries, juveniles comprised the bulk of the electrocution incidents involving this eagle species, which are probably related to the large aggregations of juveniles that form during dispersal in areas with high-risk poles (Figure 188 B).

In both Argentina and Chile, increased social awareness of avian electrocution resulted in the implementation of mitigation measures, which included retrofitting of power line pylons (Figure 189 F). However, such measures were implemented at a local scale (on particular poles) and not as part of conservation strategies at regional or country levels, with the exception of La Pampa province in central Argentina, where a power line of over 40 km was constructed to avian-friendly designs (Figure 189 G and H).

Electrocution has been reported for harpy eagles (*Harpia harpija*) in Brazil (Gusmão et al., 2020). Two juveniles and one adult died on rural overhead distribution lines operating at a standard low voltage of 13.8 kV.

Reports of wildlife collisions with power lines in South America are even more scarce than those for avian electrocution. Avian collision is mentioned for a swan species in Chile (Valenzuela, 2009), harpy eagles (Aguiar-Silva et al., 2014) and two species of terns (see below) in Brazil, Andean condors (*Vultur gryphus*) in Argentina, Chile and Peru (Plaza & Lambertucci, 2020) and turkey vultures on high-voltage transmission lines in central Argentina (Sarasola, unpub. data).

Besides birds, other vertebrate taxa may be involved in power line incidents. For instance, primates and bats are potential victims of electrocutions (Al-Razi et al., 2019; Tella et al., 2020). However, in spite of their high diversity and abundance in tropical forests of South America, there are only a few published records of these vertebrates being electrocuted in Brazil and Colombia (Lokschin et al., 2007; Pereira et al., 2019; Montilla et al., 2020).

Although power lines may not pose a risk to all types of wildlife, the lack of incidents registered for potentially affected species, and more importantly for those categorised as threatened with extinction, is likely a consequence of inadequate survey efforts at a regional scale. Future research in this region should focus on effectively assessing the impact of power line electrocutions and collisions on biodiversity.

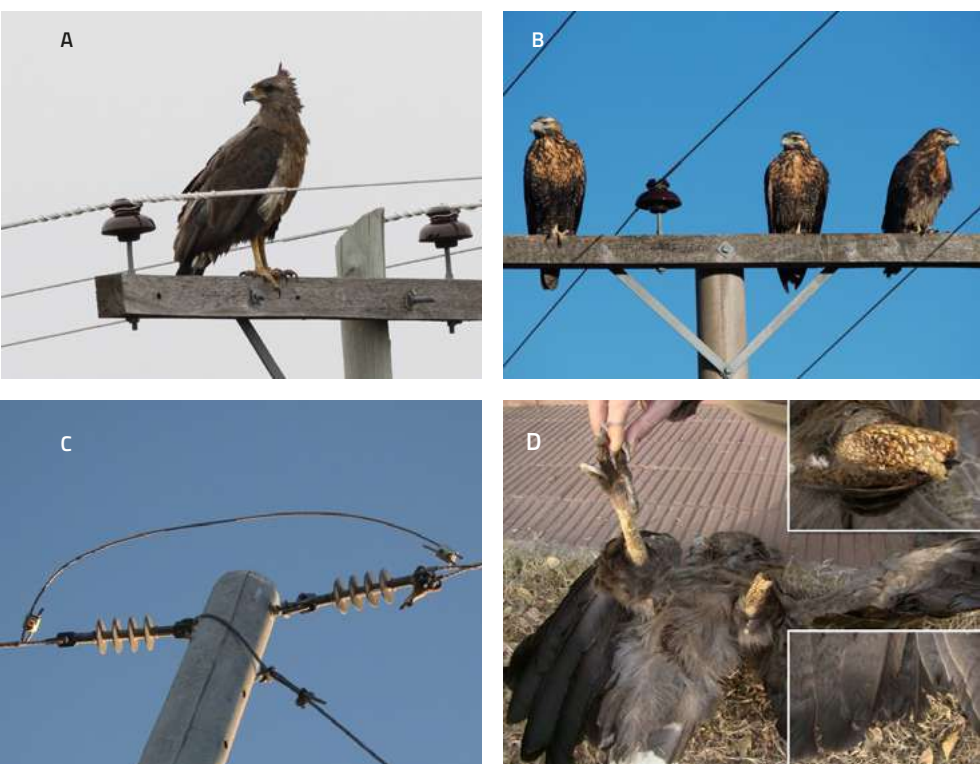


Figure 188. A: A juvenile Chaco eagle perched on a power line pole in western La Pampa province, Argentina. B: Juvenile black-chested buzzard eagles are among the raptor species most affected by electrocution mortality in southern South America, probably due to individual aggregations related to juvenile dispersal movements. C: Raptor electrocution is often reported on single-phase low-voltage lines in Argentina, particularly on steel-reinforced concrete poles with jumper wires, which are more dangerous for raptors. D: Note talons and part of tarsus of an electrocuted Chaco eagle that remained on the energised cable. © J.O. Gjershaug, José Hernán Sarasola and Maximiliano Galmes/CECARA

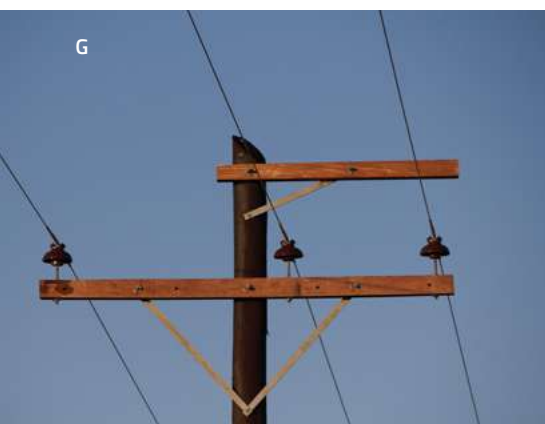


Figure 189. E: An electrocuted variable hawk in central Argentina on a pole combining wire jumpers above the crossarm with a dangerous construction material (steel-reinforced concrete). F: Black-chested buzzard eagle flying from a retrofitted pole where jumper wires were moved below the crossarm to reduce electrocution risk. G and H: Bird-friendly pole designs over 40 km of a newly built power line in Argentina. © José Hernán Sarasola and Maximiliano Galmes/CECARA