

## Field Notes on the Black Falcon

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Because of the dearth of published records for *Falco subniger* in Victoria and southern New South Wales, I have summarised all my observations from 1955 to 1978.

Wheeler (1967) lists it as "rather rare" but records it for all districts of Victoria. Although a bird of the drier inland plains, its nomadic wanderings may result in unexpected appearances outside its normal range. Factors affecting a regular food supply, such as drought, no doubt are responsible for such movements.

Because its non-hunting flight is so "crow-like" it could easily be mistaken as "a corvid". The dark sooty-brown plumage which appears black, particularly when the bird is some distance from the observer, or when seen in silhouette, its similar size and general outline could all contribute to mistaken identification. When hunting, its flight is typically falcon-like, swift and calculated. Due to its size and lack of pattern in the plumage it ought not be confused with any other falcon.

Between September 1955 and December 1956 I was able to record the species at Jindera, N.S.W., and in Victoria at Bonegilla and Corryong. The Jindera bird was my first experience with the Black Falcon. A farmer travelling in the car and knowing my interest in birds remarked that a pair had been seen frequently in the district. Approaching Jindera we flushed a bird from a telephone post. The farmer immediately identified it as a Black Falcon. It flapped and glided to a windbreak some distance away, its flight no different to that of the many corvids we had passed since leaving Albury. We slowed to little more than walking pace. Suddenly a covey of quail rose from an adjacent wheat crop. The falcon immediately side-slipped and rushed amongst them, striking one bird dead and injuring another with its wildly beating wings, all the time uttering a frenzy of loud chattering screams. It grasped the dead bird in its talons and watched us alight from the car. When one of our party approached and began to climb through the fence, it rose and carried its prey to a dead tree nearby. We retrieved the injured Stubble Quail. Both wings and one leg appeared to be broken and it could but struggle feebly. It died a few moments later while being cradled in the hand.

Soon after, a pair were located at Bonegilla. They were first seen chasing starlings and sparrows and showed considerable interest in Red Wattle-birds and Lorikeets. Subsequent observations around the military camp at Bandiana, and along the Kiewa River nearby, all probably relate to the same pair of birds. In 1963 on a return trip to the area I was pleasantly surprised to find a pair worrying the many cormorants and gulls below the wall of Lake Hume. During November 1956, a pair were found hunting around the town of Bethanga. They circled rapidly, making many dives and stoops along the main street and around the houses. Many starlings come into the town each evening and these were the main target.

The Corryong pair were sighted near the junction of the Khancoban Road and the Murray Valley Highway. Our attention was drawn to them by the action of an Australian Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus*, which was repeatedly swooping a large clump of tall dry grass. At each pass the

goshawk seemed to strike and then take evading action. Closer investigation revealed a pair of Black Falcons standing guard over a freshly-killed and partly eaten Black Duck *Anas superciliosa*. Our approach caused the three raptors to depart, but not before a splendid opportunity was taken to compare the relative sizes of the falcons; the female being several inches longer and far more robust in appearance. Whether the falcons or the goshawk made the kill is open to conjecture, but several experiences of goshawks robbing Swamp-Harriers *Circus aeruginosus* and Whistling Kites *Haliastur sphenurus* of their prey suggests that this is an accepted method of feeding.

In November 1961, a pair were seen about six miles south of Deniliquin, N.S.W. We had stopped by the roadside when the pair were sighted flying close together along the fence line. They passed within a few feet of us making no attempt to deviate from their chosen flight.

In October 1964, a pair were recorded hunting along the Yanco Creek, north west of Jerilderie, N.S.W. We were in the area for about five hours and they were present throughout all that time. Their flight was direct, like that of a Peregrine, but not nearly so hurried. Each time they passed, a nesting pair of Willie Wagtails were first to give the alarm, and a pair of Restless Flycatchers and a small mixed flock of White-browed and Dusky Wood-Swallows joined in to see the falcons off their territory.

Later in 1964 a friend informed me that a pair of falcons were using the irrigation channels around Invergordon as hunting paths. He described how the pair would fly along the channel, sometimes skimming the water in search of prey. When prey was sighted the falcons would dip over the bank, fly parallel to the channel but below water level to suddenly hurtle over the bank again and strike their prey. Duck, Grebe, White-faced Heron, Coot and Moorhens had been attacked in this manner. The falcons were noted hunting early in the morning and towards dusk. My friend felt that the same birds were active in the same area during September and had been hunting before the fog had lifted.

In January 1965 I was able to witness a somewhat similar method of attack by a pair of falcons and only a few miles further north.

Several Swampheens were flying backwards and forwards across the Boosey Creek near Katamatite. About halfway across, a large log protruded above the surface and some Swampheens landed on this, before continuing their flight. Glancing upstream I noticed the falcons approaching, low and about mid-stream. They swerved away through the Red Gums, climbing to about thirty feet and returned almost over my head. One Swampphen was on the log and appeared to freeze with fright. The larger falcon buffeted the Swampphen, knocking it off the log. The Swampphen clumsily tried to take flight from the water and barely rose from the stream when the smaller falcon flew across its path striking at its head. The larger then struck twice at the nape of the neck and across the back. The larger then turned, grasped the Swampphen and flew to a dead tree. Both falcons fed undisturbed for nearly an hour. Throughout the attack both birds screamed and chattered loudly and the smaller continued to scream until feeding commenced.

From 1968 to 1976 various reports of Black Falcons west and north of Melbourne were checked. Areas searched specifically included Ballan,

Parwan, the You Yangs, Cherry's Swamp and Wandong. All proved fruitless although the variety of bird life in each area still meant wonderful field days. However pairs were located near the La Trobe University, South Morang, and along the Darebin Creek near Epping (these could well be the same pair); near the Clarkefield railway station and among the Ironbarks at Costerfield.

In 1970 a trip was made to Laanecoorie Reservoir. I arrived before dawn on a frosty September morning. I crossed the wall of the dam and had scarcely begun fishing when a thick fog settled. It began to lift about 0830 hrs. and although the sun was trying to break through it remained very miserable. About 0900 a.m. a pair of falcons came slowly upstream in crow-like fashion, drifted up over the wall of the dam, then re-appeared a few minutes later. They flapped and hovered in an awkward manner over the main flow of water from the dam, several times dipping down to almost touch the surface. They landed on the rocks below the carpark and probed about, probably searching for small dead Redfin left on the bank by anglers. Their attention was again diverted to the flow of water and I imagined that small injured fish coming through the outlet valve may have been sought. I have on several occasions seen the Brown Falcon *Falco serigota* acting as a scavenger, and the Black Falcons seen in the South Morang area were once seen feeding on a dead Australian Magpie killed several days before by a speeding car.

During the last decade I have visited Cooma, N.S.W. on eight occasions for periods of five to fourteen days over the summer and autumn. J. H. Calaby (*In: Frith (Ed.), 1969*) notes that they "are reported to have nested for a number of years in the Cooma district" (p131). My first views of the pair were in timbered hills just south of Cooma township and west of the Cooma-Maffra road. They were next seen crossing the Snowy Mountains Highway near the Fairy Park entrance just west of Cooma. Of later years a pair were frequently seen along the Murrumbidgee River in the vicinity of the Bidgee Lodge. Twice while walking along the track between the Lodge and the Cooma Water Supply Pumping Station the pair flew directly over my head on their way to the river.

One evening our party of fly fishermen split up for the evening — some going downstream by car to Bredbo, some to the lake and I remained in the vicinity of the Lodge. I had moved several hundred yards downstream when the falcons passed in direct, swift flight, about twenty feet above the stream. When the party re-assembled at the Lodge about 2030 hrs. to exchange notes, I mentioned the falcons to one man, who then told me that one of their group had drawn his attention to a pair of falcons on a similar flight pattern near Bredbo. We calculated the distance between the two fishing points to be roughly twenty miles and the time between the observations to be about 45 minutes. If it was the same pair that followed the river they certainly covered considerable territory in a relatively short time.

On another visit during autumn I found the pair near the Cooma High School. Grey and Pied Currawongs were feeding on the numerous berries (*Crataegus*, *Cotoneaster*, etc.) growing in the area and the falcons spent many hours harassing these birds.

On the same visit we climbed Nanny Goat Hill, a local look-out, and saw the falcons in pursuit of five Galahs. The chase seemed half-hearted for

the Galahs slipped away and the falcons settled in some scrubby eucalypts nearby. Their presence disturbed a party of White-winged Choughs who adopted their usual grouping with much screaming and hissing. The falcons left for more peaceful parts using their flap and glide crow-like flight. We watched them rise over the valley and disappear over the hills south of Cooma.

The only time I have seen them soar to any great height was one summer evening when returning from the Badja River where Rock Flat Creek crosses the Numeralla-Cooma Rd. our attention was focused on a small raptore soaring on the thermals. We had seen three Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax*, and stopped to investigate. As a pair of Brown Falcons had been seen in this area earlier in the day we at first assumed it to be this species. However within a few minutes a Black Falcon came upstream within a few feet of the tussocks. She (for later we could detect it to be the larger bird) was calling a harsh and excited "Keck, Keck, Keck". After crossing the road, she swerved upwards about 60-80 feet, hovered for a few seconds and then stooped in full pursuit of some prey which seemed to dodge through the tussocks. We guessed at young rabbits as there were some along the creek. Still uttering her harsh screams she began to climb, but immediately turned and skimmed back toward the road. Our attention now returned to the first raptore. It was hurtling toward us at tremendous speed, screaming loudly and seemed about to attack the second bird. When impact seemed inevitable both birds side-slipped and calling loudly, flapped slowly upstream again. They perched on a dead tree side by side for a few moments, then flapped downstream again.

On May 3, 1977, I found my first pair of Black Falcons in East Gippsland. They were over open swampland about 1½ miles north of Holland's Landing. A fairly strong westerly breeze was blowing and the falcons were using their slow flapping glide and undulating flight into the wind, at about 20-30 feet above the swamp. A good variety and large number of water birds were present but only a compact group of Hoary-headed Grebe became alarmed and dived. The pair were under observation for about 15-20 minutes and at no time adopted hunting flight or even seemed greatly interested in the ample supply of prey available.

The second observation occurred on November 12, 1977, about one mile west of Wy Yung, where a narrow creek crosses the road. This pair were in swift hunting flight following the creek at little over scrub height. A large number of mixed honeyeaters which had been feeding noisily were instantly quiet and remained so for 3-4 minutes after they passed. The pair returned more slowly about 20 minutes later. Excellent views were obtained of both birds as they passed within ten feet of me.

## References

- Frith, H. J. (Ed.), 1969. *Birds in the Australian High Country*. A. H. & A. W. Reed, Sydney.
- Wheeler, W. R., 1967. *A Handlist of the Birds of Victoria*. V.O.R.G., Melbourne.