

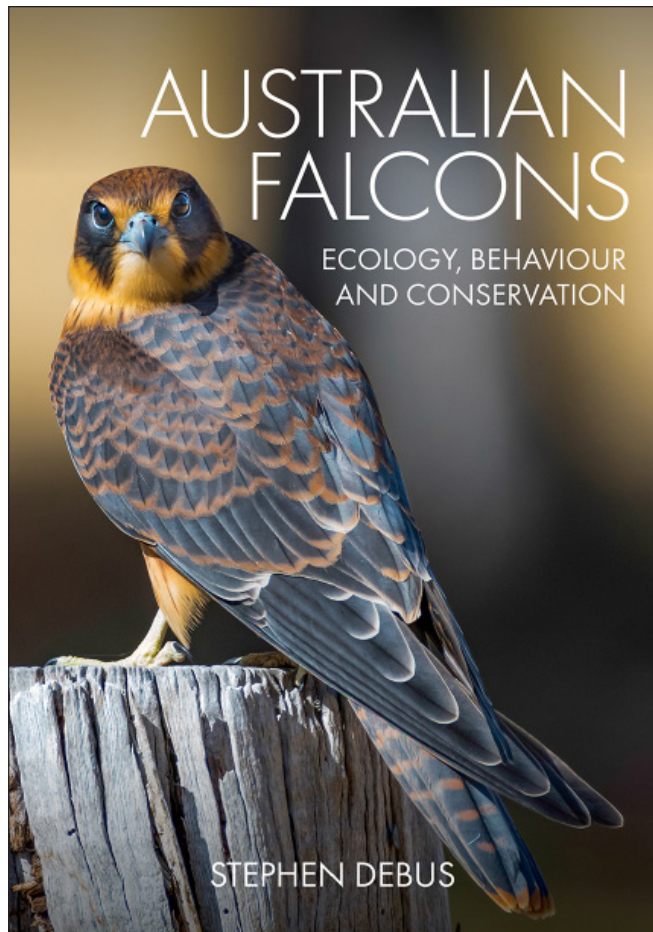
Book Review

Australian Falcons: Ecology, Behaviour and Conservation

by Stephen Debus

CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, 2022. Paperback 232 pp.

RRP \$49.99.



This book has some overlap with the author's previous works, such as Debus (2019); however, it is very much an original publication that offers much of interest on Australia's six falcon species. There are two significant aspects to the book. First, it provides a comprehensive update on information on the ecology of the Australian falcon species from that provided in the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds (HANZAB)*, Volume 2 (Marchant & Higgins 1993), a publication that is now 30 years old. Second, it features a brilliant collection of new images of each species, most of which were taken by David Whelan.

After a Foreword by William Riddell (Past President of BirdLife Australia's Raptor Group), the Preface, and the Photographer's acknowledgements, the book has a brief introductory section. This Introduction is more important than most. Not only does it set out the book's purpose and

plan, but it also provides an update on raptor phylogeny and details the systematics of the falcons. It explains that recent research using DNA evidence has shown that falcons are not related to other birds of prey but, instead, belong in their own order in a different part of the avian phylogenetic tree. A solid justification indeed for a standalone account of the six species resident in Australia.

Following the Introduction, each species is covered in a separate chapter. The chapters are arranged per the phylogenetic groupings outlined in the Introduction. The plan of each species chapter follows that of *HANZAB* and includes a subset of the headings used in *HANZAB*, including Field identification, Habitat, Distribution and population, Movements, Food, Social organisation, Social behaviour, Voice, Breeding, Measurements and Weights. Despite following the plan of *HANZAB*, the species chapters in this book are much more readable, containing relevant scientific information set within an interesting narrative. I never had the sense of reading an encyclopedia which is something I feel regularly when reading *HANZAB*. The readability is enhanced through the inclusion of an (untitled) introductory section of two or more paragraphs, and a Commentary section to close each account. The introductory section for each species typically describes the history of discovery and naming, subspecific variation, confusion in identification (if any), the level of knowledge of the species' ecology, and the amount of new published and unpublished research (usually described qualitatively) since *HANZAB*. In the Commentary section, the author highlights new information (sometimes in depth, as in the case of the Grey Falcon), discusses what insights post-*HANZAB* research offers in terms of interpreting the species' ecology, and contrasts knowledge of the species (often unfavourably) with what has been obtained for similar species in other parts of the globe.

Following the six chapters on each species, there is a very useful chapter outlining the stages of the reproductive cycle of Australian falcons. This chapter is described as a photo-essay and it makes excellent use of David Whelan's often dramatic images.

The seven falcon chapters are followed by an unexpected chapter on the Black-shouldered Kite. The basis for the inclusion of this species is that it is a 'falcon-like hawk'. This chapter was a surprise and did lead me to pause and ask whether the Black-shouldered Kite is the most falcon-like of the other birds of prey in Australia. I am sure that there are many views on this question. There is nothing to dislike about this chapter, it is as comprehensive as those preceding it and is similarly beautifully illustrated.

The Epilogue of the book looks at the threatening processes for each species and presents a summary for each one of additional work that is needed to further knowledge of its autecology. Finally, there is a Bibliography, a summary of Other sources of information, and an Index of species and topics.

Stephen Debus has an exceptional knowledge of the literature on Australia's birds of prey. He has contributed much to this literature over the past 30 plus years, directly through his own research but also by facilitating others to publish their work. He has an outstanding ability to accurately present information from other researchers' work without any loss of accuracy. As someone with an intimate knowledge of Jonny Schoenjahn's PhD thesis, through a role as a co-supervisor, I can attest to the accuracy with which this research has been summarised throughout the book including an additional manuscript on reversed sexual size dimorphism.

The real strength of this book is the author's ability to use his knowledge of each species' autecology to construct a coherent and highly readable account. The chapters are informative and well paced. For several species, the new information is vast and enables the species – especially the Black Falcon and Grey Falcon – to be understood in greater detail and very differently from the perspective provided in *HANZAB*.

While appreciating the depth of the author's knowledge, the aspect of the book that I most enjoyed was the openness and honesty with which difficult issues were identified and discussed. There is an undersupply of this frankness in the modern literature despite some of these issues being of considerable importance if progress is to be made in improving conservation management of falcons and other raptors. Some examples include the neglect by research (and researchers) of common species especially the Nankeen Kestrel (page 19), the irrelevance,

from a management perspective, of the occurrence of vagrant species (page xx), the assumption that farmers are universally the best environmental stewards (page 169), and the rescue of raptors that are actually healthy enough to remain in the wild (page 172). The one I most appreciated was the calling out of photographers at the nest of a Grey Falcon (page 68) with appropriate use of adjectives including 'inept' and 'ignorant'. The behaviour described in this episode has certainly become more prevalent and, combined with widespread use of call-playback, had led me to conclude that ethical birdwatching was no longer an issue taken seriously.

I have almost no quibbles with the book. Perhaps the only one is a wish that the *Falco* genetic tree had been reproduced as a figure in the Introduction chapter rather than the reader being referred to the supplementary material of one of Jonny Schoenjahn's papers.

This is a high-quality, highly readable book. It will be appreciated by anyone with an interest in Australian birds and, in particular, Australian raptors. The strongest praise I can give it is that I came away with a renewed appreciation of the diversity and unique attributes of Australia's six resident species of falcon.

References

- Debus, S. (2019). *Birds of Prey of Australia: A Field Guide*. 3rd edn. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.
- Marchant, S. & Higgins, P.J. (Eds) (1993). *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds, Volume 2: Raptors to Lapwings*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

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