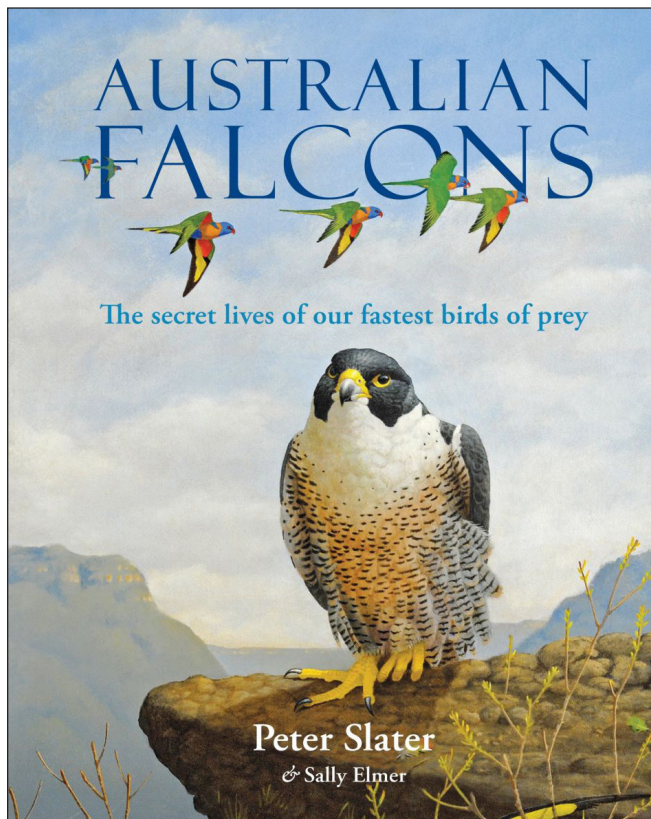


Book Review

Australian Falcons: The secret lives of our fastest birds of prey

by Peter Slater and Sally Elmer

Reed New Holland, Sydney, 2024. Hardcover. 240 pp., colour photographs and paintings, black-and-white drawings. RRP \$60. ISBN 9781925546743.



As noted by Jerry Olsen in his Foreword, this book is a memoir, art book, and treatise full of information and reflections on falcons, collected over a lifetime and expressed through prose, photographs and paintings. Jerry recounts associations with Peter and Peter's wife Pat in several contexts: questions over the bare-part colours of the Black Falcon; bird-deterrence trials at Sydney Airport with trained falcons as an alternative to shooting (full story in Jerry's book – Olsen 1994); and assistance with reporting on Jerry's early field study of Peregrine and Black Falcons in South Australia in the 1970s. Also mentioned is Peter's draft book manuscript of 1973 on Australian raptors, then criticised disparagingly by a museum curator and consequently shelved for nearly 50 years, despite Jerry's encouragement. As Jerry noted, that critic (obviously!) did not understand Peter's aim – a book of personal observations, interesting encounters, and detailed descriptions that would inform and delight the reader, illustrated with great art. The present book salvages some of what that manuscript would have presented. As Peter said in his Introduction, it is a personal reminiscence conveying the thrill and gratitude at seeing raptors in

action, and being constrained by space it can only recount a few such events.

The Foreword finishes by enumerating the six Australian falcons and one rare migrant (Eurasian Hobby) in their natural (DNA-based) groupings, and the general physical characteristics of falcons. The Introduction vividly recounts a formative event when all six species were observed, five of them hunting sequentially along with other raptors, at a waterhole on a single occasion in the Kimberley, thus setting the tone of the book. The book then proceeds with a chapter on each falcon species, mostly in the taxonomic sequence outlined in the Foreword.

Each chapter has a heading of current common and scientific name, with the authority and date for the latter, then a list of the multitude of taxonomic synonyms historically applied to that species and its (often now invalid) subspecies, with their sources. Then follows a page of text (sometimes with historic illustrations) relating the history of discovery and naming of that species and its (alleged) subspecies. The synonymies, especially for our regionally endemic species, are peppered with the chaos created by that notorious splitter of genera and species, Gregory Mathews. This aspect of the book might be of most interest to taxonomists and ornithological historians, as the DNA work referred to in the Foreword has confirmed a single genus, *Falco* (Fuchs *et al.* 2015). The bulk of the ensuing species chapters consists of first-hand observations of aspects of the birds' biology, ecology and behaviour, illustrated with photographs, paintings and sketches, usually along with a *haiku* (short evocative poem in Japanese style).

The Nankeen Kestrel chapter (28 pages) contains anecdotal accounts of the hunting behaviour and breeding cycle of several pairs, with some parental feeding rates on different prey types. It also includes a humorous take on changes to the bird's common name, and an evocative consideration of the marvels of flight and hovering, as well as an insightful comment on the interpretation of raptor road counts.

The Brown Falcon chapter (78 pages) devotes much space to countering the common belief that this is an uninteresting or unremarkable bird. With photographs occupying two-thirds of the chapter, it takes a diligent approach to understanding plumage variation related to age and gender, with evidence of a true dark morph as well as the typically dark juvenile. It also covers various aspects of foraging and feeding behaviour, including specialising

on reptiles; moult and bare-part coloration; reversed sexual size dimorphism in falcons; and various aspects of breeding biology and behaviour. It contains valuable advice on 'reading' a bird's behaviour for signs that it is comfortable (or not) with approach.

The Australian Hobby chapter (36 pages) is replete with exciting accounts of them hunting. It rightly contests many myths and errors about the Hobby's prey size and supposed lack of crepuscular hunting, most of these being based on misidentified Peregrine Falcons or misinterpretation of the behaviour of Hobbies interacting with cockatoos. Slater also challenges the validity of supposed subspecies *murchisonianus*. Several photographs of a Hobby at the nest are by Peter's son Raoul.

The Eurasian Hobby chapter occupies two pages, including a monochrome photograph by the late Eric Hosking of one at the nest. The text predicts this species' occurrence in the Kimberley, since confirmed by a contemporary sighting. With also an injured bird recently found in eastern Victoria, one wonders how many others are 'hiding' among our Australian Hobbies, traversing the continent to appear in the south and to visit Perth annually in summer.

At 34 pages, the Black Falcon chapter is a comprehensive and detailed photo-essay covering various aspects of, or discussing opinions about, the bird's habits, flight speed, hunting behaviour, breeding cycle, plumages, bare-part colours, and photographic comparison with the juvenile Laggard Falcon and dark-morph Saker Falcon. Slater regrets illustrating, in his first field guide, the Black Falcon with yellow legs, correctly as it turned out, albeit in a minority of birds (he estimates <1%).

The Grey Falcon chapter, at 12 pages, is the shortest, given limited opportunities to observe this species, mostly in the Kimberley where Slater found a remarkable nesting density. It presents valuable insights that contest many claims about this species (now known to be wrong, and often based on misidentifications). It also covers a comparison with the Barbary Falcon (desert subspecies of the Peregrine Falcon), and finishes with some thoughts on the importance of surface water to the Grey Falcon and its prey. Included is Peter's last unfinished painting, of a Grey Falcon hunting.

The Peregrine Falcon chapter (33 pages) is full of superlatives about its flight capabilities and hunting strategies, including a subjective estimate of a stoop at >300 km/h, with discussion of theory on the subject and a claimed speed from an unspecified recording device (and source) of 395 km/h. (For the record, an Australian Peregrine Falcon wearing a GPS tracker reached

271 km/h.) The chapter also covers the effect of DDT and the Falcon's recovery, as well as observations of breeding biology, and comments rightly questioning the validity of supposed south-western Australian subspecies *submelanogenys*, suggesting instead a rare dark morph. Included are photographic comparisons with migrant subspecies *calidus* and *japonensis* and subspecies *peregrinator* of India.

Slater's text reveals his personal experience of the overseas falcons he compares with ours, and interesting snippets of his personal background, along with anecdotes about captive injured falcons he cared for. The photographs, some by Sally Elmer, are masterful, showing many aspects of behaviour, and the paintings display exquisite detail. For instance, it is only Peter's signature that reveals the image on p. 76 to be not a photograph, and that on p. 120 could be a photograph too. Among the sketches, that on p. 196, for instance, is amazingly true to life.

Had Peter's planned book appeared in or soon after 1973, it would have outshone the few other raptor books then available (Condon 1973; Morris 1973, 1976), and instead of saying that the present book (2024) confirms other recent work, we would be saying that recent work confirms and quantifies what Peter already knew. And Jerry's Foreword, written by September 2020 and with foreknowledge of Peter's completed text, reveals the long lead-time to publication since Peter's death in May 2020. *Falcons* is said to be Peter's final work; I hope instead that his unpublished manuscript on the remaining Australian raptors still survives, and also becomes similar books on the other raptors in appropriate groupings. I would hate to think that his knowledge of, for instance, Collared Sparrowhawks (a typed manuscript of 65 pages) is lost.

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