

Further observations of a Black Falcon *Falco subniger* with yellow bare parts

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Abstract. I describe and provide photographs of a typically dark-plumaged Black Falcon *Falco subniger* that had yellow bare parts – cere, base of lower mandible, orbital skin and feet – observed in the field near Oakey, in inland Queensland, in July 2024.

Introduction

Cases of rare individuals of the Black Falcon *Falco subniger* having yellow (instead of the usual pale grey) bare parts were discussed by MacColl & Debus (2022), Slater & Elmer (2024) and Chapman & Churches (2024). Independently, in late July 2024, I posted a series of photographs on the BirdLife Australia Raptor Group (BARG) Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/569799506926313>) seeking confirmation of the identity of a Black Falcon. This bird also had yellow bare parts. Here I describe and illustrate, with photographs, that individual, observed in July 2024 near Oakey (27.43114°S, 151°68299 E), on the agricultural Darling Downs in inland southern Queensland. The roadside observation site was among irrigated and other crop fields, >1 km from the edge of Oakey township and <500 m from the tree-lined Oakey Creek.

Observation

On 29 July 2024 at 0830 h, I observed this falcon feeding on prey on the ground, in a grassy field near the roadside. I had a good view for 5–10 minutes, taking photographs on foot, before it flew up to a power-pole, where it remained unperturbed for further photographs before being flushed by a harassing Magpie-lark *Grallina cyanoleuca* (Figures 1–3). From its size against the Magpie-lark, the Falcon may have been a male. Evident in the photographs are the yellow cere, base of the lower mandible, orbital skin and feet. Although the photographs were processed in Adobe Photoshop Lightroom (they were originally shot in RAW file format), and were not overly saturated, as I prefer to keep colours as natural as I see them. I reviewed the RAW images, and conclude that the colour balance is true to life.

The Falcon's prey was a bird and appeared, from several wing-feathers, to be possibly a Crested Pigeon *Ocyhaps lophotes*. Two Whistling Kites *Haliastur sphenurus* were on the ground near the Black Falcon, but flushed as my car approached. I had seen a Black Falcon, possibly this individual, on two previous occasions around Oakey within the preceding year (both in 2023).

Diagnosis

The bird's features distinguishing it from a dark Brown Falcon *Falco berigora* include the long primaries, heavy



Figure 1. Black Falcon feeding on prey on the ground near Oakey, Queensland, July 2024. Photo: Amanda Lee Robertson



Figure 2. The same bird as in Figure 1. Photo: Amanda Lee Robertson



Figure 3. The same bird as in Figure 1, about to fly. Photo: Amanda Lee Robertson

feet, and feathered legs (long thigh feathers hiding the short bare tarsi). The photographs show the uniformly dark plumage, including the tail and underwings, with minimal fine and broken pale barring on the undersides of the outer primaries.

Discussion

The yellow bare parts, especially the cere, of this individual appear to be the most intense example recorded to date. Of note is that this individual was observed only ~50 km north-east of the individual observed at Cecil Plains on the Darling Downs (MacColl & Debus 2022). Also of note is that the yellow base to the lower mandible confirms this feature in the living bird, and is not an artifact of colour change in museum specimens that show this feature (MacColl & Debus 2022). The individual at Oakey (like that in Chapman & Churches 2024 and several specimens in MacColl & Debus 2022) was not particularly speckled and barred, having only slight barring in the primaries and some spotting on the greater underwing-coverts (Figure 3). Finally, Slater (in Slater & Elmer 2024) expressed regret at having illustrated the Black Falcon with yellow bare parts in his first field guide (Slater 1970), but the recent examples reviewed herein, and especially the bird at

Oakey, vindicate his initial decision even if such birds are greatly in the minority.

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