

## Second Mainland Australian Record of the Oriental Honey-Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhyncus*

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**Summary.** This note documents the second occurrence of an Oriental Honey-Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhyncus* for mainland Australia, in the Top End of the Northern Territory.

While with a birding group at Waterfall Creek (Gunlom) in Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory (13°25'S, 132°25'E), on 5 May 2005, I saw a dark medium-sized raptor soar up above the waterfall. An unusual bird, it superficially resembled the Black Honey-Buzzard *Henicopernis infuscatus* of New Britain. One of our party, Ken Havard, obtained some photographs of it as it circled over the escarpment, and I did so as the bird slowly drifted to the north. Our photographs were instrumental in having the Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) accept the record (BARC Case no. 477, T. Palliser pers. comm. January 2007).

The small head and slightly upturned wings were reminiscent of the Crested or Oriental Honey-Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhyncus* with which I was familiar in Asia, later confirmed when we referred to field guides (Robson 2000, 2002). It was a single bird, with no other raptors for comparison but clearly a medium-sized raptor in the Little Eagle *Hieraaetus morphnoides*/Black Kite *Milvus migrans* size range. It was a strikingly contrasted bird in this strong light, though dark brown above when it first appeared and was in better view. The body and underwing-coverts were blackish; the wing-tips black and well fingered; and the secondaries horizontally banded giving them a distinctly chequered appearance, with a dark trailing edge and two clear dark bands across the base of the flight-feathers. The tail was particularly striking, with a narrow pale tip, a broad black subterminal band, and a prominent white band anterior to that, with a second broad dark band more anterior, before another pale area around the base of the tail.

The rather small head appeared to have a greyish appearance in some lights. The tail was fairly long and slender when closed, but could appear rather *Buteo*-like when spread as the bird banked. The bird was soaring on bowed wings with primary-tips upcurled, typical of the genus *Pernis*. I thought that the legs may have been yellow.

The buteonine appearance rules out kites *Lophoictinia/Milvus*, harriers *Circus* or Red Goshawk *Erythrotriorchis radiatus*, and the small head, longish relatively slender tail when closed, and the bowed wing shape with upcurled primaries eliminate Little Eagle, as do the plumage markings. The chequered pattern on the wing is typical of many Oriental Honey-Buzzards. Structurally it was a typical *Pernis*, with small head, long tail and broad wings with bowed attitude and upcurled primary-tips. The wings were not long or broad enough for a Long-tailed Buzzard *Henicopernis longicauda* which always shows well-fingered primaries too, lacking in this bird. The seemingly dark blackish and white plumage bore a passing resemblance to the Black Honey-Buzzard, but again structure eliminates that highly unlikely species.

The Oriental Honey-Buzzard is polytypic, with one strongly migratory form



**Oriental Honey-Buzzard, Kakadu National Park, NT, 5 May 2005**

Plate 16

Photos: Phil Gregory

(*orientalis*) breeding in the Eastern Palaearctic and migrating as far south as Indonesia, and five essentially sedentary forms ranging from Pakistan to Indonesia (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2005). There are some arguments for treating the migrant *orientalis* as specifically distinct from the Indomalayan forms (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2005). Consequently, subspecific identification of the Waterfall Creek bird may be important. That the form *orientalis* displays strongly migratory behaviour, regularly occurs immediately to the north of Australia in the Lesser Sundas as far east as Tanimbar, and has previously been reported as a wide-ranging

vagrant, means that it is the form most likely to occur in Australia. The Kakadu bird was a very dark individual, but the species is polymorphic and shows a great and bewildering range of plumages, many still poorly known, though the existence of only one migratory form may narrow the field. I am reasonably confident that this record would refer to the form *orientalis*, should the arguments for taxonomic change presented in Ferguson-Lees & Christie (2005) receive widespread acceptance.

The Eastern (Oriental) Honey-Buzzard appears to be a rare migrant overshooting from Asia, as apparently it is regular as far east as the Lesser Sundas (Tanimbar), and therefore likely in tropical northern Australia. The Kakadu sighting was the first record for the Australasian zoogeographic zone to be accepted by the Birds Australia Rarities Committee, though the first for Australian territory was one on Christmas Island, Indian Ocean (in the Oriental zoogeographic zone) in December 2001 (Clarke 2003). An additional mainland Australian record is that of a specimen, now in the Western Australian Museum, that was found as a moribund individual near Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, in January 2003 (Anon. 2003). That record antedates the Kakadu bird discussed here, but has not yet gone through the BARC review process.

## References

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Received 5 March 2007

