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THE BIRDS OF PREY OF AUSTRALIA: A FIELD GUIDE

by Stephen Debus

1998. Oxford University Press, Melbourne. Pp. 152 + viii, colour plates 36, line drawings, 215 x 134 mm, \$19.95 (soft cover).

Australia has 24 resident species of diurnal birds of prey (raptors), which are members of the order Falconiformes. The biology and distribution of Australian raptors is relatively well-known as a result of the impressive efforts of a group of dedicated researchers, which includes both professional biologists and amateur naturalists. Among these people, Stephen Debus stands out, not only for his quiet and unassuming nature, but especially his intimate knowledge of Australian birds of prey in the field and through the literature.

The Birds of Prey of Australia provides a summary of the identification, distribution, and biology of each of Australia's birds of prey. The text is interspersed with a variety of illustrations which will assist in species identification, including 26 colour plates of flying and perched birds (from *HANZAB*, Vol. 2), colour photographs, line drawings of flying birds and sketches of flight silhouettes. Line drawings of interesting behaviours are also included. The book is a relatively short, compact publication which is the perfect size for a field guide. It can easily fit into the glove box of a vehicle (to use during BOP watches) or into a field pack.

The short introductory chapter defines 'what is a raptor?', lists the types of raptors present in Australia and then discusses raptor identification, biology, handling, and conservation. The key to Stephen Debus' approach in writing the book is given in the identification section of this chapter. Here he states that identification of raptors is not a matter of learning minute plumage details (as is the case, for example, with shorebirds), but to concentrate on shape, size, relative proportions, flight behaviour, calls, and characteristic behaviour or mannerisms. This work introduces each of Australia's birds of prey so that they can be identified using these features.

The chapters following the introduction detail each of Australia's resident raptors are divided into nine groups, with the species in each group covered in a single chapter. The nine groups are: Osprey, kites in the genus *Elanus*, Australian endemic hawks (Red Goshawk, Black-breasted Buzzard and Square-tailed Kite), Pacific Baza, large kites and sea-eagles, harriers, hawks in the genus *Accipiter*, booted eagles and falcons. For

each species a detailed description covers differences between sexes and ages and also describes colour morphs. The description includes details of features used to identify the species from similar species. It is here that the author's considerable knowledge of field characters and behaviour is apparent. Following the description, each account includes a summary of the Australian and extralimital (if applicable) distribution of the species. No maps are provided. This section is followed by ones on food and hunting, behaviour, breeding and threats and conservation. The behaviour section is particularly useful, providing a nice summary of the nature and characteristic haunts of each species.

The final chapter is a short, but very sobering, account of the threats facing Australian raptors and the management actions needed to ensure their survival. The chapter is both a summary and a synthesis of available information and includes many of the author's own ideas. The topics covered are far ranging and it makes for a very interesting and thought provoking conclusion to the text. The final chapter is followed by a glossary and a bibliography that lists papers published concurrently with or since *HANZAB*, Vol. 2.

I did notice a number of small faults with this work that I will mention briefly. Colour plates of a species are often not close to the species account in the text. For example, the Little Eagle account begins on page 101, whereas the plates are next to page 40. Unfortunately, plates are not numbered or titled and each species account does not indicate the location of the plates for that species. This lack of co-ordination could be a nuisance when using the guide in the field. The lack of maps is not a major problem but it would have been useful to have them. Also, a subject index would have been a practical addition.

Overall, I rate this publication very highly and recommend it to all readers who identify raptors in the field. The book is written in a manner that makes it accessible to observers from a wide range of backgrounds and with varying levels of experience. I cannot think of a better reference for an observer who is developing an interest in Australian raptors. Likewise, it will be very useful to overseas ornithologists and birders coming to grips with our raptors. Finally, observers like myself, who require clarification on characters or behaviours from time to time, will also find it to be a worthwhile purchase. I very much look forward to the same author writing a similar guide for Australian owls.

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