

## Hawks Unusual to the South-west of Victoria

By DONALD SHANKS, Woolsthorpe, Vic.

This season has been remarkable for the number of unusual avian visitors to the Woolsthorpe district (south-western Victoria). The country is largely open grass plains, with very little natural vegetation, and only artificial shelter belts offer cover to the few birds left that seek it. Birds of prey are always to be seen in fair numbers and *Uroaëtus audax*, *Haliastur sphenurus* and *Falco berigora* are ever present, the colour range of the last-named being most diverse. This summer, 1951-2, in addition to the foregoing and *Hieraaëtus morphnoides*, *Circus approximans* and *Falco cenchroides*, I have recorded, on more than one occasion, *Circus assimilis* (of which more anon), *Falco subniger*, and *Elanus notatus* and have once seen an undisputable Fork-tailed Kite (*Milvus migrans*).

I was watching two Brown Hawks at 10.30 a.m. on February 16, when I noticed three dark hawks much higher. They approached to about 250 feet directly above, wheeling and rising in an easy flight, the fork tail of one being plainly seen as the bird twisted from side to side. The other two appeared to have slightly cuneiform tails. I had noticed a great difference in the tails of birds of this species at Swan Hill, when a large flock of at least 60 was seen on the river at Murray Downs.

Another species which I have not been able to identify is as large as and darker than *Falco subniger*, but, instead of a golden sheen to its plumage, the head and mantle are suffused with smoky grey-blue and from the rear view in flight two white spots appear at the base of the tail, as though the bird wore spats, these being invisible when the bird is at rest. I have seen it at close range, seated on a fence post, on two occasions. Its flight is lazy but hawk-like, not harrier or eagle-like, nor does it exhibit fingers to its wings.

Of *Falco subniger*, I believe that a full account of a morning spent with this rare bird will be of interest. On Sunday, March 2, 1952, I was inspecting fencing when I flushed a Stubble Quail (*Coturnix pectoralis*). It was attacked by a hawk which I recognized as *F. subniger*, as this species had been in the district since January 25. The Falcon missed his mark and returned to me, then flew into a large dead tree. I continued on my way but was soon rejoined by him, when he flew into another dead tree. I sat down to watch (using Zeiss prismatic x8 binoculars) at fifty yards range. He, in turn, was watching me. He then turned

his head over his back to watch two large hawks flying at 100 feet, three-quarters of a mile away. I have this measurement from a recent survey. He took off and flew with great speed, to intercept them before they had gone a couple of hundred yards. He attacked the leader and caused it to drop its prey, which he caught in the air and carried off to a rock to eat. He finished his meal and returned to hover above me. By this time I had mustered some sheep and was driving them towards yards a mile away. A quail was flushed and was immediately attacked, but again the Falcon missed his mark, the quail diving into rushes. As the Falcon hovered over him, a Brown Hawk flew up from a distant tree and actually took over from the Falcon, which returned to hovering above me while the Brown Hawk endeavoured to beat up the quail. The Falcon remained hovering for at least ten minutes until we flushed a Pipit (*Anthus australis*) which he attacked at once and continued to attack eleven times until the birds went over a hill, the Pipit turning into and rising towards the Falcon at each attack.

On going to investigate the stolen meal, I flushed two Spotted Harriers (*Circus approximans*) from fence posts near by and discovered the fur of a young rabbit freshly killed at the stones. This Harrier is a beautiful bird and most unusual here.

On March 11, at 8 a.m., I saw a Spotted Harrier again. It was beating the grass, which is very thick, at about 30 feet. Following him, 50 feet higher, was a Black Falcon. The Harrier landed in some tussocks and the Falcon flew to a fence-post 100 yards away. I stalked the former with binoculars and caused it to fly to the fence. The Falcon flew across the road out of sight. I continued to stalk the Harrier and caused him to fly to a stunted gum about 100 yards further on. The Falcon immediately joined him and drove him from the tree, when he resumed his slow beating of the grass. The Falcon flew to a large dead tree and perched. On the Harrier's approaching the tree, the Falcon attacked him in the air and continued to attack as the Harrier perched in the tree. The Falcon was then driven off by Brown Hawks and flew away. This 'association' lasted for 45 minutes.

On March 13, on a road 8 miles west of Terang and 22 miles from here, I saw a fine Black Falcon perched on a post and, 100 yards further on, a Spotted Harrier beating tussocks. I watched for ten minutes, the Falcon keeping the Harrier in sight by flying along a fence.

Mr. J. A. Affleck, of 'Minyah', Hawkesdale, has also observed the association between Harrier and Falcon and more so the readiness with which *Falco subniger* accompanies stockmen working in the paddocks. So much is that

the case that the bird, which has not previously been seen at 'Minyah', is referred to by the men as 'Herb's bird' (Herb being engaged in rabbiting) from its habit of following the rabbit pack as it moves about the property.

Quail are numerous and have remained longer than is their wont, which may account for the exceptional number of birds of prey to be seen at any time of the day.

*Falco subniger* spends much time perched motionless on some slight eminence, such as a rock or fence post, but its head is never still and I should say it misses little of what is passing, although it ignores Magpie-Larks, Willie Wag-tails, Starlings and cockatoos.

## Annual Congress, 1952

Following an excursion, to be arranged, on Sunday, September 21, 1952, the Annual Congress is planned to open in Adelaide, South Australia, on the following day. On September 25, at 8 a.m., delegates will depart by train for Alice Springs, Central Australia, and the camp site on the Finke River. The camp will continue until October 8, and the party will leave for the return to Adelaide by plane, on October 10. Estimated cost, from Adelaide to Adelaide, is £63.

The camp will be held at the Amphitheatre, on the Finke River, in the James Range, near the Hermannsburg Mission and Palm Valley, about 100 miles from Alice Springs. Bond's Tours are catering for the party from the time of arrival at 'The Alice'. They have a modern chalet both in Alice Springs and at the Amphitheatre. At the latter there is new hut accommodation for 40 people and 'tentage' for any number in excess. All meals, transport and accommodation (including bedding and linen) are included in Bond's charge of £3 per head per day from Alice Springs to the camp and back. Buses will be at the camp for short excursions.

Further information may be obtained from the Branch Secretary for South Australia, Mr. H. T. Condon, South Australian Museum, Adelaide, S.A., or from Mr. Howard Jarman, Zoological Gardens, Adelaide, S.A. Notification of intention to attend the Congress and camp should be conveyed to Mr. Condon, and, in addition, to the Hon. General Secretary. A deposit of £5 is required when placing bookings.

*It is imperative that deposits reach Mr. Condon by July 29 and that plane bookings be arranged without delay.*