

First record of Oriental Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus* for Gabon and sub-Saharan Africa

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Première mention de la Bondrée orientale *Pernis ptilorhynchus* pour le Gabon et l'Afrique subsaharienne. Une Bondrée orientale *Pernis ptilorhynchus* a été observée et photographiée près de Tchimbélé, dans les Monts de Crystal, au Gabon (10°25'E 00°38'N), le 13 août 2004. Ceci constitue la première mention pour le Gabon de cette espèce paléarctique qui niche de la Sibérie jusqu'au Japon et hiverne principalement en Asie du Sud et du Sud-est. Récemment, des Bondrées orientales ont commencé à être notées au Moyen Orient et il se peut que des individus accompagnent des Bondrées apivores *P. apivorus* lors de leur migration vers l'Afrique. Il n'y a qu'une seule donnée antérieure pour l'Afrique continentale, de mai 1996, en Egypte.



Figure 1. Adult male Oriental Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, Monts de Crystal, Gabon, 13 August 2004; the tail appears rounded probably because the outer feathers are growing (W. S. Clark)

Bondrée orientale *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, mâle adulte, Monts de Crystal, Gabon, 13 août 2004; la queue apparaît arrondie, probablement parce que les rémiges extérieures sont en train de pousser (W. S. Clark)



Figure 2. (left) Juvenile African Harrier Hawk *Polyboroides typus*, The Gambia, March 1999; the underwing pattern is quite different from that of the bird in Fig. 1 (W. S. Clark)

Gymnogène d'Afrique *Polyboroides typus* juvénile, Gambie, mars 1999; le pattern sous-alaire est bien différent de celui de l'oiseau de la Fig. 1 (W. S. Clark)

Figure 3. (above) Adult Western Banded Snake Eagle *Circaetus cinerascens*, The Gambia, March 1999; the wings are shorter than that of the bird in Fig. 1, and the body is all dark. (W. S. Clark)

Circaète cendré *Circaetus cinerascens* adulte, Gambie, mars 1999; les ailes sont plus courtes que celles de l'oiseau de la Fig. 1, et le corps est entièrement sombre (W. S. Clark)

On 13 August 2004 we briefly observed and photographed what we initially thought was a European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* near Tchimbélé, Monts de Crystal, Gabon (10°25'E 00°38'N). However, upon reviewing the digital image (Fig. 1), we noticed that the bird lacked dark carpal patches on the underwings and had six, not five, long emarginated primaries ('fingers') and a dark tail with a broad white band. These are all field marks of Oriental Honey Buzzard *P. ptilorhynchus* (Forsman 1994, Clark 1999). European Honey Buzzards almost always have dark carpal patches, and always have five 'fingers' at the tips of the extended wings and pale tails with narrow dark bands (Forsman 1994, Clark 1999).

The bird had body plumage similar to that of a juvenile African Harrier Hawk *Polyboroides typus*, but with a tail pattern similar to an adult of that species. But the underwing pattern of the latter species (Fig. 2) differs in having broad dark tips to the outer primaries, even-width narrow dark bands on the secondaries, lacking a broad dark band on the trailing edge of the wing, and dark, not barred axillaries. The only other African raptor with a similar tail and underwing pattern is adult Western Banded Snake Eagle *Circaetus cinerascens*, but this species, which has not been recorded in Gabon, has relatively shorter, broader wings and an all-dark body, as well as five evenly spaced narrow dark bands on the secondaries (Fig. 3), very different from the Gabon bird in Fig. 1.

One reviewer suggested that the Gabon honey buzzard might be a hybrid between Oriental and European Honey Buzzards (see Forsman 1994, plate 15 for a photograph of a possible adult female hybrid between these species), based on the wings which appear narrow, and tail and underwing patterns which are intermediate. However, the bird in Fig. 1 is much more like the adult male Oriental Honey Buzzard in Plate 1 of Forsman (1994) than the adult male European Honey Buzzard in Plate 2. The wings of the Gabon bird (Fig. 1) appear narrow because it is flying away from the camera. The wings of the adult male Oriental Honey Buzzard in Plate 1 of Forsman (1994) appear to us to be the same width as the Gabon bird. We consider that the wing-width of the Gabon bird is not intermediate between the two honey buzzard species. The tail pattern of the Gabon bird is that of a pure adult male Oriental

Honey Buzzard, a dark tail with a broad white band, and shows no characters of European Honey Buzzard. Similarly, the underwing pattern of the Gabon adult male is within the range of individual variation shown by adult male Oriental Honey Buzzards in Plate 1 of Forsman (1994) and the five photographs in Morioka *et al.* (1995; Plates 14–16, 19 and 22). The Gabon bird has two narrow dark bands at the bases of the secondaries and inner secondaries, just like that of the adult male Oriental Honey Buzzard in Plate 1 of Forsman (1994). The adult male European Honey Buzzard in Plate 2 of Forsman (1994) has a different underwing pattern, with only one narrow dark band which does not extend onto the inner secondaries. Note that the Gabon bird has no dark in the carpal area, another character of Oriental Honey Buzzard; all adult European Honey Buzzards possess dark carpal patches. Further, the bird has the narrow dark throat stripes that are a character of Oriental Honey Buzzard not shown by European Honey Buzzard. As previously stated, the wingtips of the Gabon bird are identical to those of Oriental Honey Buzzard, with six long primaries on the wingtip. Specifically, p5 is much longer than p4 in this species, but only marginally longer in European Honey Buzzard. If the bird was a hybrid, then this and the characters discussed above might be expected to be intermediate.

Ours is the first record of Oriental Honey Buzzard for Gabon and sub-Saharan Africa. This Asian species, which is also known as Crested or Eastern Honey Buzzard, has been recorded in continental Africa just once, in Egypt in May 1996 (Baha el Din & Baha el Din 1997). The migratory northern race *orientalis* breeds from southern Siberia and northern Mongolia to North Korea and Japan, and migrates (from late August) to south and south-east Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines for the winter (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). Small numbers have been observed and photographed at the Chokpak Pass, in eastern Kazakhstan, in autumn, in the company of European Honey Buzzards (Forsman 1994). Forsman (1994), and Baha el Din & Baha el Din (1997), speculated that a few individuals might join flocks of European Honey Buzzards and regularly straggle to Africa. Oriental Honey Buzzards have since been recorded on migration in the Middle East, including Israel (over 20 records

since 1994), Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman (Shirihai *et al.* 2000, Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001, Eriksen *et al.* 2003, Richardson 2003). Three birds were claimed in Egypt during spring 2004 (S. Baha el Din *in litt.*). Juveniles of European and Oriental Honey Buzzards may remain in their winter quarters the following summer (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). The 'early' date of the Gabon sighting and the incomplete tail moult suggest that the bird had indeed spent the northern summer in Africa.

Of the few Palearctic raptors recorded in Gabon, European Honey Buzzard is the most frequent, occurring throughout the country, from coastal savannas to inland forests, as well as in anthropomorphic habitats such as the edge of plantations. The species starts to arrive in late September and is numerous from mid October to March. Most observations are of lone birds, but they sometimes occur in twos or threes. Contrary to common lore, they can be quite vocal and utter their plaintive whistling calls, especially in February, prior to spring migration. Some remain in Gabon during the northern summer (late May–August), presumably juveniles remaining their first year on the wintering grounds. Bates collected a juvenile male in the Dja, southern Cameroon, a century ago in June. The few recoveries of ringed birds from Finland (3) and Germany (1) suggest European origins for European Honey Buzzards in Gabon.

Our observation confirms that a few Oriental Honey Buzzards may migrate into sub-Saharan Africa. Observers in the region should therefore scrutinise carefully all honey buzzards seen.

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Editorial comment.—Prior to submission, Bill Clark had sought opinions from a number of experts as to the identity of this most interesting raptor, all of whom were of the opinion that the bird was indeed an Oriental Honey Buzzard. Despite this, the paper generated more discussion than perhaps any other that has been submitted to *Bull. ABC*. Eventually, the photographs and text were circulated to 13 referees for comments, some of whom were experts on *Pernis* identification, and others (the majority) had extensive experience of Afrotropical raptors. A minority had reasonable familiarity with resident African species and honey buzzards. The majority of commentators were of the opinion that the bird was a *Pernis*, some of whom agreed that it was an Oriental Honey Buzzard though three thought that the Gabon raptor was an African Harrier Hawk *Polyboroides typus* in somewhat atypical plumage. One referee was of the opinion that the bird seemed to be a hybrid *Pernis apivorus* × *ptilorhynchus* and further espoused the belief that at least some of the now quite numerous claims of *P. ptilorhynchus* from

Israel in recent years also relate to hybrid individuals, based on their appearing to show 'mixed' characters. The zone of overlap between the two *Pernis* species in Russia is seemingly at most rather small, and has been vigorously disputed by some authoritative authors (Stresemann 1940, Stepanyan 1983, Gamauf & Haring 2004), but nonetheless other Soviet authors were already reporting hybrids many years ago (see citations in Stepanyan 1983). Others admit the presence of a zone of overlap, but contest that they do not interbreed (e.g. Kislenko 1974). It is clear that the issue of whether these two species of honey buzzards are hybridising is one that is far from resolved, and indeed given that *P. ptilorhynchus* has been postulated to be spreading west in recent years (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001) might either be considered increasingly likely or its incidence be increasing. Detailed field studies from relevant regions are clearly rather urgently required. The

editors wish to thank all those who expressed an opinion on this bird. Because of the wide circulation to which this note and the accompanying photographs were subjected, we will only consider publishing very detailed, and preferably illustrated, responses on the identity of the Gabon bird.

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First record of Dunlin *Calidris alpina* for Benin

Ben van Muyen

Première mention du Bécasseau variable *Calidris alpina* pour le Bénin. Deux à cinq Bécasseaux variables *Calidris alpina* en plumage adulte internuptial ont été observées dans les marais de Guézin, au Lac Ahémé, à environ 30 km de Grand Popo, près de la frontière du Togo, dans le sud Bénin (06°24'N 01°57'E). Ceci constitue la première donnée documentée pour le pays.

On the afternoon of 6 February 2003, Barend van Gernerden and I visited Guézin marshes, Lac Ahémé, c.30 km from Grand Popo, near the Togolese border in south Benin (06°24'N 01°57'E). The area comprises an estuary with tidal mudflats, coastal lagoons, marshes and saltpans. During our visit we observed the first Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus* for the country (van Muyen 2005). We also saw several species of wader and subsequently realised that one of these had not been recorded previously in the country either.

Two rather dumpy shorebirds were foraging on exposed mud, picking and probing methodically. We instantly identified them as Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, a very common species on tidal mudflats of the Dutch Wadden Sea, where we watch waders regularly at all seasons. We observed them for c.10 minutes through 8 × 42 and 10 × 42 binoculars,

and a 20 × 65 telescope. A little later we found four more individuals on another patch of mud. All were in non-breeding plumage, being rather featureless with a plain, dull brownish-grey head and upperparts, a short, indistinct white supercilium, and white underparts with fine breast streaking forming a rather well-defined band. The longish, slightly decurved bill and the legs were black. Curlew Sandpiper *C. ferruginea*, the principal confusion species, has a longer, more decurved bill, longer legs, imparting a less dumpy appearance, and a more prominent supercilium.

This appears to be the first documented record of this Palearctic visitor for Benin. Although a table in Dodman & Taylor (1996), presenting the totals of waterbird counts undertaken in West Africa in January 1996, mentions 26 Dunlin for Benin, this exceptionally high figure has never



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