FALCO BABYLONICUS, Gurney

J. Wolf & H. C. Richter, del. & lith.

Walter, Imp.

FALCO BABYLONICUS, Gurn.

Red-naped Falcon.

Falco babylonicus, Gurney, Slater and Irby in Ibis, 1861, p. 218, pl. vii.—Blyth, Ibis, 1863, p. 8.—Jerd. Birds of India, vol. i. p. 32.

This fine peregrine type of Falcon has only been brought to light within the last few years; for it is in 'The Ibis' for 1861, p. 218, that Captain Irby states "Mr. Slater has kindly supplied me with the following remarks upon this hitherto undescribed bird:—

" 'Captain Irby's specimen, which was obtained in Oude, seems to be referable to a new species or distinct variety of true Falcon, most nearly allied to the *Falco barbarus*, for which Mr. Gurney proposes to use the name *F. babylonicus*, the first specimen of it having been obtained in Babylonia by the Euphrates Exploring Expedition. Besides Captain Irby's specimen, I am acquainted with the following individuals referable to *F. babylonicus*:—An example in partially immature plumage also procured by the Euphrates Exploring Expedition in Babylonia, and presented by Commander Jones to the India Museum, and two adult specimens in the Norwich Museum.' "

Since these remarks were published, I have been favoured by Colonel L'Estrange with the loan of a female; and a fine male was in my possession for some time from the collection of Major E. Delmé Radcliffe, of the 88th Connaught Rangers, both of which were obtained in the north-western portion of India; and Mr. Blyth states that, in a recent communication from Dr. Jerdon, it is asserted that the *F. babylonicus* is not uncommon in Cashmere. The occurrence of the bird in the above-mentioned localities leaves no doubt on my mind that part of Scinde, the north-western Himalayas, and Afghanistan form the true habitat of this species, and that its range never extends so far east as the Bengal Presidency, or to the southern part of the Indian peninsula. That it has many habits in common with the *F. peregrinus*, and that it also assimilates to that species in disposition, flight, and courage, there can be little doubt; but on this head I shall give some extracts from a very valuable paper published in the 'Field' for Nov. 16, 1867, by Major E. Delmé Radcliffe, a gentleman who is evidently a careful observer and fully impressed with the interest which attaches to any information respecting the fine Falcons of the part of India in which he is located (Kala Bagh, near Murree, in the Himalayas); and it has seldom fallen to my lot to quote lines more to the purpose, and which I feel confident may be strictly relied upon.

After a few preliminary remarks on the Shaheen Falcons of India, this gentleman says:—

"I believe there are at least three kinds. The two I am best acquainted with are the Common Shaheen, or Sultan Falcon (*F. peregrinator*), called by the falconers of India 'kala shaheen,' or 'kala kohee,' signifying black shaheen, or black kohee; and the Red-naped Shaheen (*F. babylonicus*), called by the Indian falconers 'sufaid shaheen' or 'kohee,' or 'lall sir shaheen' (white shaheen or kohee, or red-head shaheen). The latter has been erroneously called the Red-naped Lanner by some authors; and I am inclined to think that, in the very pale slate-colour which this Falcon always assumes on the back, in the adult plumage, it has been mistaken by some observers for the Sultan Falcon in an undescribed state of plumage: for the Sultan Falcon certainly never becomes light-coloured with age; the head is of a very dark slate-colour, almost black in some, the back darker than in most dark-coloured Peregrines, while the breast is very deep rufous at an advanced age. The Red-naped Shaheen becomes very pale slate-colour on the back, and its head red, at the first moult, and the back perhaps a shade or two paler at the next two moults; but the rufous colour of the breast, never so deep as in the Sultan Falcon, is maintained, and, if anything, becomes a shade deeper, while the markings become finer, as in the Sultan Falcon and Peregrine. I am at a loss to understand how the Red-naped Shaheen ever came to be confounded with the Lanners or Desert Falcons—birds of a far inferior type,—as it has nothing in common with these Falcons, possessing as it does all the characteristics of the Peregrine type; and a very handsome Falcon it is, though not equalling the Sultan Falcon in beauty. I do not entirely admire its red head; some individuals I have seen with the heads nearly as red as the Red-headed Indian Merlin.

"Both *F. peregrinator* and *F. babylonicus* breed in the rocks in the hills surrounding our hut encampment, chiefly towards the north and west. Many, I am told, breed in and about the Khyber pass and the mountains of Afghanistan; certain breeding pairs are well known to the native chiefs, from which they obtain the young Hawks for training every year. I have a stuffed specimen of *F. babylonicus*, which was shot close by; it is a bird of this year, which had apparently not long left the nest; and I almost daily see young Hawks of the latter species flying over the hill we are on, though it is covered with pine trees, and stooping at the Ravens (*Corvus corax*)—which are very abundant here, as wild as they are in England, and

nearly as impudent as the *C. splendens* of the lower country,—and also at the hill-Crows (*C. intermedius*). By both of these they are evidently held in great awe; and while the Falcon is soaring overhead there is a dead silence which is very remarkable (owing to the incessant noise these rascals kick up all day long), and they are all carefully stowed away in the pine trees. The Falcon often appears suddenly when they are flying about croaking and cawing and enjoying themselves, and comes up amongst them, stooping right and left, putting them all in; and then she rises and soars overhead. It is all play, I suppose; but I have seen the Ravens on several occasions within an ace of being killed, which they must have been if actually struck, from the velocity of the Falcon; and once one was picked up which I believe to have been killed by the Shaheen. I suppose she would not eat Crows; but it is very evident to any one seeing her fly, that if she stooped to strike, even in this place with all these pine trees about, she could easily strike a Crow, or even a Raven, whenever she pleased. The Crows seem quite helpless before her; and though the Ravens fly far better than the Crows, they are in mortal terror too. In these hills the Shaheen preys principally upon Green Pigeons and Chukar Partridges.

“The flight of Shaheens is very fine. I do not think they are so active in repeating a stoop as the Peregrine, or that they mount as quickly; but in a long rush slanting downwards, or straight down, I think they excel the Peregrine in speed. They would make first-class game-Hawks, but they require a great deal of room to fly. They are exceedingly docile and good-tempered, and are very easily broken to the hood. They moult faster and better in confinement than any Falcons or Hawks I am acquainted with. Shaheens are not adapted for ringing flights, which is the chief reason why they are not so highly esteemed by the falconers in the lower country as they are up here, where Hawks are trained to wait on. In their wild state, as I said before, they do not mount so quickly as Peregrines; and when brought into low condition, to make them fly at Herons &c., and for the rapid course of training practised by the falconers of Oude and Central India, who only get wild-caught Hawks to deal with, and a very short hawking-season to break and fly them in, this defect is the more observable; and it is a common thing to hear the falconers of Oude say that the Shaheen or Kohee does not stand training. The truth is, that these Falcons are useless, or nearly so, unless they are flown in very high condition. The style of their flight does not admit of their being pinched.

“Speaking of the plumage of Shaheens has reminded me that I have seen it stated that the varieties noted are probably owing in some measure to domestication, ‘as it is well known that birds moulting in confinement vary somewhat in the shades of their plumage’ from wild ones. (See Jerdon’s ‘Birds of India,’ vol. i. p. 38.) This is, speaking of the varieties of the Shaheen called by the natives, as Jerdon says, white, black, blue, and red. Now their white Shaheen, or Kohee, as I before said, is the red-naped Shaheen (*F. babylonicus*); their black Shaheen is the Sultan Falcon (*F. peregrinator*); and these two species are sufficiently defined. I have met with another, more like the Peregrine than these two, which is called ‘Neela,’ or the blue Shaheen. The red or ‘lall’ Shaheen, I do not know; but I don’t think there is any confusion, owing to variations in colour from domestication, with the more intelligent falconers of India.”

The figures represent a male and a female, of the size of life.

Gould, John. 1868. "Red-naped Falcon, *Falco babylonicus*, Gurn. [Pl. 4]." *The Birds of Asia* 1(XX), -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323102>.

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