

First record of Oriental Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus* for Djibouti and Africa, in 1987

Geoff and Hilary Welch

Première mention de la Bondrée orientale *Pernis ptilorhynchus* pour Djibouti et l'Afrique. Un rapace photographié sur le côté djiboutien du Bab-el-Mandeb en novembre 1987 a été récemment identifié comme une Bondrée orientale *Pernis ptilorhynchus* juvénile, la première mention pour Djibouti et l'Afrique.

Counts of migratory birds crossing the Bab-el-Mandeb strait into northern Djibouti in October 1985 and October–November 1987 recorded 80,732 and 246,478 soaring migrants, respectively, establishing the Bab-el-Mandeb as a major migratory bottleneck (Welch & Welch 1988). As would be expected with these numbers of birds, a proportion remained unidentified—972 in 1985 and 65,296 in 1987—usually because they were too distant for identification to species, but occasionally because their identity was not immediately obvious. Some of these unidentified birds were photographed. One was the raptor shown in Fig. 1, photographed sometime between 1 and 9 November 1987 (exact date unknown) and at the time recorded as ‘honey buzzard?’ due to its tail pattern. However, the bird otherwise lacked the characteristic features of European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*, i.e. prominent dark carpal patches, sparsely barred inner primaries and secondaries (usually three bars) and five visible primaries. Early November is also rather late for a migrant of this species. Furthermore, at Bab-el-Mandeb the species is either uncommon (five in 1985; 17 in 1987) or migrates earlier in autumn. As the literature available at the time did not point to the possibility of any other species—and there was no internet—attempts to identify the bird on our return to the UK were unsuccessful. The image was consigned to the ‘mystery birds’ box in our slide collection and largely forgotten.

In early 2016, we were invited by A. Laurent to assist with the preparation of a book on development and biodiversity conservation in Djibouti, which necessitated the preparation of a definitive bird list for the country. As Alain was keen to illustrate the checklist with photographs of birds taken in Djibouti, we went through our slide collection to find suitable images and in the process came across the ‘mystery birds’ images.

Since 1987, knowledge of bird identification and distribution has increased dramatically and several species previously unknown or considered extreme vagrants are now recognised as regular if scarce visitors to Africa and the Middle East. One such is Oriental Honey Buzzard *P. ptilorhynchus*, which is now regularly recorded at migration hotspots such as Eilat in Israel (Shirihai *et al.* 2000, Harrison & Lamsdell 2015) and Batumi in Georgia (Harrison & Lamsdell 2013, 2015, 2016), and winters in small numbers in parts of the Arabian Peninsula, especially the United Arab Emirates (Babbington & Campbell 2016). It has even been recorded as far west as Italy (Scuderi & Corso 2011) and Sweden (Orta *et al.* 2016; record awaiting official acceptance). Thus, this time when we looked at our slide (Fig. 1) we immediately suspected it could be of an Oriental Honey Buzzard. Closer examination seemed to confirm this: the bird shows six visible primaries, densely barred secondaries and no dark carpal patches. Despite the fact that a similarly plumaged



Figure 1. Juvenile Oriental Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, Djibouti, November 1987 (Geoff & Hilary Welch)

Bondrée orientale *Pernis ptilorhynchus* juvénile, Djibouti, novembre 1987 (Geoff & Hilary Welch)

bird, photographed at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, on 30 November 2013, appears on the cover of *Sandgrouse* 36(2), it seemed wise to obtain expert confirmation of the identification considering its significance. The image was sent to D. Forsman who agreed that the bird was indeed a juvenile Oriental Honey Buzzard.

This represents not only the first, and so far only, record for Djibouti, but also the first for Africa, pre-dating the previous first record of a bird at Bir El Ambigi on 9 May 1996 (Baha El Din & Baha El Din 1997). In Africa, there are currently fewer than ten accepted records from Egypt (Babbington & Campbell 2016) and records of singles on Socotra (Qalansiyah lagoon, 28 February 2009: Balmer & Betton 2009), in Gabon (Monts de Crystal, 13 August 2004: Clark & Christy), Kenya (Meru National Park, September 2014: Kennedy & Marsh 2016) and in Sudan (Red Sea hills north of Port Sudan, 1 June 2011: T. Jenner in *Bull. ABC* 19: 108). Like the Djibouti bird, those in Kenya and Sudan were specifically identified only via subsequent examination of photographs.

The increase in records of Oriental Honey Buzzard in Europe, the Middle East and Africa almost certainly largely reflects increased awareness of the species among observers. It is also possibly the result of an as yet undocumented westward breeding range expansion or part of a migration route used to avoid the Himalayas (Schweizer & Mitropolskiy 2008, Babbington & Campbell 2016).

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