

Reviews

Flight Identification of Raptors of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East

Dick Forsman

Christopher Helm, 2016. Hbk, 544pp; many colour photographs
ISBN 978-1-4729-1361-6

RRP £45.00. **BB Bookshop price £38.99 if you quote BB095**

Dick Forsman has become a legend in the field of raptor identification. Renowned for his amazing eyesight and an encyclopedic knowledge of identification features, including moult, he has become the 'go to' man if help is needed on photographs of tricky raptors in this digital age.

Dick Forsman has published previously in magazines and a number of books, but confesses that this latest offering has come about because of the advent of modern digital photography. This has truly been a 'game-changer': more images can be taken in rapid succession at high resolution and with amazing autofocus technology, allowing the lens to lock onto a subject at great speed no matter where it may be in the image. High-resolution sensors allow faster shutter speeds, the ability to manipulate (in a positive way) the lighting – notably in shadows when the subject is against a bright sky. As he says: 'Suddenly there was a need to capture all the raptors again with the latest digital equipment. Since 2003, my goal has been to find and to document all the raptor species found within the Western Palearctic, capturing their different plumages for this book.'

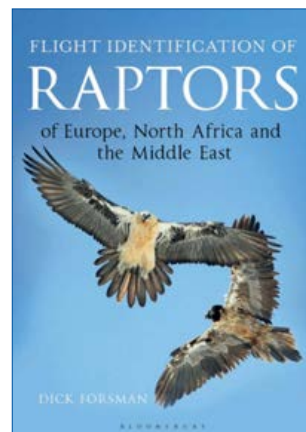
And the result is this simply monumental book, which adds greatly to his earlier volume, *The Raptors of Europe and the Middle East* (Poyser, 1999). Naturally, comparisons will be made between the two, but in reality they complement each other: the earlier book contains more substantive and detailed text, a few illustrations as well as many photographs – of birds perched and in flight though of variable quality; the later volume has less text, but vastly improved images of raptors in flight – all superb and reproduced larger; and of course these photos are underpinned by another 15–20 years of experience and knowledge.

The introductory text covers issues such as plumage variation and moult, but also two sections by other authors that particularly caught my eye: 'Hawkwatching in and around Europe', by Keith L. Bildstein and Anna Sandor; and 'Migration Ecology', by Ian Newton, which looks at mode

of flight, how weather affects migration and the new(ish) science of satellite tracking that is increasing our knowledge of raptor migration immensely. These are but the hors d'oeuvres before the main course, however; the bulk of the book (nearly 500 pages) is a wealth of very high-quality flight photographs, almost all taken within the designated area of the title of the book, and virtually all taken by the author.

Taxonomically, the order of the species roughly follows that established by *Raptors of Europe and the Middle East*, but was a little alien to me, as a user of the IOC Checklist. There is no mention of the recent placement of falcons near to parrots in the systematic order, and it would be fascinating to know Forsman's thoughts about that. Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* and Barbary Falcon *F. peregrinoides* are treated as one species, though it is noted that 'the entire Peregrine complex is still in need of further taxonomic research'. In the course of the 33 images of the two it may be hard to argue against the logic of such a decision, given the variability and extensive 'hybridisation' between them. In general, though, a little more discussion of the reasons for the decisions made on taxonomy and nomenclature might have been helpful in promoting our understanding.

There is an increase of 18 species from the first book, mostly a result of the wider geographic scope, but sometimes taxonomic revision, as in the case of Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonius*, and recent occurrences within the Western Palearctic – Amur Falcon *F. amurensis* and African White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus*. Also new is the discussion of certain hybrids or intergrades that affect positive identification of some extralimital species. A good example is the expanded Black Kite *Milvus migrans* account. Over 18 pages and 42 clear annotated photos, we are taken through ageing and



identification features of 'Western Black Kite' *M. m. migrans* and 'Black-eared Kite' *M. m. lineatus*, highlighting the problems that may be encountered in identifying and assessing putative claims outside the normal range, especially of some *lineatus*-like intergrades, termed 'Eastern Black Kite'.

Account length varies according to the level of complexity of the topic: there are two pages and three photographs on Swallow-tailed Kite *Elanoides forficatus* – included on the basis of two records from Iceland – and some 30 photos of Common Buzzard *Buteo b. buteo* plus 36 of Steppe Buzzard *B. b. vulpinus*, 23 of Long-legged Buzzard *B. r. rufinus* and 20 of 'Atlas' Long-legged Buzzard *B. r. cirtensis* and 'Gibraltar Buzzard' intermediates. The text of each species follows a standard format of 'Variation' (actually largely taxonomy), 'Distribution', 'Behaviour', 'Species Identification' and 'Plumages' (both highly variable in length depending on the difficulty of the subject), 'Moult' and 'Confusion Risks'.

For all species it is the photographs, plus Forsman's brief but focused captions, that will inspire and educate the most. The reproduction is very good and photographic quality veers between very good to excellent. The images are printed larger than in the previous book, allowing for closer examination of the details described. Sometimes they are almost too good, showing a level of detail that may not actually be visible in the field: species such as (European) Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus* and Peregrine are often identified before much plumage

detail is noted, but Forsman deals with both the simple identification (shape and structure) and the greater detail required for ageing, sexing and separation of difficult and similar species. I suspect that this is a book aimed at those who want to take their raptor identification skills to another level.

This is an outstanding book and I know that it will take the place of my well-worn 'first Forsman' as the first port of call for all of my raptor ID concerns – of which there can be many at times... The sections on 'pyg-mac' harriers – Montagu's *Circus pygmaeus* and Pallid Harrier *C. macrourus* – may well be the ones I consult the most. I have few quibbles, but there is no mention of eastern Lesser Kestrels *F. naumanni*, sometimes treated as a separate subspecies '*pekinensis*', or the increase in grey on the wings and general darker overall appearance of eastern birds; some of the 'Behaviour' sections are a bit 'dry', giving little away of the excitement of watching raptors or the dynamic nature of some of the species – Merlin *F. columbarius* for example; and the taxonomic issues mentioned earlier. Yet these are not really negatives, and perhaps I just wanted even more from the maestro himself!

This book is the result of Dick Forsman spending a lifetime watching raptors. You feel that there is little he doesn't know. Even if you already own the 'first Forsman' – or any other book on the flight identification of Western Palearctic raptors – you should not hesitate to buy this one too!

Brian Small

Britain's Birds: an identification guide to the birds of Britain and Ireland

By Rob Hume, Robert Still, Andy Swash, Hugh Harrop and David Tipling

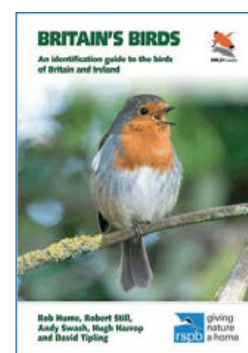
WildGuides, 2016. Pbk, 560pp; over 3,200 colour photographs
ISBN 978-0-691-15889-1

RRP £19.95. **BB Bookshop price £13.95 if you quote BB106**

This volume covers all of the species, and more distinctive subspecies, recorded in Britain and Ireland, including all accepted vagrants plus a few very recently reported species that have not, as yet, been verified by the relevant national bodies. In so far as any published work can be up to date, the present book scores very highly. Although Ireland is mentioned in the subheading, the main title seems curious, and not a little undiplomatic, given the actual geographical scope. Surely a more appropriate, if less snappy, title could have been chosen.

In addition to its more limited geographical

scope, compared with most of the alternative identification guides on the market, what really sets the present book apart is that it uses photographs rather than illustrations. I have always been rather wary of photographic guides, since the best illustrators (and we are truly spoiled for these in Europe) can capture the essence of a species, whereas photographs simply show individual birds at a moment in time. Yet this guide goes a long way to convince me that photographic identification guides do indeed have



a role to play, at least as useful companion volumes to conventional guides.

The standard of the photographs – and there are over 3,200, although some are used more than once – is generally outstanding and their arrangement carefully and effectively thought through to maximise their usefulness as identification aids. More difficult species and groups have more images and in some cases there are separate pages in which similar species are compared side by side and the identification issues discussed. Small maps indicate distribution within the covered area but text is minimal, briefly summarising status and key characteristics. Most of the photographs are annotated with age and sex details or to further highlight useful field marks.

In the case of more difficult species groups, such minimal text is sometimes a disadvantage and important caveats are not always addressed. For example, a pale flash on the under primary coverts is a useful, but not diagnostic, field mark of young Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus* and is referred to twice on the page comparing juvenile skuas. One of the images of a juvenile Arctic Skua *S. parasiticus* on the same page, though, shows exactly the same feature, yet this receives no clarifying comment.

Of greater concern, however, is the fact that some photographs have either been misidentified or show misleadingly atypical individuals. The bird labelled as a juvenile Audouin's Gull *Larus audouinii* on p. 139 looks much more like one of the other large gulls due to the heavy checkering on the wing-coverts; a better example of a clear-cut Audouin's could easily have been found. In a book of this size and ambition it is inevitable that some errors will creep in but it is hard to explain away the fact that the juvenile Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* on p. 182, complete with annotations pinpointing features separating it from a Ringed Plover *C. hiaticula*, is surely itself a Ringed Plover. Such mistakes are not widespread, though I believe others have found more than I have detected so far, and there are enough to be a cause of concern.

More prevalent are issues around the labels describing the age and sex of birds in the images. These are used liberally but in more than just a few instances they are incorrect or at least questionable. The bird labelled as a first-summer Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* in August on p. 144 could in reality be of any age except juvenile. On p. 355 two spring Meadow Pipits *Anthus pratensis* are confidently aged as '1st-year' – how has this been done? I'm not at all sure that it can be. Less would have been more here, while it is admirable to try and put an age or sex on everything, there must be limits dictated by

what can actually be known with certainty. It is frustrating too that when images are reused on pages where species are compared side by side they are sometimes labelled differently, thus the 'juvenile' Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* on p. 315 is an 'immature male' two pages before; and there are many examples of such niggling discrepancies. Again and again I'm left asking how, and indeed why, a particular bird has been aged and sexed as it has.

Such errors and suggestions of carelessness tend to put you on guard for other inaccuracies, which in turn limits your faith in the book as an identification guide. On the back cover is the claim that *Britain's Birds* offers 'Simple steps to help you find and identify any bird you see'. This is an extravagant claim for any guide, though presumably down to the publisher rather than the authors, who rightly caution against overly simplistic identification processes in the introduction. Unfortunately, they do not always seem to have followed their own advice. It is also stated that the guide will 'show all plumages likely to be encountered'. This claim is also rather wide of the mark; for example, anyone looking for an image of a juvenile Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* will be disappointed, unless they realise that some of the birds labelled as adult females appear to be juveniles. In comparison with what must have been a monumental task of gathering and arranging the images, I'm left with the impression that less care and attention was taken when preparing the accompanying text and captions.

Just 20 years ago, *Britain's Birds* would have represented an undreamed of resource for those interested in the finer points of bird identification. Younger readers will hardly be able to believe how difficult it was to get access to photographs for reference in the pre-digital age. Now, of course, a few clicks of a mouse will give you access to a multitude of photographs of almost any species on the planet. Despite occasional errors, the present guide is still far more reliable than such online resources – the internet is a veritable hotbed of bird misidentification.

This guide is a genuine bargain and the photographs are truly excellent in the main, as is the way they have been presented. Despite some concerns and frustrations, I cannot help but recommend it to anyone with an interest in the status and identification of birds in Britain and, of course, Ireland. Some may feel, though, that it would be better to wait for a revised version in which some of the unfortunate errors have been fixed.

Chris Kehoe

