

Notes on the Hawks observed in the Upper North of South Australia during 1937.

By T. Brandon, Wilmington.

Thirteen species of the order *Accipitriformes*, the Diurnal Birds of Prey, nested in the Wilmington District during 1937. A Black or Fork-tailed Kite (*Milvus migrans*) was seen on 9th, 12th, and 19th July—that species nested in 1932. The Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus audax*) has been dealt with previously—see pages 117/121 of this Volume. The details of the other species are as follow:—

Circus assimilis, Spotted Harrier.

As 1937 was a good year these birds were seen fairly often and twelve nests were found during the breeding season, but not all of them were inspected. The birds can usually be seen soaring low over wheat crops or saltbush country, every now and then dropping to the ground to catch a grasshopper (locust), etc., but the writer has never seen this Harrier catch a small bird such as a Chat (*Epthianura*) or a Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).

On 3rd May two birds were seen circling around with a Black Falcon, eight miles east of Wilmington. On 7th July a nest in a redgum tree was inspected. It was at the extreme end of a long thin sloping limb forty feet from the ground and was built by the Harriers. In fact, these birds, as far as I know, always build their own nests, and usually on a thin horizontal limb which makes them hard to get at. This nest was lined with gum leaves and contained two eggs. A lot of skilful manoeuvring was required to secure these eggs from the nest. One person was in the top of the tree giving directions, another with a scoop on the end of a long thin stick (eighteen feet), and a third on the ground with a bag in case of accidents. It might be added that one egg was caught in this manner. Later on it was found that a third egg was firmly embedded in the sticks in the side of the nest and appeared to have been laid before the nest was finished. 16th October.—A pair of birds

had been seen near a certain spot for some time, and on this date a nest on a thin horizontal limb thirty feet up in a red gumtree was found. It was constructed with redgum twigs and salt-bush sticks, was lined with green gum leaves, and contained four eggs which were slightly incubated. Both birds flew around close to the nest and now and then swooped at the climber, uttering short cackling notes. The eggs were coloured a faint bluish white and were a little nest-stained. 20th October.—A bird was flushed from a nest with three eggs in a redgum, and on 28th November three chicks, nearly fully feathered, were sitting on the edge of the nest.

Astur fasciatus, Australian Goshawk.

1st October.—A male bird of this species was flushed from a nest in a white-gumtree growing in a creek on Carrierloo Station. The nest was about twenty-five feet from the ground, about the size of a Crow's, and built of fairly coarse sticks, lined with gum leaves, which appeared to have been green when placed in the nest. There were three white eggs with a few faint blotches of pale pink which seemed to be on the inside of the shell—they were partly incubated. While the nest was being inspected the female joined its mate in a bushy tree, but they flushed as soon as an attempt was made to approach them.

This species often visits our property in the early morning and causes great alarm in the fowlyard, but, as far as I know, does not interfere with fully-grown poultry. They usually seem to be after Sparrows about the sheds, and a Goshawk was seen to fly right into the hedge after one of those birds and then fall back to the ground, where it sat looking about in a dazed manner for a few seconds before flying away. The White-backed Magpies seem to object to the presence of this species of Hawk in particular, and never fail to give chase if one appears.

Accipiter cirrocephalus, Collared Sparrowhawk.

The nesting of this species in 1937 has been described on page 134 of this Volume. In addition, a nest containing four eggs was found on 6th October. On 9th January, 1938, a male bird flew from a tree near our house and caused great alarm among the smaller birds.

Hieraetus morphnoides, Little Eagle.

6th August.—A Little Eagle was noted seemingly fighting with a Black Falcon over a nest. They were first heard a quarter of a mile away, and when approached the Falcon was seen to be swooping at the Little Eagle, which was standing in an old nest of a Whistling Eagle situated in a rather exposed

position. Every time the Falcon swooped the Little Eagle would squat in the nest and both would utter short cackling noises or screams. On being disturbed the Little Eagle circled away and the Falcon perched on the top of a nearby tree. The next day these birds were still fighting, but the following day the Falcon was not about. A few days later a Little Eagle was flushed from a nest with two eggs in a tree thirty yards away, but the Falcon was not seen. 12th August.—A Little Eagle was flushed from an old nest of a Crow (*Corvus*), which was placed, and firmly embedded, in the top of a thick mistle-toe near the end of a thin sloping limb fifty feet up in a redgum. The nest had been used during the previous season by the Crows, but had been scratched out this year and relined by the Little Eagles with green gum leaves which were nearly dry at the time of inspection. It was found to contain two eggs which were white, but one had a few minute specks of rusty brown on the larger end. The egg cavity was eleven inches wide by four inches deep. On 16th October a Little Eagle was again flushed from this nest which contained two eggs. On this occasion the eggs were pure white. Only one bird was seen in the vicinity of the nest at one time and was fairly quiet, but showed no signs of aggression whilst we were at the nest. On 9th September a Little Eagle was flushed from an old nest of a Whistling Eagle forty-five feet up in a redgum. The nest was lined with gum leaves and contained a white egg with a few reddish brown freckles on the larger end. Several weeks after this a Little Eagle was again flushed, but the nest on this occasion was empty.

Haliastur sphenurus, Whistling Eagle.

Odd pairs of this species can be found along the gum creeks of the Upper North, but they seem to prefer a swampy place to a dry one. From 21st April to 10th June a bird was often seen flying along the creek. Once it was seen feeding off a dead sheep. 1st August, 1937.—A bird was flushed from a nest fifty-five feet up in a gum sapling. The mate was sitting in a nearby tree and both circled around and watched us all the time we were at the nest, which was approximately twenty-four inches wide and fifteen inches deep, with a deep saucer-shaped hollow inside ten inches wide by five inches deep. The nest was built of sticks and twigs, lined with bits of wool, etc., but no eggs were in it. A few days later an egg was there, but was not interfered with. A further inspection was made later as the Whistling Eagles were not about the nest and it was then found that the nest was empty, even the one egg had gone. Later in the season the Little Falcons used this nest, but the Whistling Eagles

did not nest again in the vicinity, although they still lived in the same haunts.

Elanus axillaris, Black-shouldered Kite.

Odd pairs of this species were about the district in 1937. The first time they were noted was on 6th March, on which date a pair was seen along the Willochra Creek. No more were seen until 13th June, but from that date on odd birds were often seen. 4th August:—A Kite was flushed from an old nest of a Magpie. It flew to an adjoining dry tree and alighted on the top and was soon joined by its mate. The nest was fifty feet from the ground at the end of a thin sloping limb of a redgum and had to be inspected with a mirror on a twelve-foot stick. The nest had probably been used by the Magpies during the previous season, but now it had been cleaned out and lined with gum leaves, and was a very flimsy structure. It contained three fresh eggs—one was white with a few blotches and spots of rusty brown clustered at the larger end; the other end was almost pure white. The second egg was white at the smaller end and almost covered with rusty brown at the larger end; while the third egg was blotched all over with dirty brown patches. A Spotted Harrier was seen building a nest in the same tree. 1st October.—A Kite was flushed from a nest at the top of a tall redgum. It was built by the Kites and was nearly as large as that of a Crow, and was lined as usual with gum leaves. The clutch was three eggs, which were white in ground-colour, but covered all over the larger ends with dark red blotches and patches. On 28th December a pair of these birds was seen feeding young in a nest eighty feet up in a redgum. The nest seemed to be an old nest of a Crow, but was not climbed to.

Falco longipennis, Little Falcon.

22nd May, 1937.—A bird flew over the boxthorn hedge at the house and caught a hapless Sparrow, which had happened to leave the hedge at the wrong moment. The Falcon flew off with the Sparrow dangling from its talons, struggling and squealing. Suddenly a Magpie made chase after the Falcon, but could not overtake it. 10th June.—Whilst working a team of horses a Little Falcon was noticed flying fast over saltbush when suddenly it swooped at a Chat (*Epthianura*) and missed, but within a fraction of a second the Falcon had swooped again and captured the Chat in its talons and flew away. 9th September.—A bird was flushed from an old nest of a Crow ninety feet from the ground in the top of a redgum. It contained three fresh eggs. The nest had been scratched out and had

been roughly relined with wool. The female was flushed and was soon joined by its mate; both birds at first sat on a dry limb of a neighbouring tree screaming loudly, and every now and then making swoops at the climber. 10th September.—A nest in which this species bred last year was visited. A bird was seen to fly away from the tree as it was approached, and a few sticks thrown caused another bird to flush from the nest, which on inspection was found to contain three eggs of a very light colour for this species, being pink with a few darker reddish blotches on them. The nest was fifty feet from the ground at the end of a long thin horizontal limb in a redgum, and to look in the nest a mirror had to be fastened on the end of a twelve-foot stick. The nest had only been scratched out from the previous year's, but no attempt had been made at relining it. The birds sat on a nearby tree, but showed no resentment at their nest being inspected. 2nd October.—Three eggs of a Little Falcon were found in a Whistling Eagle's nest which these latter birds had built and deserted earlier in the year.

Falco hypoleucus, Grey Falcon.

9th September, 1937.—A Grey Falcon was seen sitting in a tree which contained several old nests of Crows. This bird flew to a neighbouring tree and on clapping our hands another bird was flushed from one of the nests. It flew away and joined its mate on the top of the other tree and both birds sat and silently watched us while we were at the nest, and did not move until they were purposely flushed. The nest was near the end of a sloping limb about forty feet from the ground in a rotten redgum. It was, as stated, an old nest of a Crow, and probably two years' old and had been scratched out and lined with a little old wool and broken-up gum leaves. The eggs were rather light in colour, being not much darker than a dirty pinkish white. This was the first occasion that this species had been seen since August of the previous year. A big contrast can be noted between this Falcon and its three "cousins" (the Little, Peregrine, and Black), as it is slow on the wing whereas they are fast, and is quiet while the others are rowdy and fearless. 18th, 19th, and 20th November.—One bird was seen sitting in exactly the same spot in the same tree, and when disturbed flew off leisurely along the creek, but after these dates the species was not seen again. A Spotted Harrier was sitting on a nest twenty yards from this tree, but showed no resentment when the Grey Falcon flew close to it.

Falco peregrinus, Peregrine Falcon.

16th September, 1937.—While pointing out to a visitor, Mr. J. B. Hood, a crevice in the cliffs in the Flinders Range, where several years previously I had seen a pair of Peregrine Falcons, one suddenly appeared on the edge of the same crevice, but all the noise we could make would not move the Falcon. Dinner was eaten and the bird watched for some time and then it disappeared into the crevice. Suddenly another bird approached uttering a short cackling call. This latter bird was the larger of the two, so would most likely be the female. As it neared the crevice the first bird came out, was fed by its mate, and then immediately retired out of sight, while the female flew away. As the cliff could not be descended without a rope, it was left for that day, but on the 21st September another visit was made. This time a bird was flushed and a rope was put over the top of the cliff and tied to a sheoak on the top. The crevice was found to be about eighteen feet from the top of the cliff and sixty feet from the bottom, from which the ground sloped away sharply for another 100 feet or so to the bed of the creek, which was faced on the other side by higher cliffs. The crevice was ten feet long, four feet deep, and three-and-a-half feet high in the centre, and sloped to about eight inches at the back. Three feet back a slight hollow was scratched in loose manure, dirt, and broken bits of rock. This contained five fresh eggs. On the edge of the hollow nearest the front of the crevice a piece of rock about twelve by three by four inches had been placed, but whether the Falcons had put it there purposely to stop the eggs or chicks from rolling out I could not say, but that is what it looked like. The hollow was seven inches wide by two inches deep in the middle, and it appeared as if this place had been used for nesting for years. The eggs were about the size of those of a Brown Hawk, but all were slightly different in colour, varying from light buff with a few blotches of light reddish brown evenly distributed over the whole surface to one blotched all over with dark reddish patches. While the nest was being inspected the birds took turns in making swoops at the intruder, at times coming within a few inches as they passed. When about sixty feet up they would commence a loud screaming note, which would last until they had swooped past and risen to a fair height again, causing a person to wonder what would happen if they really did strike. Some feathers of a Budgerygah (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) were the only evidence of what the Falcons had been eating. Plate VII will give some idea of the nesting site. The writer is standing in front of the nest.

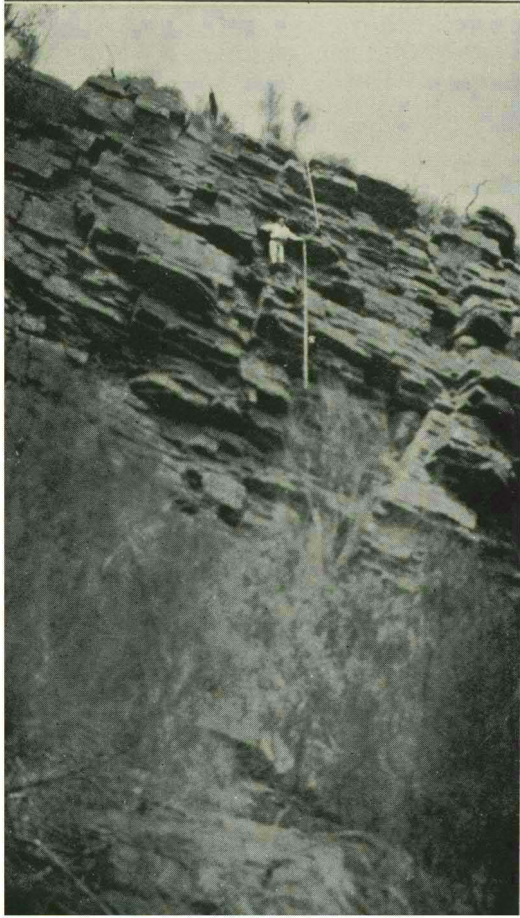


Plate VII.—Nesting site of a Peregrine Falcon
(*Falco peregrinus*).

Falco subniger, Black Falcon.

3rd May, 1937.—A Black Falcon was seen sitting on a dead tree near a Spotted Harrier. 8th, 10th, 18th, 19th June.—A bird was seen on each of those dates while we were "scooping" along a gum creek. 28th June.—A Black Falcon was seen sitting on a fence post near Depot Creek, north of Port Augusta. 29th June.—Visited a nest in a redgum, where in the two previous years this species had bred. On both occasions, at the times of our visit, the young in the nest were ready to fly—once two chicks were there, and on the second visit one chick only, yet the three were able to fly away when the nest was climbed to. That nest was an old one of a Whistling Eagle which had been scratched out but not relined, and was thirty feet from the ground. While walking along the creek where that nest was situated a Black Falcon was noted circling around fairly high over a flat near the creek, and when the tree in which the old nest was built was approached, another bird was seen to fly quietly out of a tree about fifty yards farther on. This bird proved to be a Black Falcon, which joined its mate. It was found that the bird came off an old nest of a Whistling Eagle which must have been used by the Eagles about three years previously and which had now been scratched out but not relined, and was about thirty-five feet up in a bushy redgum. It contained four eggs which were slightly incubated and ranged in colour from light to rather dark buff, one being covered almost entirely with reddish brown blotches whilst another had many minute brownish freckles all over it. The two birds flew silently around, but made no real attempt to defend the nest. 22nd July.—A Black Falcon was seen flying among a flock of about 100 Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*). Darting here and there among them, it did not appear to catch any, but caused great consternation among the Starlings. 6th August.—See the remarks on the Little Eagle for this date.

Falco berigora, Brown Hawk.

Odd birds of this species are to be seen east of the Flinders Range, but the birds are more numerous on the western side of the Range. 21st August, 1937.—A Brown Hawk was flushed from an old nest of a Whistling Eagle, fifty-five feet up in a redgum. This bird was a very dark rusty colour, and when it left the nest it was joined by its mate which was a very light brown colour. The nest had been cleaned out and relined with soft bark and wool and contained three fresh eggs. On 20th September this pair of birds was found to have another nest which contained three eggs, much lighter in colour than the

previous three. This time the nest used was an old nest of a Crow cleaned out and relined with wool, etc., by the Hawks. 6th October.—A Brown Hawk was flushed from an old nest of a Crow in a mulga tree growing on Carriewerloo Station. It was twenty feet from the ground in the top of the tree and was lined with wool. The eggs, three in number, looked rather old, although the bird was still sitting on them, and later they proved to be addled.

Falco cenchroides, Nankeen Kestrel.

During the years from 1933 to 1936 very few of these birds nested along the Willochra Creek, but in 1937 a good few returned and nested, a little later than usual. They returned about the 24th August, but the first nests were not found until about the end of September. This species generally lays here in an open hollow, usually fairly shallow, the eggs being laid on rotten wood, etc. The clutch is usually three or four, but several clutches of five were noted this season. It seems that the number varies with the season. The writer has obtained eleven eggs from one nest by taking one egg each day and leaving one in the hollow, thus encouraging the bird to keep on laying. On the Willowie Plains the Nankeen Kestrels use old nests of the Crow, as there are no hollows to be found handy.
