

HARRIER IDENTIFICATION

by J. B. COX*

The following notes are based on the study of a pair of Spotted Harriers (*Circus assimilis*) that bred near Mannum in 1969, their three young, free flying and independent at the time of writing, and Swamp Harriers (*Circus approximans*), a common species around Mannum, in all plumage phases.

Although the Spotted Harriers nested a mile away from any wet areas, their young were frequently seen over the swamps where Swamp Harriers occur; likewise Swamp Harriers frequently hunt over fields, including those where the Spotted Harriers bred.

The two species are rather similar in appearance, but if good views can be obtained there should not be any confusion between the adults or immatures of either species. Disregarding habitat, flight (both species hold their wings in a shallow V), size and nesting habits, Spotted and Swamp Harriers can safely be identified by plumage and fairly safely by shape.

Spotted Harriers are slimmer built than Swamp Harriers, being comparable to the builds of the European Montagu's Harrier (*Circus pygargus*) and Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) respectively. The latter species although very similar in plumage detail, particularly in females or immatures, can safely be identified by shape alone, as any experienced European observer well knows.

However, even though the builds of the two Australian harriers are different, safe identification on this alone requires experience, and as the Spotted Harrier is generally a rare bird, experience with this species is not easily obtained. A fairly safe key is the shape of the tail, especially in birds flying high overhead. In both adults and all three young Spotted Harriers the tip of the tail was wedge-shaped whereas the Swamp Harrier has the tail tip rounded. Although the wedge is only shallow it is very noticeable if looked for.

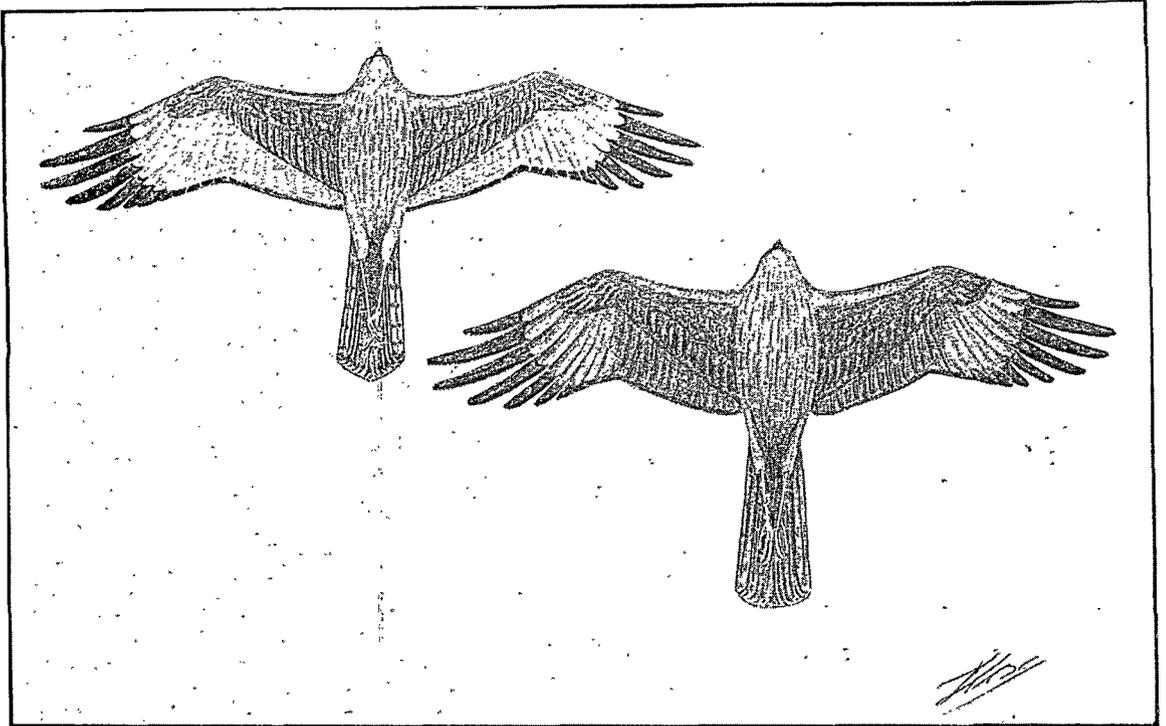
The underwing patterns are quite different, and are separable even at long range.

Both species have dark tips to the underside of the flight feathers but whereas the Swamp Harrier has the secondaries brown and only the primaries pale silver-grey-brown, forming a distinct pale patch, the Spotted Harrier, adult and young, has all secondaries and primaries pale silver grey forming a pale area extending the whole length of the wing. The spots on the underwing coverts and underparts of adult Spotted Harriers can only be seen at close range, and are of diagnostic value only as forming a contrasting pattern with the pale flight feathers which are noticeable at a far greater range than are the spots.

The tail is much more narrowly barred in the Spotted Harrier, both above and below and appears greyish at a distance, whereas the Swamp Harrier's is brownish. Young Spotted Harriers which have streaked or only slightly spotted underparts can be identified by a rufous patch on the side of the neck and face, contrasting with the paler throat and upper breast, as well as by the underwing pattern. If a young Spotted Harrier is seen showing only its upper parts (not very likely, as this species often flies high, and even if low the method of flight is such that it would show the underwing pattern some time) it could easily be mistaken for an old Swamp Harrier, which is often very pale on the upper surface. The young Spotted Harrier's rump is only blotched white and is not the distinct pure white of most Swamp Harriers; nor is the area as big. Swamp Harriers often have the bases of the tail feathers white also; the young Spotted Harrier does not. The upper surface of the wings of the young Spotted Harrier are brownish grey, contrasting only slightly with the dark tips to the primaries, but if the barred scapulars and lower back are seen identification is fairly certain as old Swamp Harriers do not have these markings.

Finally, while Swamp Harriers usually fly with their legs raised, Spotted Harriers frequently hold them dangling at about 45° even when flying high.

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Spotted Harrier
(Immature)

Swamp Harrier