

BROWN FALCON SUBDUED BY PREY.

The Brown Falcon *Falco berigora* is well known as a predator of reptiles (Marchant and Higgins 1993). Years ago, when above-ground telephone lines spanned the country, these birds were often seen sitting on the cross-arms watching for reptile movement along the roadsides (Eckert 2000). I have seen them take well-grown Bearded Dragons *Pogona barbata* and partially grown snakes. On 3 December 1980 I saw a Brown Falcon flying over heath at Malinong, 20 km NW of Meningie, clutching a snake about a metre long by its middle. The snake was still well alive with head and tail sections waving and writhing as the bird flew. The result of the encounter was unknown.

On 29 October 2001 Ashley Menadue reported that a large hawk seemed incapacitated at the edge of my track at Langhorne Creek about mid-morning. Investigation found it to be a Brown Falcon, unable to fly and only able to flap and struggle a short way through 30 cm high cereal before stopping and lying exhausted. I picked it up by a wing-tip to ascertain the cause of possible injury but quickly dropped it again when about 40 cm of lively Eastern Brown Snake *Pseudonaja textilis* swung out from below the body of the bird and up towards my hand.

Thinking that either the falcon might be engaged in a gargantuan struggle to subdue a large prey, or it may have been bitten by the snake and poisoned, I decided to leave the situation for a while to ascertain the outcome. On my return some 30 minutes later things were found to be almost the same as when previously left. The falcon could only struggle away a metre or so before collapsing and the snake was still present. Further examination revealed that the falcon had released its grip on the middle of the snake's body. Several large puncture marks through the body indicated where the snake had been seized. The falcon seemed too entangled by the snake to move freely.

The snake seemed sufficiently injured to eventually die, although reptile death is often slow and I have known snakes with severe injuries to be still surviving more than 24 hours later. I therefore decided to despatch the snake and try to ascertain the problems that incapacitated the falcon. The snake had its head and some 30 cm of body lying somewhat unconcernedly out to the side of the falcon. However each time a blow was aimed at its head it quickly withdrew under the falcon's body. It was finally despatched by dropp-

ing a stone on its head.

The death of the snake did not appear to assist the falcon to recover. It lay, seemingly trapped, on the ground for several minutes more with no struggling. I therefore began to unravel the snake and found that it had wrapped its mid-body once around the falcon's left wing, not far from the shoulder, then thrown its rear section around the falcon's neck in about four coils. These were wrapped tightly and were invisible beneath the bird's feathers. This tight coiling had the effect of pulling the bird's head to the left and also severely restricting the use of the left wing. Mark Hutchinson, Curator of Reptiles, South Australian Museum (SAM), has informed me that the Eastern Brown Snake has the propensity to constrict prey and often coils around reptiles such as the Sleepy Lizard *Tiliqua rugosa*. In the present instance the coiling was presumed to be defensive, as it appeared that the falcon almost certainly instigated the attack.

When freed, the falcon lay on the ground for about two minutes then suddenly sprang to its feet and flew off to alight on a power pole some 100 metres away. The delay in rising seemed to indicate that the snake's constrictions had restricted the bird's air intake. I drove away, wondering if it might return to claim the snake. However after resting for a few minutes it flew off for a considerable distance in the opposite direction. The snake's body was retrieved, preserved and delivered to the SAM. It was 99 cm long.

There has been conjecture as to whether Brown Falcons could sometimes be poisoned by snake-bite. Cade (1982) and Mooney (1984) have pointed out that the Brown Falcon does seem to possess adaptations that would allow it to prey on venomous snakes. Sonter and Debus (1985) summarised more than ten known instances of the bird's predation on venomous snakes of eight different species, including one individual reputedly 1.8 m long. Mooney (1984) also instanced a case of a large snake that succeeded in keeping its Brown Falcon attacker at bay. However there seems no previous example of a snake succeeding in subduing a Brown Falcon. In the present instance, enough of the head end of the snake was free to bite the falcon almost anywhere but it was not attempting to do so. Instead, on occasion, it used the falcon as shelter. It is difficult to envisage how the falcon could have freed itself from its predicament, as each struggle would have stimulated the snake to tighten its grip and this

reaction could have continued for some hours even after the snake eventually died. Without interference the outcome might well have seen the eventual death of both combatants.

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