

**SPOTTED HARRIER TAKING SOUTHERN BOOBOOK.** The Spotted Harrier *Circus assimilis* is widespread in South Australia, but considered to be uncommon in the South East (Marchant and Higgins 1993). In 2002 there were many sightings in the Cape Jaffa to Victorian border area, with several reports of two birds together (Birds South East 2002a, 2002b). This may have been in response to the dry conditions inland in winter 2002.

A Spotted Harrier regularly visited a stretch of the southern coast west of Mt Gambier, in the Pelican Point to Blackfellows Caves area (37°55'54"S, 140°26'33"E). It was regularly observed flying over the narrow strip of scrub between the beach and coastal road, and over pasture with patches of reeds and tussocks on the other side of the road. This note reports an observation of the harrier hunting and capturing prey.

While driving along the Pelican Point to Blackfellows Caves road in the early afternoon of 19 June 2002, I noticed a Spotted Harrier flying low over the coastal scrub running parallel to Livingstones Bay, c. 5 km SE of Carpenter Rocks (for general location see Christie 2003, p. 79, Figure). It was a cold, overcast day with a north-westerly breeze. As I slowed to turn down a track to the bay, I noticed the harrier dip momentarily into the scrub and re-appear grasping a large bird. Initially it seemed to have trouble controlling the bird, but I was unable to judge if this was because the prey was struggling or the harrier had an insecure hold on it. One wing of the prey was hanging down fully extended. Very soon two ravens *Corvus* sp. were in close attendance. The harrier landed in tall grass on the road verge and from my vantage in the car some 150 m away I could see the harrier's head above the grass. The ravens harassed the harrier, alternately flying at it and perching on nearby fence posts. Disturbance from passing cars repeatedly caused the harrier to fly and land again by its prey or on the fence. On one occasion when the harrier was on a fence post I had clear views of its chestnut spotted chest and yellow legs and feet.

After a while I tried to get closer to the harrier and its prey, but my presence together with a passing car caused the harrier to fly off some distance. I quickly located the kill, which was an apparently adult plumaged Southern Boobook *Ninox novaeseelandiae* still warm with blood seeping from its bill. I replaced the boobook where found and retreated, and the harrier soon returned.

Later that afternoon I searched for the kill, but finding no trace I assumed that the harrier moved it to a less-disturbed area to finish the meal.

There appear to have been very few studies of Spotted Harrier diet and I could find no reference to Southern Boobook as prey of Spotted Harrier. References consulted list prey of the Spotted Harrier as including terrestrial birds such as quail, pipit and lark; and mammals, reptiles and insects (e.g. Marchant and Higgins 1993; Olsen 1995; Debus 1998; Pizzey and Knight 1999). Most of the recorded bird prey is terrestrial and small, but quite large prey can be taken, with a study in north-west Victoria finding that Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* made up 52% of the diet (Baker-Gabb 1984). Larger bird prey mentioned by Marchant and Higgins (1993) are adult Noisy Miner *Manorina melanocephala* (24–27 cm, 55–90 g) and early references to domestic Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus* (age and weight unknown). Remains of Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* (21 cm, 80–90 g) and Australian Magpie *Gymnorhina tibicen* (38–44 cm) were found in pellets by Baker-Gabb (1984).

The Southern Boobook is 25–36 cm long and weighs about 300 g (e.g. Baker *et al.* 1997), and is most likely towards the upper end of the weight and size range of prey for Spotted Harrier. The boobook weighs slightly less than a Rabbit (960–1570 g) or adult domestic Red Junglefowl, and is smaller (but heavier) than an adult Australian Magpie (38–44 cm, c. 280–320 g) (e.g. Baker *et al.* 1997).

Spotted Harriers generally take prey from the ground (Marchant and Higgins 1993). Although it is not unusual for Southern Boobooks to roost on the ground (Higgins 1999), I was unable to determine if the boobook was taken from or near the ground or from a low perch.

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