

Bird Note

Courtship Feeding and Mating in the Grey Falcon, *Falco hypoleucos*

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Marchant and Higgins (1993) claimed that courtship feeding, by both sexes, occurs in the Grey Falcon, *Falco hypoleucos*. However, a check of their sources revealed that all three referred to sharing of prey in contexts other than courtship (supplementary) food provision by the male to the female in the pre-laying and mating period (McGilp 1934; Cupper and Cupper 1980; Hollands 1984). McGilp (1934) described a female sharing a kill with the male by feeding him pieces bill to bill, but it is not possible to verify whether it was perhaps an adult feeding a juvenile, of what may not even have been Grey Falcons. The other authors described food delivery by the male to the female in the incubation and nestling periods, which was thus not courtship feeding in the pre-laying period.

This note describes courtship (supplementary) food provision to a female Grey Falcon by the male, followed by copulation, near their nest at the start of the breeding cycle. Mating behaviour in this species was also not previously described, until the account by Ley and Tynan (2016).

On 31 July 2015 on the Barkly Tableland in the Northern Territory, we observed and photographed the following behavioural sequence on a telecommunications ('repeater') tower. The habitat was fairly open country with much spinifex, *Triodia* sp., low scrubby

vegetation in the gullies and abundant birdlife in the area. In the early afternoon we observed four stick nests in this tower, possibly built by Torresian Crows, *Corvus orru*, which were present when we arrived.

Our attention was drawn to the trilling/chattering sound (a rapid *ke-ke-ke-ke* ...) of the female Grey Falcon, which snatched prey from the male after he flew in and perched next to her. The falcons had arrived, perched together for ~30 seconds and loudly called (a rapid *ke-ke-ke-ke* ...) at some crows already perched on the platform at same level as them, the calling apparently being mostly by the male falcon, as the female was feeding. The crows departed and the male falcon flew off. The female took about 10 minutes to consume the prey, a small grey bird. Meanwhile, the male flew around the tower and observed us. When she had finished feeding, the female made some more chattering (rapid *ke-ke-ke-ke* ...) calls, and after a minute or so the male flew on to her back and they mated (at 1444 h). They were silent during mounting, which lasted for an undetermined time (multiple photos being taken within a single minute), while they watched us on the ground below (Figure 1). The male then flew, but may have landed on the tower structure. The female flew to a perch near to and on the same level as one nest, lower down than the other three and protected somewhat by an antenna. The female had a bulging crop, evident in a photo, and the male was perched near her on the tower structure. Next morning, well after daybreak, they were both perched on the tower at an upper level (higher than the nest).

Our observations supplement those of Ley and Tynan (2016) on the Grey Falcon's mating

behaviour around the laying period, and confirm that courtship (supplementary) food provision by the male, associated with copulation, occurs in this species. Also, our observations confirm that in these behavioural aspects and associated vocalisations the Grey Falcon is similar to other falcon species (e.g. Cade 1982; Marchant and Higgins 1993; Olsen 1995).

On 27 September 2015 there were no Grey Falcons at the site although the nest was still there and seemingly intact, suggesting that the falcons had either rejected the site and possibly bred elsewhere, or had attempted to breed there but failed (J. Schoenjahn pers. comm.).

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Figure 1a, b, c. Pair of Grey Falcons mating near their nest on repeater tower, NT, 31 July 2015

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