

A RECORD OF THE AUSTRALIAN BLACK FALCON

On the afternoon of 21 November 1983 I observed from the roadside gate of my home in Score Road, Gisborne, a large all-black bird, at 50 m distance, picking at some prey which I could not positively identify, but which appeared to be the well-opened carcass of a small yellow-feathered chicken. As it picked, the bird frequently raised its femurs almost vertically, with long slender wing tips trailing the ground, at the same time splaying its long and wide tail. In this situation, the bird was on an area of mown grass 2 or 3 m from the edge of a 0.4 ha area of 60-year-old native plantation which abuts on to the roadside.

I had suspected the bird to be a Black Falcon (*Falco subniger*) on first sighting it for, although it is rare in Australia, I had made close observations of the species in north-west Victoria and again in inland Queensland; but I was somewhat puzzled to see it eating its prey on the ground for, as Calaby (1969) says, the bird "usually carries its prey to a tree for butchering and eating." However, after about a minute of observation, by which time my wife had brought me my binoculars, the bird flew, with its prey in its talons, to a tree on the near side of the road, where at 40 m I could see it perfectly. Whereas in the shade it had appeared jet black all over, its true colour of very dark sooty brown, slightly lighter in the lower underparts, was now revealed. Except for the underparts, and an almost pure white patch about an inch in diameter on the upper throat immediately below the bill, the very dark colour was uniform throughout, with no trace of mottling such as is shown in the illustration in Frith (1969). According to Slater (1970), the mottling appears only during the moult in December to February and is due to the new very dark feathers appearing in the worn plumage.

The grey-blue bill was noted, a bluish-white cere and eye-ring, and dark brown eyes. The colour of the legs was not recorded because they were completely concealed by feathering, and the feet were not visible at any stage. The soft parts are variously described in the literature as bluish grey or yellow; but Slater (1970) definitely ascribes the bluish grey to immature birds. His illustration on p. 49 is precisely as I saw the bird, apart from the colour of the soft parts.

I estimated the total length of the bird at 17 or 18 inches, and this, together with the bluish-white soft parts, would indicate that it was a male, perhaps a year old.

The Black Falcon is described as rare throughout its range, which is restricted generally to open forest and plains, but reaching the east coast from the New South Wales border north to about Rockhampton.

LITERATURE CITED

- CALABY, J. H. in FRITH, H. J. 1969. Birds in the Australian high country. A. H. & A. W. Reed
SLATER, P. 1970. A field guide to Australian birds, non-passerines. Rigby

A. BLACKBURN, 10 Score Road, Gisborne