

# Chinese Sparrowhawks *Accipiter soloensis* (2 N<sup>o</sup>) on Browse Island, Western Australia on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2016

## Submission to BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC)

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### Introduction

So far as we are aware, this is the first report of Chinese Sparrowhawk *Accipiter soloensis* for both Western Australia and 'mainland' Australia. This submission concerns two birds that were sighted together on Browse Island, Western Australia, which at 14°06'S 123°33'E lies some 180 km NNW of the Kimberley Coast and approximately 350 km south-south-east of the western tip of the Indonesian island of Timor. Previous Australian reports of this species emanate from the Australian Indian Ocean Island External Territories of Cocos (Keeling) Islands (BARC Cases 754 & 757), Christmas Island and at Ashmore Reef (BARC Case 803) which lies some 214 km to the NNW of Browse Island.

Browse Island hosts an unmanned Bureau of Meteorology weather station and is a designated Nature Reserve administered by Western Australia. The island has a total area of ~17 ha and is surrounded by a small (350 ha) fringing reef. It rises 3-4 m above high-tide level and has a terrain that includes sand dunes and limestone outcrops. Much of the centre of the island retains obvious evidence of extensive guano mining that occurred during the 19th century, with exposed areas of coarse limestone overlaid with stacks of the excavated limestone, in places forming obvious corridors and walkways. Approximately two thirds of the island is vegetated. The centre of the island is cloaked with woody herbs and tangled *Ipomoea* creepers, whilst sandy substrates are dominated by Indian Lantern Flower *Abutilon indicum* (Burbidge et al. 1978, Clarke 2010). Towards the south-western shoreline there is sandy flat of several hectares that contains low scattered herbs, tufts of grass, small *Ipomoea* clumps and a small shrubby thicket of Cardwell Cabbage *Scaevola taccada*.



**One of two Chinese Sparrowhawks (bird 2) at Browse Island, 9<sup>th</sup> November 2016**

Figure 1

Photo by Rohan Clarke

### The Observation

For about three hours from sunrise on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2016, a Kimberley Birdwatching tour party consisting of Rae Clark, Michael Hancock, Nigel Jacket, Judy Leitch, Noel Luff, Martyn Moffat, Colin Rogers, Cathy Saywell, Jack Winterbottom, John Young and the three authors, spent about three hours

birding on Browse Island. When the group first approached the Cardwell Cabbage thicket we flushed two birds that elicited immediate calls from the group of 'Oriental Cuckoo', 'Accipiters' and then 'Chinese Sparrowhawks'. The birds paused only briefly before departing the island in an approximately south-easterly direction. There was very little wind and it was cloudless, hot and humid, as it had been in the preceding days.

### The Birds



**Distant Chinese Sparrowhawk (bird 1) at Browse Island, 9<sup>th</sup> November 2016 (note dark wing point)**  
Figure 2 Photo by R. Clarke



**Chinese Sparrowhawk (bird 2) at Browse Island, 9<sup>th</sup> November 2016**  
Figure 3 Photos by Judy Leitch

### Description

**Size:** These were small accipiters estimated to be similar in size to Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes which at first glance they also resembled in plumage being overall grey above and white below. They were not dissimilar in size to Magpie-lark of which three were also on the island that day.

**Structure, plumage & bare parts:** These features are best appreciated by reference to the four photographs of bird 2 (Figs 1 & 3 above). The first to flush (bird 1) flew off the island quickly so we have little detailed information on that individual other than very distant record images of the silhouetted bird departing to the south-east (Fig. 2). Other than a clearly similar structure (i.e. compare Figs 1 and 2) and a similar underwing pattern little more was noted on the first bird. Suffice to say that the two birds were obviously together and were the same species. To MC, the first bird appeared more uniform in colouration and seemed paler. Since the second bird paused before flying off it was more available to study and gave time for the photographers to ready their cameras. That bird is an immature, so MC suspects that the first bird was an adult.

The structure of the second bird when perched (a very brief view, see photo) was typical of a small accipiter. Its head was somewhat square with a flattish crown and the body was plump but elongated. The closed tail was relatively long with a square tip, appearing wedge-shaped when spread. Size-wise, the grey bill seemed proportionately right for a 'sparrowhawk' rather than a larger 'goshawk'. The yellowish cere was

noticeable but not strikingly bold. The feet were bright yellow, the tarsus long and slender and the toes moderately robust. In flight the wings were typical of the genus being relatively broad, bulging across the trailing edge of the secondaries but more pointed at the tip than most accipiters. Four fingers showed in the spread wing tip. The eye was bright yellow.

The upperparts were dark grey with slightly paler or browner feather edgings that produced a faint patterning. The head was mostly grey, darker and unmarked on the crown and with no obvious supercilium. The uppertail was a paler grey with four somewhat inconspicuous narrow dark bands. The underbody was basically pale with a rufous wash on the breast, and darkish barring down the flanks. The spread underwings were mainly white with tinges of rufous. The strikingly black wing tips were composed of black tips to the four visible (long) outermost primaries. The remaining remiges had terminal or subterminal black spots so creating a dusky trailing edge to the wing. Apart from a line of dark spots along the leading edge of the wing, the underwing coverts were unmarked white or off-white.

## Identification

The plumage of the Collared Sparrowhawk, a common species in the Kimberley, is very different. Most significantly, at no age does their underwing pattern resemble that of these birds.

The subject birds' identification as Chinese Sparrowhawks is straightforward given their small size, rather pointed wings with only four fingers and distinctive, black and white, under-wing pattern. Our ability to identify the species in the field at the time of the initial sighting was enabled by the fact that the three authors (and others in the group) were familiar with all Australian accipiters and had each previously observed Chinese Sparrowhawk as well as Japanese Sparrowhawk on Australian territory, on two or more occasions. We were thus familiar with the diagnostic characters required to secure the identification. The most likely confusion species, Japanese Sparrowhawk *A. gularis*, can be eliminated by the presence of the following diagnostic criteria:

- The wing point consisted of four, not five, fingered primaries
- For the most part, the underwing coverts were plain, unmarked off-white (not buff, spotted or finely barred)
- The primary tips were broadly tipped black (not pale)

Two other small accipiters in the East Asian flyway that are superficially similar are Besra *A. virgatus* and more particularly, Shikra *A. badius*. Besra can be eliminated because in all plumages it shows regular dark markings on the underwing coverts (Leader & Carey 1995; Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). Shikra can be eliminated because it is much paler above, shows more barring across the underwings including the coverts when juvenile. Although the wing point in Shikra is dark grey it is more rounded than in the subject birds and not 'black'. Its tail is more rounded and 'floppy' (Eaton *et al.* 2016). Northern (Eurasian) Sparrowhawk *A. nisus* has six fingers forming the wing tip and in adult plumage has palish cheeks framed by the grey crown and nape to form a dark 'helmet' and a pale supercilium at all ages (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). Vinous-breasted Sparrowhawk *A. rhodogaster* lacks the bold black wing tips of the subject birds and has barred underwing coverts. Small Sparrowhawk *A. nanus* is too small being described by Eaton *et al.* (2016) as 'tiny'. Spot-tailed Sparrowhawk *A. trinotatus* has a rounded, not square, tail and dark (black) eyes. At no age does the underwing pattern of Rufous-necked Sparrowhawk *A. erythrauchen* resemble that of the subject birds (Eaton *et al.* 2016).

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