

**A second 'Western' Osprey *Pandion haliaetus haliaetus* on the  
Cocos (Keeling) Islands  
17 December 2018 to 31 March 2019**

Submission to BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (Draft 1; 14th April 2019)

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**'Western' Osprey, West Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2019**  
Photo by Geof Christie

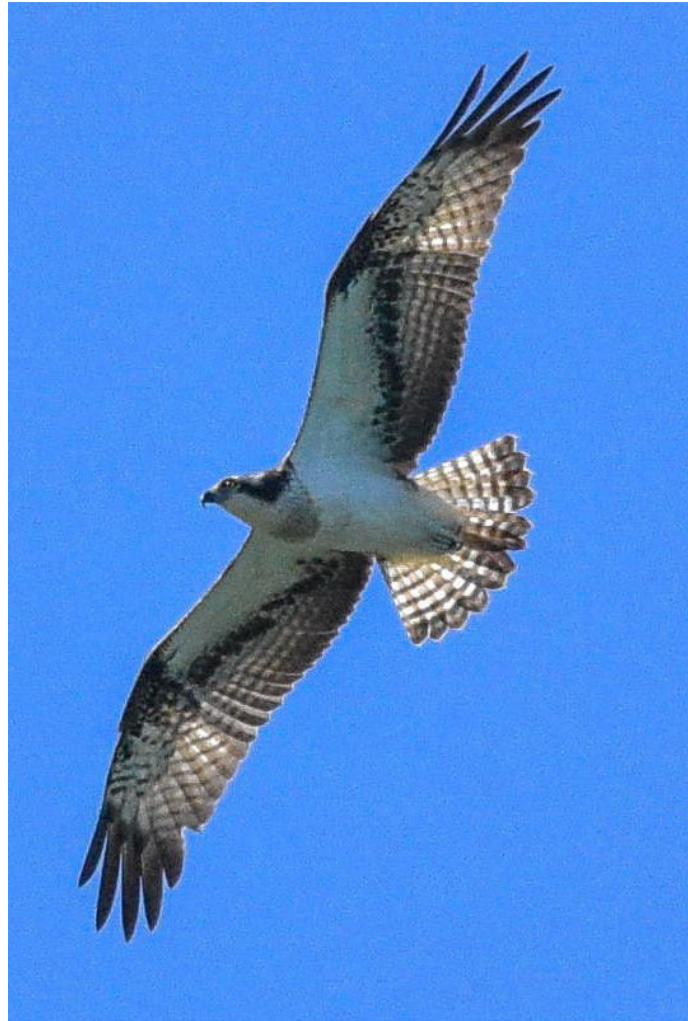
Australia's second-ever 'Western' Osprey *Pandion haliaetus haliaetus* was found and identified by Geof Christie (GC) on West Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, an external Australian territory in the Indian Ocean, on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2018. GC was also instrumental in the discovery of the first record of this taxon found on the same island on 25<sup>th</sup> December 2014 (BARC case 862). Although often difficult to find, with periods of longer than a week of apparent absence, it was seen intermittently over the next three months by GC and numerous visiting observers many of which were members of birding tour groups, in particular several run by Birding Tours Australia led by Richard Baxter. Mike Carter saw it twice in one week in late February 2019. The last known sighting was by GC on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019.

The bird was sometimes seen eating large fish or just resting on perches such as that in the image above, remnants of metal decking from WW2. It seemed to prefer these to fallen or erect coconut palms. It was also occasionally reported as being seen on nearby Home Island. A report from there of an 'eagle-like bird' with much white on its underside harassing breeding White Terns *Gygis alba* is thought likely attributable to this Osprey.

The accompanying photographs are considered adequate depiction of the bird so no written description is provided. All are by Geof Christie except where otherwise noted.



**'Western' Osprey, West Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, 17 December 2018**



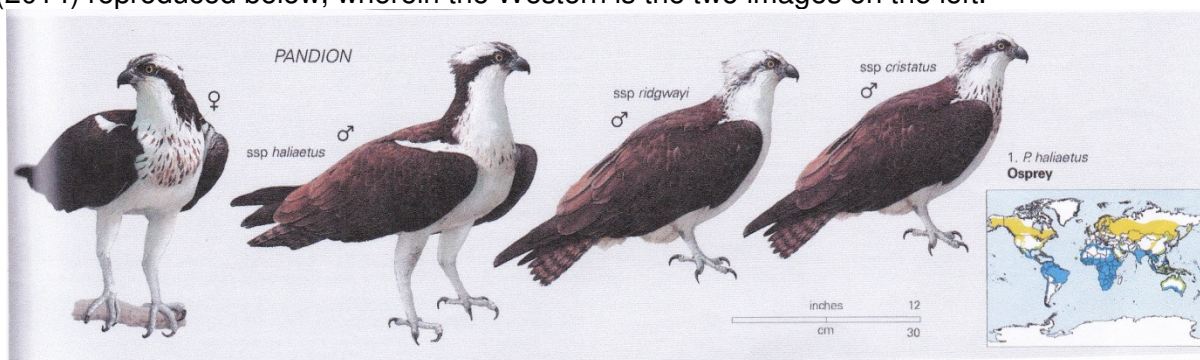
**'Western' Osprey, Cocos (Keeling) Islands 25<sup>th</sup> December 2018**



**'Western' Osprey, Cocos (Keeling) Islands 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019**

### Specific identification

The bird is clearly a raptor and apart from Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* no other raptor occurring in the region (South-east Asia or Australasia) has a similar plumage. That is the combination of the mainly white underbody, white wing linings and a white head with bold dark brown eye-lines that extend as stripes running down each side of the neck and merge with the similarly coloured mantle at the base of the neck. The only field character that we know of that separates the nominate Western Osprey from the Eastern *cristatus* is the shape, darkness and therefore prominence of this eye-line and neck stripe. In Western it is broader, longer, darker and bolder extending through the nape to merge with the equally dark brown mantle. These show well in photos provided above. In the typical Australian Eastern Osprey, the white extends from the crown down the hind-neck (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). These distinctions are particularly well shown in the illustration in del Hoyo & Collar (2014) reproduced below, wherein the Western is the two images on the left.



It is clear that the Cocos individual matches only the ‘Western’ Osprey.

### Age & sex

The distinct barring on the secondaries and rectrices as shown in the flight photo taken on 25<sup>th</sup> December are juvenile characters (van Duivendijk 2011) so we consider that this was a first winter bird. When first seen, see flight photos on 17<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> December 2018, the breast streaking (the gorget or necklace) was limited in extent but fine and distinct. The photo taken on 21<sup>st</sup> February by MC show that the breast was in moult and the streaking was now ill-defined and less extensive. Therefore we suggest that this was a male.



‘Western’ Osprey, Cocos (Keeling) Islands 21<sup>st</sup> February 2019 Photo Mike Carter

## Taxonomy

When Christidis & Boles (2008) updated their Checklist of Australian Birds they followed Wink *et al.* (2004) in elevating the Indonesian and Australian breeding, non-migratory subspecies of Osprey *P. haliaetus cristatus* to specific level. Later, the IOC adopted the same approach as shown on their World Bird List Version 5.1 (accessed on the web on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2019). Initially BARC chose to follow that checklist but now follow BirdLife International which currently regard this taxon as the nominate race of the species which occurs elsewhere in Australia. Thus this submission does so too. Whatever opinion is assumed regarding the taxonomic status, we believe it is important to recognise that this taxon has occurred at Cocos so we seek acceptance of this record. However we think the names 'Western' and 'Eastern' Ospreys are misnomers and that 'Northern' and 'Southern' respectively would be more explicit.

## Distribution

The Western Osprey has a world-wide distribution except for southern Indonesia and Australasia where it is replaced by the resident Eastern Osprey. It breeds only in the northern hemisphere throughout the Nearctic and Palearctic with the more northerly breeding birds migrating south to spend the boreal winter in South America, Africa, the Indian Sub-continent and the Orient but not Australasia. This is the second record from Cocos and for all Australian territory.

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