

Oriental Honey Buzzard – Christmas Island

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Summary

This submission relates to the sighting of an Oriental Honey Buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*) photographed at the Christmas Island Refuse Site on Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean. The Oriental Honey Buzzard was seen extremely briefly on the 17th of February 2019, during which a short series of photos were obtained. Although there have now been a number of reports of this species from Christmas Island, only one has been accepted by BARC. Therefore, if accepted, this individual would constitute the second confirmed record for Christmas Island, and 5th accepted record for Australia.



Oriental Honey Buzzard at Christmas Island Refuse Site on 17th February 2019

SUBMISSION

Species: Oriental Honey Buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*)

Location: Refuse Site (-10.4351°S, 105.6861°E), Christmas Island.

Dates: The Oriental Honey Buzzard was observed on the 17th of February 2019. Despite follow up searches for several days afterwards, it was not relocated.

Circumstances of sighting: Immediately upon arrival at the Refuse Site, at 7:35 am on the 17th of February 2019, the authors observed a large raptor steadily flying over the Refuse Site ahead of them. JG and NJ identified it as an Oriental Honey Buzzard, and several photos were taken by BT. Unfortunately the correct settings on the camera has yet to be configured, resulting in highly over-exposed images of the passing raptor! The authors immediately travelled in the direction the raptor was heading, but were unable to relocate it. Weather conditions were warm and cloudy.

Physical description:

General:

The raptor was mostly pale underneath with distinct barring on the underwing, light upper tail coverts, and brownish upperparts. It had a relatively small head, and broad, straight wings with fingered primaries.

Size: There were no birds to directly compare the size of the raptor with, but the heavy wing beats suggested a reasonably large bird.

Head: Proportionally small relative to overall size, with an elongated neck showing dark streaking that contrasted with rest of underparts (Fig. 1 & 3).

Body: The chest and belly were a uniform light cream colour, with darker streaking/barring on the flanks (Fig. 1 & 3). The upper body was not seen.

Wing: The upperwing was mostly brownish (Fig. 1 & 2), with possibly slightly paler brown coverts and contrasting dark secondaries and outer primaries (Fig. 1). The underwing was cream, with at least three rows of evenly-spaced, narrow dark bars on the secondaries. Fig. 1 & 2 indicate there may be a light rufous wash to the underwing coverts, but this was not apparent in the field.

Tail: The undertail was relatively long, rounded and pale, with at least three, relatively narrow, dark bands (Fig. 1 & 4).

Age: Using *The Australian Bird Guide* (Menkhorst et al. 2017), this individual is thought to be an immature, based on the light underparts, relatively fine tail bands, and suspected whitish base to the uppertail.

Sex: Not determined.

Flight:

The raptor was observed flying over the Refuse Site, at a height of ~30m (i.e. above the height of most of the vegetation present). It was observed flapping continuously, with deep, steady wing beats. The flight path appeared direct.

Habitat:

The Christmas Island Refuse Site is located in the north-eastern corner of the island, at relatively high elevation (~300m asl). The Refuse Site consists of cleared areas, secondary growth, and bordered to the north and south by tall, closed native forest. To the east of the Refuse Site is a large cleared expanse associated with the Christmas Island Airport.

Images (photographs by Bill Twiss)



Figure 1. Oriental Honey Buzzard in flight. Above – original (cropped, but unedited); below – cropped with exposure heavily reduced. Note heavily barred primaries and secondaries on underwing, relatively long tail, brownish upperwing; fingered primaries, and yellow feet.



Figure 2. Oriental Honey Buzzard in flight



Figure 3. Oriental Honey Buzzard in flight.



Figure 4. Oriental Honey Buzzard in flight. Note several, evenly-spaced, dark bands on the undertail.

Elimination of confusion species

There are only two resident diurnal raptors on Christmas Island – the Nankeen Kestrel and Brown (Christmas Island) Goshawk, both of which can be ruled out by the observed raptor's broad, distinctly barred underwing, with obvious 'fingers'. The deep, steady wing beats are also uncharacteristic of Nankeen Kestrel and Brown (Christmas Island) Goshawk.

The following combination of structural and plumage features visible in the photos were deemed sufficient in ruling out potentially similar raptor groups (e.g. harriers, ospreys, *Buteo* buzzards, hawk-eagles, serpent-eagles), leaving the honey buzzard group (genus *Pernis*) as the likely candidate.

Structural:

- Relatively long tail
- Relatively long neck
- Small head
- Broad, straight wings
- Heavily-fingered wing tips with six (apparent) fingers

Plumage:

- Evenly-spaced bands on tail
- Heavily barred remiges on underwing
- Well-patterned (i.e. streaked) neck

There are currently four species of *Pernis* (honey buzzards) recognised by HBW and BirdLife International (v3), and IOC (v9.1), and three species by Clements (v2018). The four treated by the two former taxonomies are discussed below.

Sulawesi [Barred] Honey Buzzard (*Pernis celebensis*): Only known from Sulawesi, Indonesia. Very similar in most respects to Oriental Honey Buzzard, but differs by being shorter-winged, and showing a densely barred belly (Eaton *et al.* 2016; albeit juvenile birds appear to lack belly barring), which was not apparent in the field, or in images (e.g. Fig. 1, 3).

Philippine Honey Buzzard (*Pernis steerei*): Only known from the Philippines. Very similar to Sulawesi Honey Buzzard, and similarly differs from Oriental Honey Buzzard by the presence of barring on the belly (del Hoyo *et al.* 1994; albeit juveniles appear to lack belly barring). Photos available online (e.g.

http://orientalbirdimages.org/search.php?Bird_ID=2973) suggest younger individuals may show more tail bands than that found on similarly aged Oriental Honey Buzzards.

European Honey Buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*): Very similar to Oriental Honey Buzzard in most respects.

Using Svensson *et al.* (2009), the observed raptor differed from European Honey Buzzard by:

- lacking dark carpal patches on the underwing;
- showing a relatively narrow terminal band to secondaries (i.e. similar in width to other bands on secondaries);
- broad wings [relatively narrow in European];
- an apparent (small) sixth 'finger' (Fig. 1) [only five 'fingers' in European].

Conclusion: We believe there is enough evidence put forth to indicate the observed raptor was a species belonging to the honey buzzard genus *Pernis*. We believe European Honey Buzzard can be safely ruled out by plumage and structural features noted above. Similarly, adults Sulawesi and Philippine Honey Buzzards can be ruled out by the apparent lack of dense barring on the belly. Although all features visible in the photographs are consistent with Oriental Honey Buzzard, it may not be possible to rule out juvenile or immature Sulawesi or Philippine Honey Buzzards, however unlikely their occurrences may be.

Previous occurrences: James & McAllan (2014) noted six occurrences of Oriental Honey Buzzard on Christmas Island between 2001 and 2011. Additionally, there was a report from Christmas Island in May 2014(?) (D. Baxter pers. comm.). However, of these only two have been submitted to BARC, one of which was accepted (Case 335).

BARC lists three other accepted records from mainland Australia and Ashmore Reef, indicating if accepted, this record would constitute the 5th record for Australia and its Territories.

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