

Gurney's Eagle *Aquila gurneyi* at Saibai, Torres Strait, Qld. on 13 March 2020

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The Sighting

On 13 March 2020 a Gurney's Eagle *Aquila gurneyi* was observed for between three and five minutes soaring over the channel that separates the island of Saibai from that of Kaumag to its north. We were some hours into the cruise of this channel after sailing in a NE direction our overnight mooring that was at 90° 22' S 142° 42' E, approximately 8 km south of mainland Papua New Guinea. The channel is 7 km long and between 180 to 650 m wide and is a known hot-spot for observations of Gurney's Eagle. In fact one of our main targets whilst cruising this channel was this species. It was seen by all ten members of a group that were participating in a tour run by Birding Tours Australia. We visited three islands in northern Torres Strait, Boigu, Saibai and Ugar (Stephen's Island). The tour leader was Richard Baxter and the other participants were Graham Barwell, Darryel Binns (Biggles), Carol Butler, Mike Carter, Hickson Fergusson, Bob James, Robert Shore, Jenny Spry and Tom Wheller.

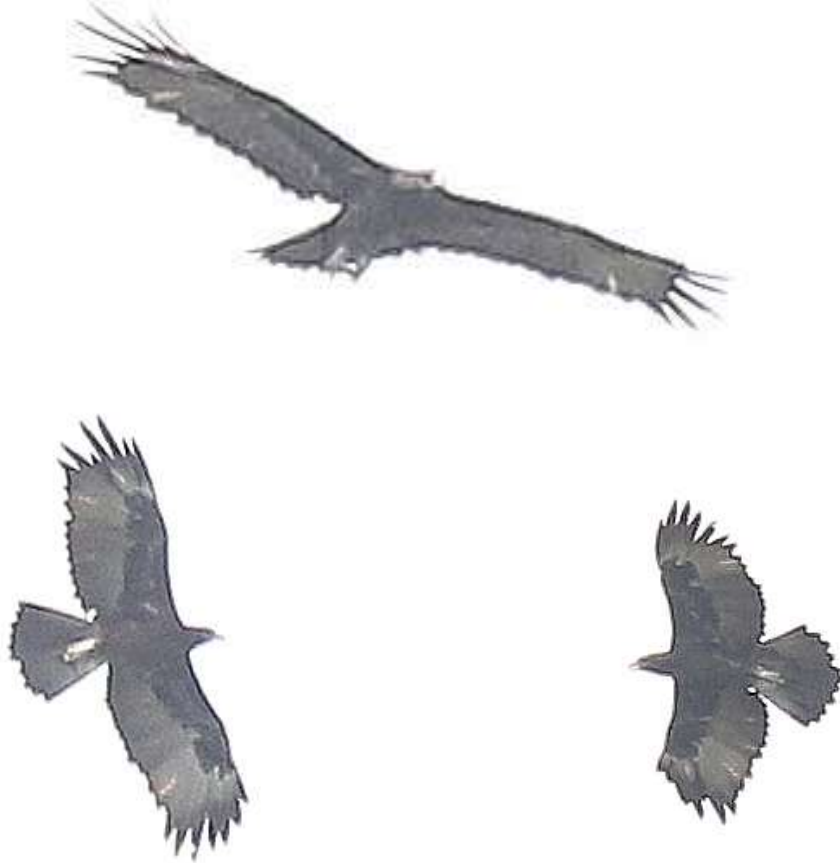
The bird was first spotted by Richard Baxter at 3.19 p.m., about 50 minutes after the sustained sighting of another resident New Guinea raptor, a Long-tailed Honey-buzzard *Henicopernis longicauda*. Whilst there are five accepted records for Australia of Gurney's Eagle and at least two other reports, the most recent being BARC case 915 on 16th March 2016, (that bird was also seen by Richard Baxter at precisely the same place as this individual), there are as yet no BARC accepted records of the Honey-buzzard.

Our observation platform was the top deck of our live-aboard charter vessel the 'Eclipse FNQ', a 16 m long catamaran based at Weipa on the Cape York Peninsula.

The weather was warm and sunny with a light wind and a flat sea. Scattered puffy white clouds were prominent in an otherwise bright blue sky. As it was the afternoon and the subject bird was to our east we had excellent sustained viewing conditions although it was never very close.

The Bird

The physical features observed are best appreciated by perusal of the following seven images.



Figs. 1 to 3. Gurney's Eagle, Saibai, 13th March 2020 Photos by Richard Baxter



Figs. 4 to 7. Gurney's Eagle, Saibai Island 13 March 2020 Photos by Robert Shore

This was a huge eagle as evidenced by other birds seen locally at about the same time. Those relevant to judgement of size included Whimbrel which were quite common and distant Australian Pelicans. As can be seen in the photos it was a very dark bird; not black but very dark brown. On the upper-side the only slightly paler areas were at the base of the primaries and on the underside, the bases of all the flight feathers, primaries and secondaries, were slightly paler, most noticeably in comparison with the underwing coverts.

Identification

Because of its size, shape and overall dark plumage, this was a very distinctive bird and was identified instantly as several aboard (particularly Richard Baxter) had previous experience of the species. Notes of a previous observation by Mike Carter and others on a similar tour in 2007 (for which there is no photographic record) are attached. The uniformity of its dark brown plumage determines that it

was an adult. Images used to determine this are on Plate 18 of Pratt & Beehler (2015), page 168 in Eaton *et al.* (2016), page 155 of Gregory (2017) and page .225 of Menkhorst *et al.* (2017 & 2019). There are no similar species with which it might be confused.

Acknowledgements

We thank all of our shipmates for their companionship on this tour, their help during this observation and in preparing this submission.

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Appendix

Gurney's Eagle *Aquila gurneyi* at Saibai on 12 October 2007.

Notes by Mike Carter

A single Gurney's Eagle was watched for from 2 to 5 minutes at a range of about 500 m soaring above the mangrove forest on the northern coast of Saibai on 12 October 2007. It was near the mouth of a river 6 km east of the township. All ten observers on the trip, travelling in two small boats, saw the bird. I was one of six in the leading boat, the main tender, licensed to take ten passengers, belonging to our cruiser. Thus it was a substantial craft providing a relatively stable observation platform. The other four followed in a dinghy.

We had a clear sustained view of the bird looking up at a comfortable angle of ~30°. The weather was bright, hot and humid, almost calm. It was partially cloudy and the bird was viewed against a background of thin cloud and blue sky. I used 7 x 50 Zeiss binoculars.

It was immediately apparent that this was an all-dark, large *Aquila* eagle. Although no other birds were available for direct comparison, large size was confirmed by subsequent sightings (within a few minutes) of soaring Australian Pelicans at a similar distance and then a Darter flushed as we entered the river. The head was small. It had long, broad, distinctively shaped, fingered wings, held flat with a slight upward curl of the primaries. The leading edge of the wings was almost straight but slightly concave between the body and the carpal then slightly swept back to the tip. The trailing edge had a marked bow across the secondaries but was straight at the primaries, parallel to the leading edge. The very rounded tail was of medium length, fanned so that its width at the tip was twice that at its base.

Although it was wholly dark with no discernible pattern it was not black, probably dark brown. It appeared paler than I had anticipated although Frank Pierce commented that it appeared darker than he'd expected. A jet-black male Darter seen shortly after definitely appeared darker.

The above description fits Gurney's Eagle and no other raptor.