

Submission to Birdlife Australia Rarities Committee

Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* West Is, Cocos Keeling Islands 3 June 2021

First Australian record

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This is a submission to BARC on the occurrence of an Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* on the Cocos Keeling Islands, the Australian External Territory in the Indian Ocean on 3 June 2021.



Photo: R.Baxter

Details of the occurrence

On the 3 June 2021 Ash James was travelling North from Canoe Beach to settlement on West Island. Ash is a long time resident of the islands and is familiar with the local birds and some of the regular visitors to the island. He was accompanied by James Shackleton, who had only recently arrived on the island.

When passing the Southern end of the runway Ash noticed a medium sized bird which he had not previously seen on the island. At the time the weather was cloudy and overcast and the sighting was between periods of rain. Ash noted that the bird was a raptor, possibly a falcon and described it as about the same size as a Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo, an occasional visitor to the islands he had seen previously.

As a result of the sighting, he later informed RB who attended the location during the mid afternoon and failed to find anything matching the above description. Later that day RB informed JS and late on the afternoon of the 4 June JS was at the site with her two children Kimmy and Hudson who are both birders. After a ten minute wait, Hudson spotted a smallish raptor in the vicinity and a number of photos were obtained at a distance by JS. Camera used was a Canon 7D with 100-400m lens. The bird perched on top of lagoon side Scaevola (Cabbage Bush) and was seen to stick to an open area of grassland at the Southern end of the runway.

JS then returned home and after not being able to find the bird in her Australian field guide, then searched through Robson's Birds of South East Asia and tentatively identified the bird as a female Amur Falcon. JS then informed RB who after seeing the pictures confirmed the identification and posted the sighting on social media.

The following day RB attended the site and obtained the photographs used in this submission.

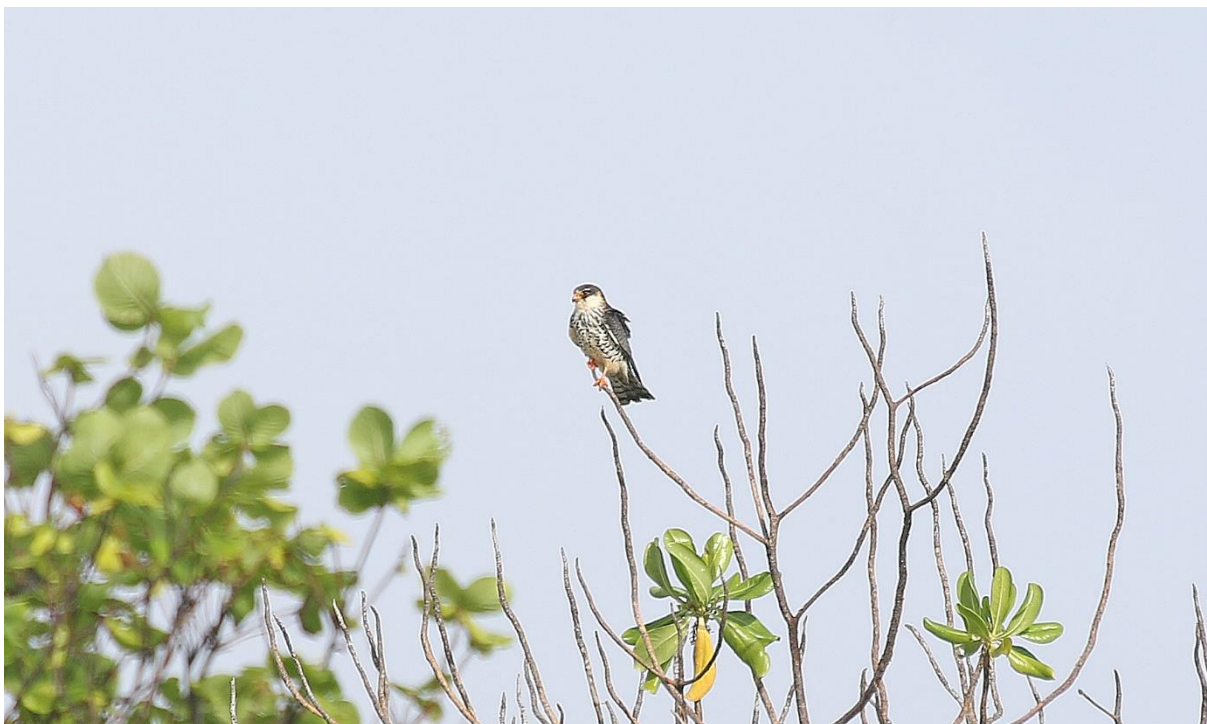


Photo: R.Baxter

Amur Falcon is a well known smallish raptor that breeds in Eastern Eurasia and winters in Southern Africa. The species performs the longest migration (22,000km) of any of the world's raptors, including a 4000km crossing of the North West Indian Ocean. The World population is estimated to be over 1 million breeding individuals. It is believed this individual was on her return journey back from Africa.

In the days prior to the initial sighting a tropical low formed South of India and travelled South towards Cocos, intensifying as it travelled. The low become stationary in the vicinity of the islands about four days prior to the initial sighting and deposited nearly 400mm of rain on Cocos over four days.

Description

The Cocos bird appears to be about 28-29cm with dark grey upperparts with evenly spaced black barring. The uppertail is a darker grey, also with black barring. The crown and nape are also dark grey, with a black moustache and thin white supercilium.

The base colouring of the underside is off white except for the buff thighs and vent. The trailing edge of the underwing is fringed dark grey, with dark barring across the underwing and relatively plain underwing coverts.

The most striking features of the bird are its red (dark orange) feet which are most obvious when perched and its orange cere.



Photo: R.Baxter

Behaviour:

The area at the southern end of the Cocos runway is flat and grassy and approximately 100m wide, with ocean on one side and lagoon on the other. The bird spent long periods of the day perched on exposed dead branches of Scaevola or Cabbage Bush from where it would fly across the open area and hunt for grasshoppers, often hovering kestrel like. It was seen to pick prey from short grass and also plunge into grass 30cm high. It seemed to be very successful at catching prey, as it was often seen flying with a prey item in its talons.

Conclusion:

There are three members of the family *falconidae* that have previously occurred on the Cocos-Keeling Islands, Brown Falcon, Nankeen Kestrel and Peregrine Falcon. There are at least eight additional members of the family that could occur and these are Lanner Falcon, Red-footed Falcon, Merlin, Common, Lesser and Spotted Kestrel and Oriental Hobby, as well as Australian Hobby. With the combination of smallish size, reddish legs and orange cere there are no other raptors that could be confused with this bird and the photos conclusively show this.