

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*, Roebuck Bay, Broome, WA, 18 March 2022

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Summary

This submission relates to the sighting of an immature Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* at Quarry Beach 17° 58' 05"S 122° 17' 15"E on the northern shores of Roebuck Bay, Broome, Western Australia at about 08:15, 18 March 2022. The bird was seen well at close range with binoculars. There are no images so this is an old-fashioned write up!

Circumstances of the sighting

We were 'scanning' flocks of migratory shorebirds to record colourbanded and engraved flagged individuals for on-going research. The birds numbered about 5,000 and were feeding vigorously on an incoming tide. The observers were situated close to a large over hanging rock situated at the top of the beach so, somewhat hidden. At about 08:15 a 'hobby' flushed the entire flock of birds. We only saw the bird with our naked eyes as it flashed low over our heads and disappeared over the trees on the low cliff behind us.

We both merely said 'oh hobby'. The birds spent a couple of minutes in flight, some left and flew east while about 3,000 returned to the mud and resumed foraging. About 10 minutes later the birds flushed again and the (same?) hobby dashed over our heads and appeared to chase the flock for some 200ms out to sea before banking away. However the hobby didn't make an attempt to capture any individual bird and we can't rule out that it was chasing a dragonfly (*Odonata* species) of which there were many present. However, we feel it is more likely it was attacking or 'testing' the flock of shorebirds. We only had views of the bird flying low and fast directly away from us and we both once again merely said 'hobby'. Then the bird flew back towards us just off to our right and we got our binoculars on to it. It then banked again and flew directly in front of us at only about 20ms away. And then away to the east and over the Pindan Trees (*Acacia eriopoda*) and cliffs at the east end of the beach.

Description

The bird was a small, slender, long-winged falcon. It appeared more slender-bodied and longer-winged than Australian Hobby *F. longipennis*. Upperparts were never seen well as the bird was above us all the time. In the initial sighting (assuming this was the same bird) we had naked-eye views of the upperparts and again poor views of the upperparts with binoculars at the second sighting. We were seated on stools for the entire observation. The best we can say from the views we obtained is they were 'dark'. The underparts were white with bold/heavy black streaking on the breast and this became thick 'tear-drops' on the lower flanks. The undertail coverts were white, a feature that CJH took particular note of. The face was black and white. The bird was hooded with a long black moustachial stripe. The cheeks were white and extended towards the neck and gave the appearance as if the bird had a collar. We don't believe it was 'collared' and with the head tucked in in flight didn't allow us to see that but the white of the cheeks certainly extended towards the birds nape.

The underwing was not seen well as the observers were concentrating on the underparts and facial pattern. The best we can say is that it was heavily patterned with dark spotting/streaking/markings.

No notes were taken at the time of the observation. The description above has been written on the same day as the sighting at 20:00.

Age

The bird was assumed to be a first year bird, fledged in the northern summer of 2021 (immature bird or 2CY in European parlance) due to the lack of any colour in the undertail coverts. Piet van den Hout a falcon researcher from the Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research says '*It seems that the rusty red 'adult-like' trousers and undertail coverts appear in most birds in their 3rd CY, but in some individuals this transition can already take place between 2nd CY spring and 2nd CY autumn*'.

Confusion species

Australian Hobby has a similar jizz to Eurasian Hobby and our initial views didn't allow us to distinguish the bird from Australian Hobby indeed that is the species we expected it to be. But once we saw the boldly streaked underparts it was clear it was not Australian Hobby as that species, at all ages, has some degree of warm buff/orange underparts with fine/medium streaking. Oriental Hobby *F. severus* has plain orange underparts and lacks the long moustachial stripe of *F. subbuteo*. Immature *F. severus* have streaked orange underparts.

Female and immature female Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* have many plumage similarities to *F. subbuteo*. However, *F. amurensis* is not strongly 'hooded' the crown being more blue-grey not black. *F. amurensis* has a short moustachial stripe, our bird had a noticeable long one. *F. amurensis* is a paler bird in general with more white in the underwing. While we did not see the underwing of our bird well, it most certainly more dark than light in the views we obtained. CJH is familiar with Amur Falcon from working for many years in northern China. This bird didn't remind him of Amur Falcon. He feels Amur Falcon is shorter winged, slightly smaller overall and have a fairly languid flight for a falcon.

The other species to rule out is Peregrine Falcon *F. peregrinus*. In particular the subspecies *F. p. calidus*. This subspecies has now been recorded in the Broome region in all summers since 2015. *F. p. calidus* is closer in plumage to *F. subbuteo* than the other hobby species and more difficult to rule out on plumage alone. The underparts of immature *calidus* have streaking but it is not as 'black and bold' as the markings on our bird. However, the crucial factor to us is the jizz of our bird and, that at no point did we discuss with each other if we were looking at a peregrine. We only ever considered the bird to be a hobby. We are both very familiar with Australasian Hobby and reasonably familiar with Peregrine Falcon. This bird was too slender to be a Peregrine. It didn't have the compact super-powerful flight of a peregrine. We note that that *F. p. calidus* is considered to be more slender (longer and more attenuated wings and tail than *F. p. macropus* (Australian Bird Guide) however, we see *F. P. calidus* and this bird didn't have the jizz or 'feel' in any of the views we obtained either with the naked eye or with binoculars of any peregrine we have seen.

Feeding

Was this bird attempting to actually take shorebirds as prey? Eurasian Hobby take a wide variety of insect and avian prey. Birds from the size of martins (*Delichon* species) up to and including Rose-ringed Parakeets *Psittacula krameri*. A vagrant Hobby in the Seychelle Islands was recorded taking a White Tern *Gygis alba* (Del Hoyo *et al* 2020). The flock that our observed bird interacted with had 100's of Red-necked Stints *Calidris ruficollis* and 10's of Terek Sandpipers *Xenus cinereus* within it, both species well within the prey size recorded for Eurasian Hobby. Eurasian Hobby has been seen targeting shorebirds in the Netherlands '*Yes, I did see hobbies hunting shorebirds, on several occasions on mudflats of the Wadden Sea and the Dutch Delta in the south of the Netherlands*' Piet van den Hout (pers. comm)

Despite the plumage similarities of this bird to *F. p. calidus* and *F. amurensis* the jizz of this bird and subtle plumage differences makes us conclude that the bird was an immature Eurasian Hobby.

First Record for Broome

This is the first record of Eurasian Hobby for the Broome Shire. Other records for Western Australia are the well-documented records of multiple birds (both adults and first winter) in Perth between 2016 and 2022. And, there are three records from Australia's external territories summarised in Singor 2021.

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