

RAPTORS IN MALTESE SKIES

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(This is the second of a series of articles on diurnal birds of prey. The author has been working on this family of birds for the last six years at the request of the M.O.S. Ed.)

Honey Buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*) Kuččarda

The Honey Buzzard is frequent in spring (late March to early June) and common in autumn (mid-August to mid-October). The words 'frequent' and 'common' when describing migratory birds are somewhat vague. Thus, the two periods mentioned simply indicate the period of passage of the bird; the status given applies for only a part of this period. Honey Buzzards arrive initially in ones or twos, the number increasing as the season gets under way. This of course applies to all migratory birds.

The Honey Buzzard is very variable in its plumage but it is always dark brownish on its back and on its upper wing surface. Its head may be white grey or brown, while the streaked or barred under parts may be white or some shade of brown. Its brownish tail has a dark subterminal band and two or three variable bars. Occasionally a bird with a white rump can be noted.

This raptor is a most useful bird, subsisting mostly on insects, especially those of the bee family, with an occasional small vertebrate. The scale-like feathers on its cheek serve to protect its face from being stung by wasps and bees as it ransacks their nest. Naturally, considering its mode of feeding, it is quite

at home on the ground.

In the air this buzzard is quite an accomplished flier, soaring and gliding on down-curved wings with grace and ease. Honey buzzards, considering their size, can be surprisingly fast on the wing — especially when shooting down with nearly closed wings towards a tree chosen as a roost.

In Malta this bird is usually seen in flocks of up to a dozen at a time, at a height varying from a few hundred to a few thousand feet. These parties are mostly seen travelling steadily on their journey, though they can be observed also wheeling high in the sky. Other hawks (Short-toed Eagle, Black Kite, Marsh Harrier, Lesser Kestrel, Kestrel and Hobby) are observed in their company. Roberts (Birds of Malta — 1954 — Progress Press) noted also the Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* soaring with this buzzard.

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) Arpa

The Osprey is a scarce though regular passage migrant, occurring in spring (late March to mid-May) and in autumn from mid-September to late October. About a dozen birds are recorded yearly. One was recorded at Wardija on 4th November 1968 (M.O.S. Quarterly Bulletin Voi. 1. No. 4). Despott, curiously enough, recorded the Osprey only between 8th June and the 25th of September (Notes on the Ornithology of Malta — Ibis — July 1917, pp. 281-349).

Ospreys have dark brown upper parts with the white under parts having a faint brown band across the breast. A broad black band runs

from the beak through the eye to the sides of the neck. Its bluish feet have padded toes with strong claws to enable it to clutch securely the fish on which it feeds.

In its habitat this raptor occurs naturally enough near water. This holds true also for Malta; however, especially in autumn, they can also be observed at the hill ridges.

Its buoyant flight consists of a few slow wing beats followed by long glides on level deeply-arched wings.

Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*)
Astun Iswed

This Kite is a scarce spring and autumn passage migrant occurring from April to mid-May and in slightly greater numbers from August to late September. It has been also recorded in late March and in July. About ten occurrences are noted yearly.

Black Kites are a dingy dark brown with darker streaks on breast and belly. The upper surfaces of the wing have a pale patch which is also found on their under surface in Juveniles. Its dark tail is slightly forked.

These birds can be seen singly or in small parties (the largest recorded being of sixteen birds in spring 1970). On migration they fly at a medium height, in autumn often with the Honey Buzzards.

In flight this bird soars and glides leisurely but gracefully on level wings, though it can hold them momentarily in a shallow V.

Sparrow Hawk (*Accipiter nisus*)
Sparvier

Sparrow Hawks are uncommonly seen from late September to mid-October; they are very rare at other times. So far in the last five years it has only occurred twice later than mid-October, and just once in Spring. It is interesting to note that Schembri (Catalogo Ornitologico del Gruppo di Malta — 1843) described it as common in both spring and autumn.

Male Sparrow Hawks are slate grey on back, wings and tail; the breast and belly are white-barrad with rusty brown. Females have brownish upper-parts, while their underparts are white-barrad with greyish brown. In young birds the upper-parts are brownish with rufous tipped feathers; the underparts range from orange to white with irregular markings. Both its feet and iris are yellow.

These hawks are found in well wooded areas which are suitable for the way they hunt. Their prey consists chiefly of small birds, although a few small mammals are also taken.

It has a rapid flight, a few supple wing beats being followed by a long light glide. It has not been observed soaring much in these islands.

These predators are usually met with flying over the hill ridges (especially over Buskett) on their migratory flight which takes place at very variable altitudes. Birds mostly travel singly but on two occasions were noted with hobbies. Occasionally it can be observed hunting, skimming low over the stone walls.