

# RECENT RECORDS OF THE BLACK-BREASTED BUZZARD *Hamirostra melanosternon* AT GUNBOWER ISLAND VICTORIA

LAWRIE E. CONOLE and RALPH MAC NALLY<sup>1</sup>

Section of Ecology, Department of Biological Sciences, Monash University, Victoria 3800

The Black-breasted Buzzard *Hamirostra melanosternon* is not classified as threatened in Victoria (DNRE 2000), though there are just nine accepted records for the state (AVW 2000) and a further eleven unconfirmed records listed by Marchant and Higgins (1993). This is presumably because the species is regarded as a vagrant, breeding has never been documented or even suspected in the state, and it is not thought to have a permanent population within Victoria. The accepted records to date are all from western Victoria (AVW 2000), with unconfirmed records from western and central Victoria, including the outskirts of Melbourne (Marchant and Higgins 1993). We present an account of two individual Black-breasted Buzzards that were present in the Gunbower Island State Forest (35°45'S, 144°17'E) near Cohuna, between January and September 1999. These birds were observed during a more extensive study of the vertebrate fauna of Gunbower Island, Barmah State Forest and Lower Ovens Regional Park (Mac Nally *et al.* 2000).

On 28 or 29 January 1999, Mr N. Taylor (pers. comm.) observed an adult Black-breasted Buzzard around midday, flying from south (farmland) to north (forest) over Taylor's Lagoon (35°51'11"S, 144°18'33"E) on Gunbower Island.

On 5 February 1999, an adult Black-Breasted Buzzard was observed by LEC soaring over Cemetery Bend (35°45'13"S, 144°18'28"E). This bird clearly displayed the upswept and backswept, very long, narrow wings with prominent 'bulls-eyes'; short and square greyish tail; and deep black breast, that characterize the Black-breasted Buzzard (Marchant and Higgins 1993; Pizzey 1997). It was observed for about 2 minutes, at closest *ca* 10 metres, soaring in loose figure-eights along the fringing forest of the Murray River, at about midday on a very hot summer's day (>40°C).

On 6 July 1999, LEC found an immature Black-breasted Buzzard perched in a tree on a transect line at '86 Break' (35°48'32"S, 144°20'40"E). The time was early morning (0800 hours), and the weather cold (*ca* 2°C). The bird was reluctant to fly even when approached, and was observed from as close as 20 metres. The extraordinarily long wings were evident at rest; overhanging the short tail by an appreciable margin. The unfeathered legs and erectile crest feathers on the head also were prominent. As depicted in Marchant and Higgins (1993: plate 72, Fig. 4), this young bird showed some black feathering on a rufous background on the breast, and a small amount of black feathering on the crown of its head. We conclude on this basis that the bird was a second-year immature.

On 7 September 1999, both an adult and an immature bird were observed by LEC flying over Peters Creek Track (35°45'43"S, 144°17'25"E). They appeared to be associating as a pair, and vocalized frequently. These birds appeared to be identically plumaged birds to the two individuals seen earlier in the year, and we suggest that they were likely to be the same two individuals. Though no breeding activity was observed, we consider the likelihood that this pair did attempt to breed on Gunbower Island to be high. There have been no confirmed breeding attempts by this species south of 30°S (Marchant and Higgins 1993).

The birds were observed with binoculars (Bushnell Natureview 10×42, Bausch and Lomb Inc., USA). Viewing conditions on the three occasions varied from satisfactory to excellent.

That the two Black-breasted Buzzards were present on Gunbower Island over much of 1999 may have been a reflection of the drought conditions in eastern Australia. However, combined with the earlier records from the Swan Hill-Kerang area (Marchant and Higgins 1993; AVW 2000), it is also possible that this northern section of the Victorian Riverina is on the margin of the normal range of a sub-population of the Black-breasted Buzzard. It seems possible that breeding may have occurred in Victoria in 1999, or may happen at some future point. Therefore, we consider it legitimate to treat the Black-breasted Buzzard as a rare resident or visitor to the Victorian Riverina, rather than as a vagrant. LEC spent *ca* 50 days engaged in surveying birds on Gunbower Island between February 1999 and January 2000, but only encountered the buzzards on these three occasions. This probably indicates the amount of observer-effort required to adequately survey for this rare species in riparian forests in northern Victoria.

Given the small size of the population (<50 mature individuals; satisfying CR criterion D), we recommend that the Black-breasted Buzzard be considered for classification as Critically Endangered (CR) in Victoria (IUCN 1994).

This addition to the fauna of the Gunbower Island State Forest brings to eight the number of threatened Victorian species recorded there during our fieldwork: White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, Black-breasted Buzzard, Barking Owl *Ninox connivens*, Nankeen Night Heron *Nycticorax caledonicus*, Royal Spoonbill *Platalea regia*, Giant Banjo Frog *Limnodynastes interioris*, Growling Grass Frog *Litoria raniformis*, Broad-shelled River Turtle

<sup>1</sup>For correspondence: e-mail [dacelo@silas.cc.monash.edu.au](mailto:dacelo@silas.cc.monash.edu.au)

*Chelodina expansa*. Together with other threatened taxa known to occur there, such as the Carpet Python *Morelia spilotes* (Bennett *et al.* 1998), this reinforces the value of this important forest and RAMSAR wetland for biodiversity conservation in northern Victoria.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the Murray Darling Basin Commission for funding this work (Project R7007). R. M. gratefully acknowledges the support of the Australian Research Council. We also thank Noel Taylor and Chris Coleborn for providing details of the Taylor's Lagoon observation.

#### REFERENCES

- AVW (2000). 'Atlas of Victorian Wildlife'. (Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Heidelberg, Victoria.)
- Bennett, A., Brown, G., Lumsden, L., Hespe, D., Krasna, S. and Silins, J., (1998). 'Fragments for the Future. Wildlife in the Victorian Riverina (the Northern Plains)'. (Department of Natural Resources and Environment: East Melbourne.)
- DNRE (2000). 'Threatened Vertebrate Fauna in Victoria 2000. A systematic list of vertebrate fauna considered extinct, at risk of extinction or in major decline in Victoria'. (Department of Natural Resources and Environment: East Melbourne.)
- Emison, W. B., Beardsell, C. M., Norman, F. I., Loyn, R. H. and Bennett, S. C. (1987). 'Atlas of Victorian Birds'. (Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands/RAOU: Melbourne.)
- Marchant, S. and Higgins, P. J. (Ed's) (1993). 'Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds, volume 2, Raptors to Lapwings'. (Oxford University Press: Melbourne.)
- Mac Nally, R., Parkinson, A., Horrocks, G., Conole, L. and Tzaros, C. (2000). 'Relationships between vertebrate biodiversity and abundance and availability of coarse woody debris on south-eastern Australian floodplains'. (Murray-Darling Basin Commission report No. R7007.III.)
- Pizzey, G. (1997). 'Field Guide to the Birds of Australia'. (Angus and Robertson: Sydney.)
-