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BOOK REVIEWS

Some Time with Eagles and Falcons

Jerry Olsen. 1994. (Applied Ecology Research Group, University of Canberra: Canberra) 215 × 135 mm, viii and 159 pp, 6 tables, 6 figures, 16 colour plates. \$19.95.

When I first read the title and viewed the cover of this book, memories of my own experiences with raptors came flooding back — the capture, a tangled creature completely out of its element, red piercing eyes staring into mine, slender wings catching the breeze then soaring high. These images came alive as my mind recalled the thrills of the encounter and the exhilaration of the release with freedom regained. How privileged I was to enter the world of the raptors for such a short time. But my encounters pale into insignificance compared to those of Jerry Olsen.

Jerry has accomplished what many field researchers have always said they would like to do some day but just never get around to it — publish their experiences! He has been able to weave some good yarns with snippets of research data without compromising either. The reader follows as Jerry's interest in raptors grows from his encounters in the United States of America to a full blossoming in the arid regions of South Australia and Canberra's environs. On my initial reading I pondered the relevance of his rather morbid first chapter set in the wilds of Canada but realized later that it gave an inkling of the events that would later shape his outlook on the natural world and in particular, birds of prey.

As Jerry leads us along we are introduced to his friend, Les Boyd, and the 'sport' of falconry in the United States of America. He does not make value judgements on any moral issues concerning the capturing of wild individuals or taking young from their nests to train. Whatever the reader's opinion, many aspects of the birds' ecology were able to be examined at close quarters and some additions made to the knowledge base. Besides, on occasions the captured and trained prize simply flew off to take its place in the wild leaving a bewildered handler staring into the distance. His admiration and sensitivity to the birds he handled, if not directly stated, comes shining through.

When he took up a teaching position in South Australia his interest in falcons, particularly the Peregrine, followed him. By researching questions on distribution, diet, method of attack and prey partitioning he was able to strengthen the foundation of basic knowledge necessary for more advanced studies. His interest in the effects of pesticides, especially DDT, on the reproductive success of raptors took him into the world of the oologist (egg collector). Thicknesses of egg shell before and after the introduction of DDT were examined to highlight any perceived threat within the birds' ranges. I was enthralled by his comparison of the Black and Peregrine Falcons' hunting abilities and their respective prey species. I was also intrigued by the various strategies used by prey species to escape capture. That these falcons are thought to single out the smaller or weaker was a pertinent comment on the sparse data given and is certainly worthy of future research.

Jerry's authorised experiences using falconry whilst in South Australia were utilized in trying to solve the Silver Gull problem at Sydney's airport. Readers may judge for themselves if this method could have been successful.

Rehabilitating injured birds can be a very rewarding or disheartening experience for the carer, depending on the eventual outcome. Jerry describes various encounters by tracing the history of several injured birds. This is made all the more interesting by his giving them names as I found I could then personally relate to the life history of individual birds. Jerry's involvement with these injured birds led to an opportunity to educate the general public about raptors through the film media. His charges have appeared on *Earthwatch*, several Leyland Brothers productions and a jeans commercial. They also featured in several movies including *Ground Zero* (about the British nuclear testing at Maralinga) and *Mad Max III: Beyond Thunderdome* — can you remember the scene at the 'children's camp'? To preserve the wild nature of these birds so that they can be released later and to train them to 'perform' for the camera to get that certain shot takes a great deal of patience and skill. Jerry tells how he did this describing several lighter moments but ending on a rather sad note.

His trip to the Solomon Islands in search of the endangered Sanford's Sea Eagle had two aims: to see if they still existed and how difficult they would be to study. He relates the tale of his eventual sighting of the bird in a light-hearted fashion but leaves the reader with the question; 'Did anyone later study this rare bird?'

Then back to Australia and on to Canberra. I found this chapter thought-provoking as it shows how basic field observations and research can be utilized quite readily in the preservation of a species. He sought answers to a number of questions such as:

When should raptors be released to provide the maximum chance for survival?

Will adults accept and foster orphaned young?

Can adults provide enough food to feed an increased number of young in their brood?

How can the chances of breeding success in Peregrine Falcons be improved by 'refurbishing' their nest sites?

Answers to these questions prompted several simple remedies for the conservation of these magnificent creatures.

On a visit to USA, Jerry was able to rekindle friendships from 21 years ago. I was not quite sure what stance Jerry was taking when he talked about selling common parrots to fanciers in America and how the progeny of protected New Zealand falcons, which were sent off-shore to be captive-bred for research and to save the gene-pool, turned up as falconry birds. He discusses the protection of feral game animals and the influence of the gun lobby and raises the issue of captive-bred raptors being released in their previous ranges and not *ad hoc* across the countryside.

His friend, Les Boyd, had started up a business breeding mainly Barbary Falcons from North Africa for sale as falconry birds. Jerry describes how Les stops the birds from screaming for food because this is annoying for the falconers. This appears to smack of domestication to me! One aspect not referred to was the impact that exotic escapees might have on the survival of native raptors.

Jerry's description of the Snake River Birds of Prey Reserves and the World Centre for Birds of Prey highlights what can be done with a suitable and enthusiastic personnel with a clear cut goal. Some ideas for concerned people in Australia can be gleaned from this chapter.

Finally he relates in diary form, the trials and tribulations of caring for an injured Collared Sparrowhawk. This chapter leads naturally into the appendix which sets out guidelines for handling, caring for, feeding, housing, transporting, fostering, and releasing rehabilitated birds.

I have very few criticisms of *Some Time with Eagles and Falcons* as I found it both entertaining and informative but under the current controversy surrounding Sydney Airport I do not think Jerry can get away with the slip that the E/W runway extends into Sydney Harbour. I also found that on numerous occasions he includes many asides, encased in commas, which makes his sentence structure cumbersome and tends to detract from the flow of the story. Few spelling and grammatical errors were evident but I thought Jerry would have picked up 'Gray' Goshawk and the fact that villagers do not actually grow chocolate.

Jerry's love of raptors is evident throughout his book. I was inspired by the focused nature of the research, as this type of data collection can be carried out with time and patience by any person with a love for these birds. I whole-heartedly recommend *Some Time with Eagles and Falcons* for the amateur birder and professional ornithologist alike.

John Farrell, Springwood, New South Wales

Reader's Digest Photographic Field Guide — Birds of Australia
Jim Flegg and N. Longmore, 1994. Reader's Digest (Australia) Pty Limited, Surrey Hills. RRP \$35.00

This is the first complete field guide to Australian birds to rely almost entirely on photographs of living birds, most of which were photographed in their natural habitat. Most photographs were sourced from the National Photographic Index of Australian Birds. It comprises 368 pages printed on art-coated paper bound in a soft celloglaze cover (210 × 148 mm) and contains 840 full colour photographs, distribution maps and a detailed text with habitat and status symbols which provide a simple, easy to understand, quick reference for each species. The introduction includes some basic information on bird biology, habitats and bird families.

This book was printed in London, in what must have been a rush for publication to get it into bookshops prior to Christmas. Unfortunately, many production errors have crept into the book which have seriously reduced its value as a field guide. One must also question the wisdom of using art-coated paper for a book which was designed for field reference — if it gets wet, or even damp, the pages will stick together.

Apart from the production errors, which includes, possibly as the worst example, most of the photographs of the *Pachycephala* whistlers being incorrectly labelled (pages 245 and 247), I question the value of a field guide which uses photographs which do not in many cases depict or highlight distinguishing features. In fact, in some instances, a photograph can give a very wrong impression of colour and the most obvious is the flash-induced red-eyed subject.

Presumably because of space limitations and unavailability of appropriate photographs, there are not enough photographs of many species to show their different plumage phases, such as breeding and non-breeding plumage (e.g. wading and seabirds), or other distinguishing features such as underwing patterns (e.g. seabirds, waterbirds and raptors). Also, species in which the males, females and immatures may have quite distinctly different plumages, are often only illustrated by one photograph and these are sometimes poorly labelled (e.g. photographs of female Satin Flycatcher and Lovely Fairy-Wren are labelled by the species name, but not as females, and the male plumage is not shown). Thus the situation arises that in many field experiences one may sight a bird which is simply not illustrated in this book and inexperienced observers consequently may not be able to identify what they have seen or misidentify it. Text descriptions of differences in plumage are not a substitute for illustrations in a good field guide.

This book might appeal to and be useful to aviculturists and those with a casual interest in birds, but it falls far short of being a reliable and useful field guide for the serious field observer.

J. W. Hardy, Ermington, NSW