

Comments on Book Review

Comments on the review of 'Australian High Country Raptors' by Greg Clancy

Greg Clancy's review of my book *Australian High Country Raptors* (Corella, 2015, 39: 23) contains a number of errors. He appeared to misread or misquote phrases in the book and offered certain claims as 'fact' that were unsupported by evidence. However, it's worth examining these statements to generate some questions for future research.

Below, the statement from my 2014 book is listed first, followed by the Clancy statement:

1- (Olsen 2014, section on different types of habitat) 'dense undergrowth of shrubs, blackberries and ferns. These provide habitat for nectar-feeding birds such as finches, silvereyes and other small passerines, the prey of accipiters...'

(Clancy 2015) "errors such as including finches with nectar-feeding birds (page 27). Finches are granivorous and will often take insects but nectar, if ever taken, would be very unusual, although introduced finch species are known to take nectar occasionally."

Firstly, the generalization that finches do not feed on nectar is incorrect. For example, Rodríguez *et al.* (2015) recorded the Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*, and other finches feeding on nectar from the invasive Century Plant *Agave americana*. Secondly, this section of the book describes habitats, and prey species that come to these habitats, for example, House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* and Goldfinches *Carduelis carduelis*, the only 'true' finches in Australia. According to Higgins *et al.* (2006) both occasionally take nectar. Furthermore, Greg contradicts himself by conceding that 'introduced finch species are known to take nectar occasionally'. What is the exact percentage of nectar intake as percentage (1%? 10%?) that rules a bird species in or out as a 'nectar-feeding bird'?

2- (Olsen 2014, re Brown Goshawks), 'Sexual maturity is attained at one year, but breeding in juvenile plumage is rare.'

(Clancy 2015) "The reference to Brown Goshawks not breeding in the juvenile plumage should more correctly state immature plumage as the Goshawk has an immature plumage, unlike the related Collared Sparrowhawk."

Greg has confused 'immature' and 'juvenile' plumage. First-year Brown Goshawks are in 'juvenile' plumage, not 'immature' plumage as Greg states; second-year plumage is 'immature plumage'. He is saying that Brown Goshawks in immature plumage do not breed, which is incorrect. Goshawks are more likely to breed in immature plumage than in first-year (juvenile) plumage.

3- (Olsen 2014 re conservation of Powerful Owl habitat) 'Nests are difficult to locate. They roost and nest in mature hollow trees; nests found in Namadgi and Tidbinbilla were away from habitation.'

(Clancy 2015) 'The statement that the Powerful Owl nests and roosts in mature hollow trees is incorrect (page 242). They

do, indeed, nest in mature hollow trees but usually roost away from the nest tree, other than when incubating or brooding. Thickly foliated rainforest trees and wattles are favoured.'

In their definition of roosting Campbell and Lack (1985) said, 'The nest site may be an important roost both prior to, as well as during, nesting (incubating birds are often asleep)' (p. 518). Owls prospect for hollows and roost in them before choosing one as a nest, and this applies to the Powerful Owl, as described by Matthew Mo (pers. comm. and in prep.).

4- Olsen (2014) 'Sooty Owls give a long descending siren-like scream or wail, known as the 'falling-bomb' call, and harsh screams similar to a Masked Owl.'

Clancy (2015) "Additional information could have been included such as describing the insect-like call of the Sooty Owl, which is as common as the 'falling-bomb' call, which is described (page 60)."

Firstly, on page 248 the book clearly directs the reader to Olsen (2011) for more detailed information on owls. The 2014 book is not a field guide. I was under a strict word limit.

Second, Greg's claim is incorrect. Debus (1995) said the 'falling bomb' call is by far the most common call heard, much more common than the 'insect-like call' (heard 23 times in his study versus one time for the 'insect-like call') and much more commonly heard when playback was used (27 times versus 13 times).

5- (Olsen 2014 re Nankeen Kestrel) 'Adult males have a grey head and tail, females are chestnut. Iris brown, legs and feet yellow. Juveniles similar to adult female.'

Clancy (2014) 'The juvenile Nankeen Kestrel is described as 'similar to the female' but the addition of 'but more heavily marked with black or brown bars and spots' would have clarified the situation better (page 274).'

Again, this was not a field guide. And I would take issue with Greg's claim about the diagnostic value of heavy marking (see Debus 2012). Because of the variation in female and juvenile marking the best way to discriminate juveniles and adult females, at least during the breeding season, is that adults are moulting tail, primary and secondary feathers, and these gaps are easily seen when birds are in flight (Olsen 2014). Juveniles have a 'clean' outline with no gaps in wing or tail feathers. Also, juveniles of all falcons in the high country have a clearly visible light tail-end that adults lack.

6- Olsen (2015) 'Barn owls are said to be distinguished from 'typical' owls by a sharply defined facial disc, typically heart-shaped (Higgins 1999) but, to my eye, the differences are not always that clear. For instance some individual Southern Boobooks have a fairly well-defined facial disc.'

Clancy (2015) 'He also claims that the Southern Boobook has a facial disc. While there is a partial disc it is far removed from the distinctive heart shaped facial discs that characterise the masked owls (genus *Tyto*) and this claim may confuse novice readers.'

Firstly, I did not say ‘*the Southern Boobook has a facial disc*’. And Greg ignores the high variation within the species. If you look at photos in, for example, David Hollands’ (1991) book (pp. 52 and 54), many Boobooks, depending on their colour, have a facial disc that other *Ninox* lack. This discriminates Boobooks from others in the genus such as Powerful Owls *Ninox strenua* that lack a facial disc. I think it helps the novice to understand this variation. This so-called clear difference between *Tyto* and *Ninox* (*Tyto* have a facial disc, *Ninox* do not) is a myth.

One purpose of the book, not mentioned in Greg’s review, was to challenge many claims made in the scientific literature, including claims about species such as the Eastern Osprey *Pandion cristatus*, which Greg studies. As just one example: Dennis and Clancy (2014) said about Ospreys, ‘With a scarcity of permanent inland lakes and major rivers over much of Australia, Osprey breeding habitat is primarily confined to coastal areas, including along estuaries to their tidal limit (Marchant and Higgins 1993)’ (p.409).

Olsen (2014) said, ‘In North America Bald Eagles and Ospreys commonly breed far inland on such bodies of water but, so far, ornithologists have not found Ospreys breeding inland in south-eastern Australia and none breed in the high country. Bald Eagles in North America breed at much higher elevations than White-bellied Sea-Eagles do in the highlands (Table 2.1); Sea-Eagles wander to high altitudes but don’t breed there. Perhaps the water isn’t clear enough for hunting Ospreys, and suitable fish, turtles and waterbirds aren’t plentiful enough for Sea-Eagles’ (pp. 27-28).

There is permanent water in southeast Australia. Inland rivers in western North America the size of our Shoalhaven, Murrumbidgee, or Murray Rivers, or dams the size of Burrinjuck, Blowering or Googong Dam would have Ospreys on them, far inland from the sea, even at elevations above 2000 m, as high as the top of Mount Kosciuszko. Furthermore, permanent freshwater bodies in Australia contain similar fish species (carp, and salmonids such as trout) to those commonly taken by breeding Ospreys in freshwater habitats in Europe and North America (Poole 1989). Likely reasons for the failure of Ospreys to breed inland in Australia are twofold: i) Most Australian raptors differ from their overseas counterparts in their inability to nest at high altitudes, ii) Inland lakes and rivers in Europe and North America have clear water (you can see to the bottom of rivers and see deep into many lakes) but Australia does not. The turbid waters in Australian rivers and lakes could prevent breeding (Olsen 2014).

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

These conflicting claims can be tested, in the field and in the literature:

1- Introduced ‘true’ finches should be included in studies of nectar-feeding birds if they are taking nectar (Higgins *et al.* 2006) **versus** introduced finches should never be included in studies of nectar-feeding birds (Clancy 2015).

2- Breeding in juvenile plumage is rare in Brown Goshawks (Olsen 2014) but less rare in immature plumage **versus** Brown Goshawks in immature plumage do not breed (Clancy 2015).

3- Powerful Owls roost in tree hollows (Olsen 2014; Matt Mo personal observation), an important stage in nest-site selection before egg-laying **versus** Powerful Owls do not roost in tree hollows (Clancy 2015).

4- In Sooty Owls the ‘falling bomb’ call is more commonly heard than the ‘insect-like’ call (Debus 1995) **versus** the ‘insect-like’ call of the Sooty Owl is as commonly heard as the ‘falling-bomb’ call (Clancy 2015).

5- The best way to discriminate juvenile Nankeen Kestrels from adult females in the field is to look for wing and tail moult (Olsen 2014), and the terminal light bar on the juvenile tail **versus** the best way to discriminate juvenile Nankeen Kestrels from adult females is to look for the heavier spotting and barring on the juvenile back (Clancy 2015).

6- Southern Boobooks are highly variable and some have a fairly well-defined facial disc (Olsen 2014) **versus** Boobooks have only a partial disc (Clancy 2015).

7- Ospreys don’t regularly nest inland in Australia because, unlike North America and Europe, Australian fresh waters are too turbid for hunting, and Australian raptors do not nest at high altitudes (Olsen 2014) **versus** Ospreys in Australia do not regularly nest inland because there is a scarcity of permanent inland lakes and major rivers (Dennis and Clancy 2014).

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