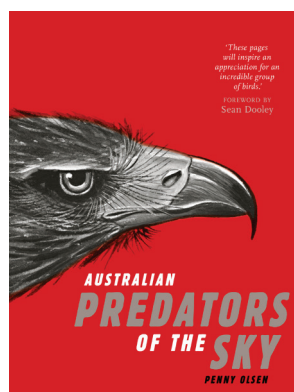


Book Review



Australian Predators of the Sky

Penny Olsen 2015. National Library of Australia Publishing, Canberra. Softcover, 216 pp, colour paintings. ISBN: 9780642278562. RRP \$A40.

This book is another in the author's series on historical Australian bird art, this time focussing on raptors and owls. It deals with each Australian species through a short commentary on its discovery and naming accompanied by, as far as possible, the earliest known European illustration of the species (often First Fleet art) and other early paintings. It is organised in chapters, although not numbered as such:

- (1) Discovering Australia's birds of prey – a short history of who discovered which species and when; a catalogue of early illustrated bird books and their artists up to the beginning of the field-guide era (Cayley) and beyond, and an explanation of the eclectic sources of art used in this book.
- (2) About Australia's birds of prey – a brief overview of the resident species of Australia and its territories, their zoogeography, general habits and ecology, comparative sizes, hunting and diet, breeding biology, relations with humans, conservation status, and an explanation of the species accounts in the following two sections.
- (3) Birds of prey – diurnal (25 species, including the Christmas Island Goshawk).
- (4) Birds of prey – nocturnal (nine species, including the Christmas Island Hawk-Owl, but treating the Boobook and Sooty Owl forms as single species).
- (5) Biographies of artists – cross-referenced to their art in the book, giving details of the 32 artists and their publications.
- (6) List of illustrations used – indexed to where they appear in this book, and naming the artist, medium used, and source of the picture (e.g. book title, National Library image reference).
- (7) Further reading – a list of general raptor books, early illustrated bird books (e.g. Gould, Mathews), and histories of exploration, First Fleet art, early ornithologists etc.

The species accounts have a common format: the people (and their occupations) who first described and named the particular species; the meaning of its scientific name; some historical paintings (including the first, where available) with their original captions (English and scientific names of the taxon illustrated, as used at the time) and date of production; and a narrative of the species' discovery, of variable length from a few lines to half a page, and sometimes with a quote from the discoverer, or a comment on some taxonomic or biological aspect or issue (educating the layperson on, e.g., 'type' specimens and priority in scientific naming).

This compilation of paintings, and the biographies of the artists and associated authors, is an invaluable record of our ornithological heritage, and such a project (along with other like

books) is a very worthy one, having a special resonance with First Fleet descendants like me. Some of the early paintings appear to us now as quaint caricatures, but many are very life-like, and reveal great talent and eye for detail. The book does, though, presuppose some knowledge of taxonomy and the vagaries of scientific nomenclature. It is perhaps not a book for beginners or non-birders, but rather a retrospective for those familiar with contemporary bird books and wanting the historical background on ornithological exploration, discovery and illustration. Birders should absorb books like this to appreciate how Australian ornithology evolved.

The public accessibility of these paintings raises a nomenclatural problem with our two harrier species (Debus and McAllan in prep.). Thanks to this book, it is immediately apparent that *Circus assimilis* Jardine & Selby 1828, going by Selby's painting of the type (1827, captioned *Circus assimilis*), clearly depicts a Swamp Harrier by its white rump, sparse tail barring and other plumage features (whereas juvenile Spotted Harriers would show ginger 'epaulettes' and a thickly barred tail). Thus, the astute Gould correctly applied *Circus assimilis* to his own specimens of the Swamp Harrier, and *Circus jardinii* to his newly discovered and described Spotted Harrier (Gould 1838, *Synopsis*...). So, assumptions and speculation that Selby's model was an 'immature' Spotted Harrier and a vagrant to the Sydney region where it was collected, and musings over the supposed 'late' official entry of the Swamp Harrier to science (as *C. approximans* Peale 1848, from Fiji), are wrong. Gould himself definitely recorded the Swamp Harrier in New South Wales in 1839. The label *C. assimilis* against his plate of the Swamp Harrier (*The Birds of Australia*, 1848) refers to its similarity to familiar European harriers (notably the Marsh Harrier) and thus makes sense of his vernacular 'Allied Harrier', whereas the Spotted Harrier is unlike European species. Failure by subsequent ornithologists to recognise Selby's subject as a Swamp Harrier is inexplicable. However, confusion has persisted even in recent raptor and other bird books (juvenile Spotted Harrier captioned as 'Swamp Harrier' in Price-Jones 1983, *Australian Birds of Prey* pp. 58–59, and Wade (Ed.) 1975, *Every Australian Bird Illustrated*, p. 66), and continues to this day among field observers.

Overall, there is little else to quibble with here. However, the Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* occurs well south of Coff's Harbour (NSW); the radar-measured diving speeds of the Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* (to 190 km/h) still make it the fastest animal without the 'hype' around estimated speeds (320 km/h) of doubtful accuracy; and the female (southern) Sooty Owl is heavier than the Tasmanian Masked Owl (the latter is thus not the largest *Tyto*). *Tyto javanica* for the Eastern Barn Owl was an unfortunate DNA analysis error, and has been corrected to the regionally endemic *T. (alba) delicatula* (e.g. *Australian Field Ornithology* 27, 2010: 183).

The above matters notwithstanding, this book is highly recommended as part of the essential background to Australian ornithology. I wish, though, that publishers would not split bird images over a double page!

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