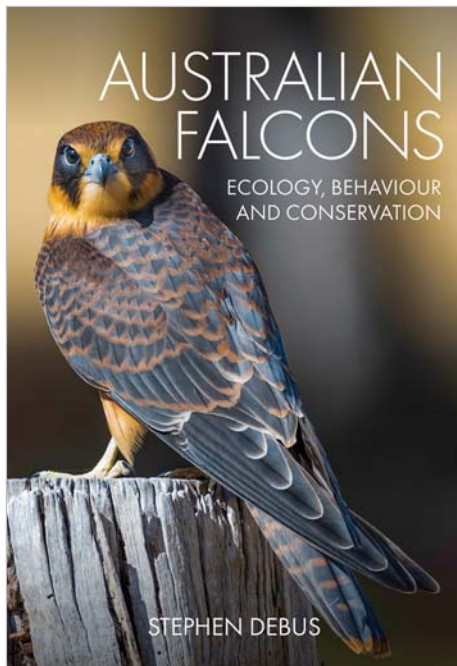


## Book Review



**Australian Falcons: Ecology, Behaviour and Conservation.** Stephen Debus 2022. CSIRO Publishing. Paperback, 232 pp. Colour photographs. ISBN 9781486315765. RRP Au\$49.99.

The second volume of the *Handbook of Australia, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds* (HANZAB, Marchant and Higgins 1993) was published in 1993. A lot has been published since then to increase our insights into the biology and ecology of Australian birds. This is certainly true for the falcons (family Falconidae), an iconic global family of raptors. Nobody knows the literature better than the author of this new book on Australian falcons, Stephen Debus. Debus has spent a lifetime studying and writing about Australian birds of prey, as well as having played significant editing roles in Australian ornithological journals. As a result, he was awarded the D.L. Serventy Medal for ornithological publication in 2015.

Falcons occur on all continents except Antarctica, and their stealth, speed and grace have made them iconic birds in many civilizations. This iconic status continues today in Australia and stretches beyond the ornithological and birdwatching community. Melbourne's high-rise nesting Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* have become a global hit, with live-streamed webcams of their nesting activities attracting tens of thousands of followers, particularly during tough COVID-19 lockdowns (Pearson 2020; Williams 2021; Gordon 2022), and the response of one of the pair to an earthquake in Melbourne in 2022 gained 186 million 'views' globally in the space of a single week (Gordon 2022). Despite falcons exciting global fascination and having a long connection with humans, the ecology of some Australian falcon species has only been studied in detail in recent decades (e.g. Grey *Falco hypoleucos* and Black Falcons *F. subniger*).

The book is framed as an update of HANZAB for this family (and the Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus axillaris*; also see below) although, as the author stresses, it adds to, but is not intended to replace HANZAB. Does it work as a stand-alone piece? In short, yes. The author does not restate what HANZAB reported but summarises the knowledge acquired in the almost 30 years since that time, either confirming the HANZAB information or adding new insights from the literature published since then.

The book contains an Introduction which includes background on global and Australian falcon systematics, chapters on each species, a specific chapter on the falcon breeding cycle, an epilogue (which is largely a summary of conservation considerations) and a bibliography. Each species account has an introduction followed by sections on 'Field identification', 'Habitat', 'Distribution and population', 'Movements', 'Food', 'Social organisation', 'Social behaviour', 'Voice', 'Measurements and Weights' and a 'Commentary'. Each account is heavily referenced as in HANZAB, but the text itself is written in a tone far more engaging and accessible than the necessarily 'efficient' style of HANZAB.

One of the main differences between this book and HANZAB is the absence of illustrations of all the species. However, this is more than offset by a series of often stunning photographs by David Whelan. This series includes multiple photos of each species documenting various aspects of its ecology and behaviour, including hunting, feeding, mating and nesting (my personal favourite is a photo of a juvenile Australian Hobby *F. longipennis* diving, on p. 59).

So, what have we learned about Australian falcons since HANZAB? For the Grey Falcon there has been a revolution in our "understanding of most aspects of the Grey Falcon's autecology and the threats it faces"; for the Black Falcon it is expansion of knowledge of the "autecology, notably its downward population trend, breeding parameters and relevant threats". There are also many new insights for other species summarized from the published literature of the last three decades.

I have some quibbles. Firstly, beyond the falcons, the Black-shouldered Kite is given the same treatment in this book as the true falcons as it is 'falcon-like'. However, Australia's other endemic *Elanus* species, the Letter-winged Kite *E. scriptus*, is not afforded this treatment, without a clear explanation being given other than that it is 'superficially more owl-like than falcon-like'. This seems like a missed opportunity, as the Letter-winged Kite is considered Near Threatened under the *Action Plan for Australian Birds 2020* (Pavey *et al.* 2021) and, as the author states, this species "has been (and is being) more thoroughly studied than the Black-shouldered Kite".

Secondly, despite increasing occurrences of the Eurasian Hobby *F. subbuteo* in Australia (both in the Indian Ocean Territories and south west Western Australia; Greatwich 2019; Singor 2021), there is little treatment of this species. The reasons for this lack of treatment are surprisingly dismissive;

“biologically irrelevant” and that “birdwatching excitement... might be better directed to understanding our Australian Hobby more fully”. Considering that changes in bird species’ ranges and perhaps migratory routes are likely a result of climate change, I would have thought that documenting increasing occurrences of what might once have been considered vagrants is important.

Finally, referencing is frustratingly and unnecessarily split between species at the rear of the book. These references would have been better (for the reader) placed either at the end of each species account or simply in a single traditional reference list (considering the book is so heavily referenced) at the end of the book.

Regardless of the above qualifications, this is an authoritative update on this fascinating group of birds that will be of value to raptor ecologists, ornithologists more generally and the general public that has an interest in these iconic species. Importantly it also highlights the gaps in our knowledge and thus the challenge for research in the future.

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