
Book Review: *Australian Birds of Prey in Flight*

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With the plethora of bird field guides and the relative affordability of high quality binoculars and cameras these days, identifying birds has never been easier for the lay person. The problem is that birds don't always display co-operatively in plain sight and the only glimpse one may get of a bird is a flash of feathers before one's eyes or a silhouette soaring in the distance. This is especially the case with birds of prey, which are most visible in flight as a speck on the landscape. Thankfully, ornithologists Richard Seaton, Mat Gilfedder and Stephen Debus have collaborated to produce a photographic field guide to assist with the identification of one of the most challenging groups of birds. Their book, just published, is called *Australian Birds of Prey in Flight*.

The idea for this book came during the planning of surveys for Red Goshawks in Queensland. I suspect this was due to some dubious Red Goshawk records in places such as central Australia, where a rufous-morph Brown Falcon or young Black-breasted Buzzard may have been mistakenly identified as this rare raptor that is usually confined to tall coastal tropical and subtropical forests and woodlands. With birdwatching increasing in popularity as a hobby and people eager to contribute data, especially on rarer birds, a need has been identified for birdwatchers to become better informed on the nuances of identifying birds of prey in flight.

The format of the field guide is pleasingly simple. Important to note at the start is a diagram that presents the upper and lower body of a bird of prey, and the terms used for different parts of the body that can be seen in flight. Whilst some of these terms are technical and rarely used (i.e. carpal bar, underwing coverts), they are later referred to in species profiles and aid identification. A four-page species profile is provided for every Australian diurnal bird of prey, as well as the two vagrant species. The first two pages consist of colour images of the species at a variety of distances and angles overlaid on typical habitat in which the species is likely to be found. The third page displays the species at six standardised angles to illustrate the features of flight that aid identification of the species.

The fourth page of the species profile contains the text, consisting of a brief description of the species, other species with which it is readily confused, key identifying features, and a distribution map. The Key Identification Points summary encompass an impressive level of detail, but it might be overwhelming for the novice bird enthusiast. Much of the technical information relating to shape, proportions and plumage will be useful to the birdwatcher who has managed to catch a photograph of a species that he or she is unable

to identify immediately. The most crucial component of this section is the Primary Distinguishing Features paragraph, as this describes the most prominent characteristics that will distinguish the featured species from other birds of prey. Birdwatchers should get familiar with these features when identifying birds of prey in flight.

The final part of the book displays similar looking species alongside each other for quick cross-referencing. This is a useful tool as it can be relatively easy to whittle down the list of potentially species to two or three, and a quick look at the Species Comparison page could provide the definitive identification. More emphasis could have been placed on the habitats of different species, as birds of prey that look similar in flight, such as Grey Goshawk and Grey Falcon, tend to occur in very different habitats and can be differentiated on this basis. However, I understand the authors' reluctance to broach this aspect due to the potential to confound the identification process.

Australian Birds of Prey in Flight is a useful addition to the reference library of any keen naturalist. Whilst the book contains an impressive array of photos it's not designed to sit on a coffee table. It's intended to be taken out into the field and quickly whipped out from a backpack as a bird of prey fades from the birdwatcher's field of vision. The book is astutely designed for simplicity of use, whilst containing an impressive level of technical detail that only a raptor boffin such as Stephen Debus can provide. With the rise of ornithological data gathering via citizen science surveys, a need has arisen to hone the skills of birdwatchers throughout Australia. This field guide will definitely help achieve that task.

Reference

Seaton, R., Gilfedder, M. & Debus, S. (2019 = both paperback edition and ePDF edition) *Australian Birds of Prey in Flight*. CSIRO Publishing, Clayton, Victoria.