

## Notes

*New evidence of dark Hobbies*

Corso & Monterosso (2000) described seven recently fledged Hobbies *Falco subbuteo* which appeared particularly dark when compared with typical juveniles. All occurred among family parties of typical Hobbies, between July and September in southern Italy. The authors described several differences between them and heterozygous dark-morph Eleonora's Falcons *F. eleonora* (Corso & Monterosso 2004), but Ristow (2004a) suggested that the arguments presented to distinguish dark Hobbies from Eleonora's Falcons, in particular dark-morph second-calendar-year (2CY) males, were not entirely convincing.

We were unaware of this published correspondence when we observed a dark Hobby in northern Spain in August 2006. Between 2000 and 2006, we examined the plumage of 118 full-grown Hobbies in northern Spain: 77 in the field and the remainder in the hand, either during ringing activities or, in the case of 12 birds, at a rehabilitation centre. Birds were of all age and sex classes. All but one presented the typical plumage pattern (see Chapman 1999, Forsman 1999, Ristow 2004b). The only exception was a fledgling hobby aged 35–40 days on 26th August 2006. This bird was perched in the pine (Pinaceae) forest canopy around the nest-site, with a sibling of normal plumage type. The adults were a 2CY female and a 3+CY male, both showing a typical plumage pattern. We watched them for five hours through three good-quality, 20 × 80 telescopes at 100 m distance; the light was good, enabling detailed observation of plumage colour.

The cere and orbital ring of both the dark chick and the normal chick were bluish, the legs were bluish or pale green and the remiges were shorter than the tail; these are all typical characteristics of a fledgling Hobby (Forsman 1999; Ristow 2004a,b). Nevertheless, the dark bird did not show the typical buff fringes of juvenile feathers, normally evident mainly on the head and the upperparts; instead, this bird appeared uniformly dark on the upperparts. Moreover, the cheek was dark brown, with no white, making the 'moustache' difficult to distinguish. The throat, breast and underparts, which are normally buff or cream in juveniles (Chapman 1999), were dark brown, with typical markings. Finally, the typical buff fringes of juvenile rectrices were dark brown, so that these feathers

appeared uniformly dark. In fact, this Hobby was darker than a heterozygous Eleonora's Falcon (see Ristow 2004a). Corso & Monterosso (2004) did not observe whether pale fringes or tips were present on the mantle, wing-coverts and remiges of their birds, although they could detect them on the closest normal individuals. Nonetheless, they established that the entire upperparts were uniformly brownish, including the tertials (as on the bird we observed). However, Ristow (2004a) considered that the lack of such fringes would be unique among juvenile falcons of any species. We believe that these fringes could be dark brown in colour, making it almost impossible to perceive colour differences between the fringes and the rest of the feather.

The great controversy in the case of Corso & Monterosso's (2004) dark Hobbies was due to the possible confusion with Eleonora's Falcon behaviour (Ristow 2004a). However, in our case there was no doubt about the species' identity, since we found the nest-site and monitored the family's behaviour. Both chicks made short flights during our observations, no more than 30 m, during which they called to their parents.

There are no breeding territories of Eleonora's Falcon in northern Spain (Muntaner 2003). The chick described above could be confused with a heterozygous juvenile male Eleonora's Falcon or a juvenile Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor*, and the likelihood of identifying this bird correctly in the field, away from a known nesting area, is perhaps low. We suggest that there may be more dark Hobbies which have been identified incorrectly as Eleonora's Falcons.

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### Ship-assisted Barn Swallow

On 20th April 2007, while travelling from New Zealand to Japan on the research vessel *Professor Khromov*, and at approximately 20°N 144°E, to the west of the Northern Mariana Islands in the western Pacific, a group of four migrant Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* circled the ship. One bird landed on the ship, perching on lifeboats, deck railings, etc., and soon began to take advantage of the fairly numerous flies (Diptera). The bird roosted overnight and appeared to be in good condition.

As the journey progressed, the swallow became increasingly tame and on one occasion it readily accepted a freshly caught fly from my fingers. This began a period of hand-feeding, which lasted for the duration of the bird's stay on the vessel. At first there was no shortage of flies around the ship and the swallow would accept them whenever it was perched in an accessible location. On several occasions it even flew towards me and took the fly

before it was offered! Although hand-feeding was initially only supplementing its diet, latterly it seemed that the bird could not catch sufficient for itself (despite its frequent forays) and any fear of humans appeared overcome by hunger. As the number of flies decreased, I tried feeding it with fragments of raw steak. This proved highly successful (especially when the meat was dipped in water first) and was used almost exclusively for the last four days of the bird's stay, with regular feeding about every two hours. Although the bird's plumage became unkempt (primarily due to its habit of flying close to the ship's funnel) and it became quite lethargic, it always remained capable of flight. It grew so tame that it would land regularly on passengers and crew!

Remarkably, the bird remained with the ship until 26th April when, approximately 150 km from Kyushu, Japan, it flew off strongly with a group of other migrant Barn Swallows.

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**EDITORIAL COMMENT** Angela Turner has commented that Barn Swallows are known to roost on ships, but the length of stay described here is exceptional.

### Robin imitating Barn Swallow

On 29th October 2006, I was walking past a small shelter-belt of Sycamores *Acer pseudoplatanus* in an area of upland pasture at Ashover, Derbyshire, when I heard what I initially took to be the typically loud and urgent double 'si-weet' alarm call of a Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*. On hearing it again, I realised that the call was interspersed with the otherwise normal, loud and regular song of a Robin *Erithacus rubecula*, probably a migrant bird. I listened for several minutes and the Robin used this call, always given twice in quick succes-

sion, in most of its song phrases, sometimes beginning them with it. It was still doing the same when I left the area three hours later.

*BWP* states that mimicry is 'often suspected but difficult to assess due to apparent modification of motifs derived from model'; Blackbird *Turdus merula*, Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*, Great Tit *Parus major* and Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* are listed as species whose songs have been copied, but mimicry is more frequent in subsong than in full song.

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