LETTERS

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EVIDENCE OF SPOTTED KESTREL (*FALCO MOLUCCENSIS*) NESTING IN THE ROOFS OF SUMBA'S TRADITIONAL HOUSES

On the Island of Sumba, Indonesia, the persistent, animist religion of ancestor worship has widely preserved the traditional thatched house structure. These houses have a striking roof that is low-sided but high-peaked. The houses associated with clan ancestors have higher roofs and are preferably placed on hilltops. Traditional villages are found scattered throughout the rolling country, much of which is used for extensive cattle and horse raising, but ancestral houses are also in small towns.

During a tour of Sumba, from 10–14 August 1997, I made short visits to nine traditional villages. In five of these, and also near traditional houses in the center of Waikabubak (the second largest town of Sumba with a population of about 15 000), I found Spotted Kestrels (*Falco moluccensis*). I found no more than one pair at each location and the kestrels called from trees close to the houses or hunted in adjacent fields. In the village of Praigoli, southeast of Waikabubak, I also observed an adult kestrel enter the top of a roof and emerge after some seconds to stand near the presumed nesting cavity. About 10 km to the west, I saw similar behavior in a village near Morossi Beach; on this occasion the kestrel entered the roof top with a large orthopteran in its bill and it stayed inside longer. Both houses were occupied, but the upper part of the Sumbanese houses are undisturbed because the owners believe them to be places reserved for the spirits of their ancestors. I was intrigued by some possible link between this belief and the presence of kestrels, but an apparently well-informed local guide was unable to give me any relevant information on this subject.

Although the Spotted Kestrel is already listed among the raptors that are attracted to towns by opportunities to nest in buildings (Brown 1976, Birds of prey, Ross International Books, Ltd., London, U.K.), finding it nesting in traditional villages suggests much older association with human dwellings. The distribution of this Indonesian endemic is centered on the biogeographic region called Wallacea. The extensive grassland that is found in this region, which is especially vast on Sumba, may be the result of human activity but has existed long enough to support a distinctive bird fauna (White and Bruce 1986, The Birds of Wallacea, B.O.U. Checklist No. 7, London, U.K.). Although it is rather an opportunistic species, the Spotted Kestrel has shown its preference for open habitats in Wallacea in the past (e.g., Rensch 1931, *Mitt. Zool. Mus. Berlin* 17:451–637) when the region was more forested.

During my tour, Sumba's grassland seemed especially rich in orthopteran prey. However, the Spotted Kestrel probably has to cope with a scarcity of prominent rocks to nest on Sumba, especially where I saw evidence of nesting birds. Also, trees with hollows are scarce in these grasslands. High-peaked thatched roofs situated on hilltops probably make up for this deficiency. Unfortunately for kestrels, the thatching practice is being challenged by longer-lasting, though thermally less insulating, sheet-iron roofs.

I found no previous report of this apparently common nesting habit. This may be because the Spotted Kestrel looks similar to the Common Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) and did not draw the attention of early field naturalists, Sumba is still visited infrequently by tourists who might tend to report these birds; Sumba's traditional villages offer many other attractions that might distract people from the species, and birders avoid human settlements with Spotted Kestrels to search for more "memorable" species. In fact, the Spotted Kestrel remains a little known species over all of its range.

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