

BOOK REVIEW

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The Raptors of Europe and The Middle East: A Handbook of Field Identification. By Dick Forsman. 1999. T. & A.D. Poyser, London. xviii + 589 pp., 71 line drawings, 737 color photographs. ISBN 0-85661-098-4. Cloth, \$45.—As stated in the subtitle, this book is a compilation of information about the field identification of diurnal raptors. It covers the 43 species that occur regularly in Europe and the Middle East but not the vagrants to that area. *The Handbook* goes well beyond any of the available field guides in describing how to identify raptors as to species, age class, and in many cases, sex. New are the use of color photographs in place of color illustrations (although a photographic guide exists for North American raptors) and the thorough description of molt, especially of flight feathers, and its use in aging raptors.

Dick Forsman has published several books (in Swedish) and numerous articles on field identification of raptors. He has traveled throughout much of Europe and the Middle East taking photos of and studying raptors in the field. After 25 years of experience, Forsman is well qualified to write this book. The book begins with a preface and acknowledgments, as well as an extensive glossary entitled “Abbreviations and Terminology.” This is followed by “How to Use the Book,” which provides a brief description of each heading in the species accounts.

The first chapter, “Introduction to the Field Identification of Raptors,” begins with a detailed discussion of molt in falconiforms. Differences in molt sequences of flight feathers among members of the Accipitridae, Pandionidae, and Falconidae are covered, as is the use molt to determine age, especially for species that take more than one year to reach definitive basic plumage. Other topics covered in this chapter are identification based on plumage characters, size, shape, structure, and characters of flight and movement. The chapter concludes with short discussions of variable light

conditions, hybrids, and points to remember, all relating to field identification. Anyone with an interest in identification or molt, especially for diurnal raptors, should study this chapter.

The 43 species accounts constitute the meat of *The Handbook*. Each begins with short paragraphs summarizing subspecies, distribution, habitat, population (estimates and trends), movements, and hunting and prey. This is followed by a more extensive section, “Species Identification.” Measurements of length and wingspan are given first (most are taken from live birds), followed by a sentence or two about the degree of difficulty of identifying the species in the field. Next is a blue-background box entitled “Identification Summary,” which is a particularly helpful feature because some discussions are lengthy and detailed.

Then follow sections entitled “In Flight, Distant,” “In Flight, Closer,” “Perched,” “Bare Parts,” and “Confusion Species,” and a section on molt by age class. The final section of each species account, “Ageing and Sexing,” includes another helpful blue-background summary. References to the photographs of each species are given for age and sex classes. The text concludes with a list of references; full citations are given in the bibliography at the end of the book. Many species accounts also include illustrations showing wing attitudes and plumage characters; some of these are in color, others in black-and-white.

The heart of the book is a set of color photographs that depict both perched and flying individuals, and for some species, birds in hand (covering all of the different plumages). Photographs of captive birds were used for at least one species. The caption for each photo gives information on age, sex (if possible), field marks, date, location, and photographer.

I, too, have studied raptor identification in Europe and the Middle East and have a raptor field guide in press for that area that uses color plates and a few color photos. Although it may appear that I would be somewhat biased in reviewing a book that could be considered a competitor for

mine, please read on and reserve judgment on that issue until you have read the entire review.

Somewhat at random, I have chosen four species accounts for detailed scrutiny: White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), Pallid Harrier (*Circus macrourus*), Eastern Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*), and Sooty Falcon (*Falco concolor*). While reading through the book, I had to keep in mind that English is Forsman's third language; he lives in a Swedish-speaking area of Finland. Although at times the wording is somewhat cumbersome, he still manages to describe plumages and behaviors clearly. The sets of photographs and the descriptions of the various age and sex classes and identification points for these four species were all accurate and thorough, with the exception of some points mentioned below.

The description of the first prebasic molt in the White-tailed Eagle is biased toward northern European eagles, because it is stated that they replace only "some inner secondaries," when clearly the second-plumage eagle in plate 77 taken in Israel shows a minimum of seven new inner, outer, and middle secondaries. The field mark of uniformly dark leg feathers (called "trousers") is mentioned but not stressed as a character of second- and third-plumage eagles not found on juveniles, whose trousers have tawny-buff spotting.

In the Pallid Harrier account, the relative position of the wingtip to tail tip on perched birds, and the facial ring extending across the throat, both of which are useful field marks for distinguishing adult females from the very similar Montagu's Harrier (*C. pygargus*), are not mentioned under Confusion Species. However, my article in *Birding World* (July 1997) describing these field marks was published after *The Handbook* was already in press. Also not mentioned is the absence of streaking on the flanks of juvenile Pallid Harriers, which is useful for distinguishing them from juvenile Montagu's Harriers, which always show such streaking. The adult males in plates 229 and 231, labeled "First plumage adult," show dusky bands on the tips of the secondaries and a dark breast. I believe that these are just variants of the second-plumage male.

The only item that I question in the Eastern Imperial Eagle account is the number of immature plumages. Based on detailed examination of specimens and birds in the field, John Schmitt and I found that adult plumage is attained in four or five

years, the same time required for all of the other large eagles, such as Golden (*Aquila chrysaetos*), Steppe (*A. nipalensis*), and White-tailed eagles. Forsman gives this as six or seven years. I think that his second and third plumages are the same, just variations in the amount of molt, and correspond with our second plumage. Likewise, his fourth and fifth plumages are the same; we consider this to be the third plumage. And his sixth plumage, the first adult plumage, is the same as our fourth plumage. Further fieldwork, particularly with marked individuals, would be helpful in determining which of us is correct.

I question that there are 200 pairs of Sooty Falcons breeding in Israel. I wonder if this is a misprint, because I had thought that there are no more than 20 pairs there, based on my fieldwork in the mid-1980s. I have never seen any Sooty Falcon, alive or as a specimen, with "nearly black" feathers as described by Forsman for some second-year birds, nor does any photograph in the book show this. Adult Barbary Falcons (*F. peregrinoides*) were not mentioned in the Confusion Species section; they are also blue-gray above, only slightly larger than Sooty Falcons, and breed in the same areas.

Almost all of the accounts have a complete set of photographs showing all plumages described; however, only four photos are shown for the Spanish Imperial Eagle (*A. adalberti*), three of which are of birds in captivity. Also, no photos of dark-morph Marsh Harriers (*Circus aeruginosus*) were included.

In spite of the nit-picking comments above, *The Handbook* provides an excellent and nearly complete compilation of color photographs and information on raptor identification in Europe and the Middle East. This reflects the time and effort expended by the author over many years to understand how to identify raptors in the field, including age and sex determination. It certainly lives up to the subtitle, *A Handbook of Field Identification*. I highly recommend *The Handbook* for anyone interested in raptor field identification or working on raptors in Europe and the Middle East. It is worth acquiring solely for the wonderful collection of photographs, which is all the more remarkable given that the original photographs were misplaced, and the author had to spend more than a year assembling a new set.—**William S. Clark, 7800 Dasset Court, Apt. 101, Annandale, VA 22003 U.S.A.**