

# First winter record of Crested Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhyncus* for Israel

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The Crested Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhyncus* (aka Oriental, Asiatic or Eastern Honey Buzzard) has two distinct populations—a southern, Indo-Malayan, sedentary population, and a northern population that is migratory (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). The migratory population of the Crested Honey Buzzard *P. p. orientalis* breeds exclusively in the eastern Palaearctic from southern Siberia south to northern Mongolia, northeast China, North Korea and Japan. These populations winter mostly in India and Southeast Asia. The first observations to the west were from Chokpak Pass, Kazakhstan, in 1993 (Forsman 1994)



**Plate 1.** Crested Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhyncus* in flight at the Eilat Bird Sanctuary, 10 March 2008. © Anton Khalilieh

and are well west of known breeding limits. Ferguson-Lees & Christie (2001) suggested that there could be an unrecorded westward range expansion or a circular westward route around the Tien Shan and Hindu Kush to avoid crossing the Himalayas. This species has now been reported from as far west as Turkey, Israel and Egypt. Ferguson-Lees & Christie (2001) suggested that these are individuals caught up in migrating flocks of Western Honey Buzzards *Pernis apivorus* in autumn, which over-winter in Africa.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, with the increased awareness of the species on migration in the Eilat region of Israel (first record 1994, Shirihai *et al* 2000) and publication of the detailed field identification of the Crested Honey Buzzard (Forsman 1994, 1998, Forsman & Shirihai 1997), the number of individuals recognized from amongst the flocks of migrating Western Honey Buzzards has increased considerably. At present, there are single records each autumn, mostly in September, and 15–20 records in April and May each spring.

To date, the earliest spring record for the Crested Honey Buzzard in the Eilat region, and for the rest of Israel, was on 19 March 2006 (Mark Andrews). Here we report the first ever observations of a Crested Honey Buzzard in winter in Israel, in the Eilat region.

The first observation was on 4 February 2008 when MK and NW saw two soaring raptors at the entrance to the Eilat Bird Sanctuary. We identified one as a Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* and were initially confused by the strange-looking dark “buzzard” like raptor which we eventually identified as a dark-morph Crested Honey Buzzard. The observation lasted for 5 minutes with the two birds soaring back and forth, at a low altitude, over the bird sanctuary. We noted that it was a fairly large raptor, though much smaller than the Greater Spotted Eagle; had a rather small head (but not as small as in the case of Honey Buzzards) which also protruded well beyond its body and wings. The most striking features were the lack of a carpal patch and the six long, dark-tipped ‘fingers’ of the primaries (Plate 1). The raptor had all dark underwing coverts, the remiges were mostly pale (primaries paler than secondaries) with a rather prominent and sparse buzzard-like barred pattern. The bird had a broad dark trailing edge to the wing. The flight of the raptor was leisurely and the slow wing-beats gave a rather eagle-like impression (Plate 1). The



**Plate 2.** Photos showing the Crested Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhyncus* on the ground at the Eilat Bird Sanctuary, 12 February 2008. © Mikolaj Koss.

tail was shorter and relatively broader than that of Honey Buzzard. After half an hour the bird was resighted and some blurred, record, flight shots taken. Eight days later, on 12 February, the bird was seen again, perched on one of the trees in the southern part of the bird sanctuary and closely resembling a Honey Buzzard, but the head was too big with a suggestion of a small crest, which helped identify the raptor as a Crested Honey Buzzard. This was also seen by RY who has experience with the species in India. We aged the bird as a second calendar year female based on its prominent yellow cere and dark eye (Plate 2, also see Naoroji 2006). However, this must be considered with caution because variation between sexes is not well documented and may not be constant. The bird then flew into the

northern section of the bird sanctuary, where we relocated it digging in the soil with its claws, apparently in search of invertebrates. It was fairly tame and allowed us to approach and take photographs, including two 2-minute videos.

The bird stayed in the area and was located on most subsequent occasions, for over a month and a half, in the date palmeries of Kibbutz Eilat. It was seen and photographed by many visiting birdwatchers. The last observation of the individual was on 5 May 2008 suggesting that the bird remained in the region for at least three months.

To date, it has been assumed that the individuals observed in Israel are of the migratory Siberian form *P. p. orientalis*. However, even though the bird had a faintly barred underbody when observed up close, it was uniformly brown (Plate 2). This allowed us to assume that the bird was a dark morph. However, we find certain inconsistencies between descriptions in the literature and the bird observed by us in the field. Naoroji (2006) found that the Indian resident race, or wintering *orientalis*, dark morph birds have uniform dark brown body and underwing coverts, lack carpal patches, and have flight feathers with typical barring. Also, many show a diagnostic dark gorget across the throat—another marking we were unable to discern in the Eilat bird. In contrast to the literature description, the carpal patches in our bird were lacking. Hence, the assumption that all observed birds are of the migratory race *orientalis* of the Crested Honey Buzzard should be treated with caution.

## REFERENCES

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