

Egyptian record of Wahlberg's Eagle

Hieraaetus wahlbergi is the first in the Western Palearctic and Middle East

AHMED WAHEED

On 3 May 2013, I photographed a Wahlberg's Eagle *Hieraaetus wahlbergi* near Ras Gharib (gulf of Suez, Egypt). This is the first documented record of this Afrotropical species not only in Egypt but also in the Middle East as well as in the entire Western Palearctic (Dick Forsman pers comm). The Egyptian Ornithological Rarity Committee approved the record.

Ibrahim Saad and I were birdwatching in a tiny oasis southwest of Ras Gharib, 28° 13' 48" N, 33° 04' 35" E. Passerine and soaring raptor migration was taking place including a number of pale morph Booted Eagles *Hieraaetus pennatus*. What I took to be a dark morph Booted Eagle came close and I concentrated on getting some photographs of it as it flew over. Ibrahim advised me that the eagle had settled in a nearby palm tree and I got additional shots of it sitting and shortly after it had taken off. Afterwards I filed the pictures in my Booted Eagle folder. Almost a year later, in April 2014 while compiling photos for the BirdLife Migratory Soaring Birds project, I wondered about that eagle's identification. I sent the photos to the Finnish raptor-specialist Dick Forsman for help. He replied the next day "Congratulations! First WP record of Wahlberg's Eagle". I then sent the photos to Sherif Baha el Din and Uffe Gjøl Sørensen and both immediately confirmed the ID.

The record of the eagle was well documented from my photographs of which three are presented here (Plates 1–3). In flight when seen from below (Plate 1), the profile is characteristic with long, fairly parallel-edged but slightly slim wings and a long, narrow and squared-ended tail. Except for dark tips to primaries, all flight feathers from below are faintly barred and without the pale notch on inner primaries shown by Booted Eagle. Translucent pale fringes to inner primaries and the secondaries form a narrow but distinct trailing edge to the wing. Underwing coverts are uniform buffy with only the outer large primary coverts being darker brown creating a small dark patch in contrast to the pale bases of the outer primaries. The underside of the body is uniform buff in contrast to the darker tail. The upper-side is very distinct (Plate 2). All flight feathers are uniform dark brown except for the narrow trailing edge made by pale fringes to inner primaries and secondaries. All coverts on wing and back have distinct pale fringes and a thin central line runs down the wing formed by the narrow fringes to the greater coverts while the broader fringes to the remaining wing-coverts are confluent creating a pale forewing in contrast to the otherwise dark upperside. The uppertail is uniform dark brown in contrast to paler tail-coverts tipped white. On the sitting bird (Plate 3) the underside is uniform buff (faintly mottled), and the distinct head has prominent dark eyes.

Wahlberg's Eagle is one of the smaller eagles being only slightly larger than Booted Eagle. I did not notice this difference in the field when this sole bird passed overhead. Wahlberg's Eagle is a polymorphic species with highly variable plumage. A dark brown morph is the most numerous but pale and intermediate-colour morphs occur as well. The uniform buffy plumage of this record indicates that it is a pale morph. Adult and immature Wahlberg's Eagles exhibit similar plumage characters according to even the most recent field-guides, but Dick Forsman supplied the following information. "This eagle is a juvenile. First of all, the plumage is very uniform indicating that all feathers have been



Plate 1 (top). Wahlberg's Eagle *Hieraetus wahlbergi* from below, near Ras Gharib, Egypt, 3 May 2013. © Ahmed Waheed

Plate 2 (above). Wahlberg's Eagle *Hieraetus wahlbergi*, the upperside photographed right after the bird took off, near Ras Gharib, Egypt, 3 May 2013. © Ahmed Waheed

Plate 3 (right). Wahlberg's Eagle *Hieraetus wahlbergi* sitting in a date palm, near Ras Gharib, Egypt, 3 May 2013. © Ahmed Waheed

grown at the same time. This is only the case with juveniles. In addition, the pale tips to flight-feathers and tail are diagnostic of juveniles only, as is the pattern of the underwing flight-feathers (where adults will have much more distinctly barred flight-feathers with a broad, dark trailing edge). Actually, the shape of the wing with the bulging trailing edge is also typical for a juvenile—adults will have parallel-edged, rectangular wings”.

Wahlberg's Eagle is a widely but unevenly distributed breeding bird in sub-Saharan Africa outside the central rainforest belt. In savannahs in west and northeast Africa

relatively few breeding records are known (del Hoyo *et al* 1994), though the species is common in parts of southern Africa (Simmons 1997). North of the equator, this species is either resident or shows only limited movements (del Hoyo *et al* 1994). The eagles of the southern population are intra-African migrants being present in the breeding territories August (late July)–April and spend the non-breeding season north of the equator (Simmons 1997). Details of occurrence north of the equator are obscured as migrants from the south move into savannahs with a resident population. Meyburg *et al* (1995) satellite-tracked one breeding bird from Namibia to northeast Nigeria and another breeder from northeast South Africa to southeast Chad.

The timing of the Egyptian record in early May fits well with northbound post-breeding migration of a bird from southern Africa. The nearest non-breeding records to Egypt seem to come from Eritrea (Ash & Atkins 2009) *ie* the present bird overshot its presumed non-breeding area by at least 1400 km. The species was until recently classified as an African representative of the *Aquila* eagles, but genetic studies have shown that it is not an *Aquila* (Wink & Sauer-Gürth 2004, Helbig *et al* 2005, Lerner & Mindell 2005). The similarity of Wahlberg's Eagle to Booted Eagle is obvious and this is the ID challenge in the years to come.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dick Forsman made the initial identification and commented on the age of the eagle. Sherif Baha el Din and Uffe Gjøøl Sørensen confirmed the ID. Uffe Gjøøl Sørensen helped considerably with analysis of the photos, review of relevant literature and improving the draft manuscript. Lene Smith provided linguistic improvements.

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Ahmed Waheed, El Arish, North Sinai, Egypt. awaheed.lifesinai@gmail.com