

First record of Eastern Buzzard *Buteo japonicus* for Tajikistan

RAFFAEL AYÉ

The taxon *japonicus* has been treated as a subspecies of Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* by most authors (Vaurie 1965, Orta 1994, Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001, Dickinson 2003). Based on mitochondrial DNA, it was suggested that *japonicus* better be given species status as Eastern Buzzard *Buteo japonicus* (Riesing *et al* 2003, Kruckenhauser *et al* 2004, do Amaral *et al* 2009). This treatment has been followed by several authors since (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005, Brazil 2009, Ayé *et al* 2012), but not by others (*eg* Naoraji 2006).

Eastern Buzzard breeds from Irkutsk oblast, Russian Federation, in the west to the sea of Okhotsk and Japan in the east (Dementyev *et al* 1966, Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). It winters mainly in east and southeast Asia. In Central Asia/Middle Asia it is a rare passage migrant and wintering bird recorded mainly in Kazakhstan, but also in Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Dementyev *et al* 1966, Gavrillov & Gavrillov 2005, Wassink & Oreel 2007, Ayé *et al* 2012). Although Zarudnyi & Bilkevitch mentioned it for the upper Amudarya under the name '*burmanicus*' (cited in Dementyev *et al* 1966), the species has apparently not been documented in Tajikistan thus far (Abdusalomov 1971).

THE OBSERVATION

On 13 February 2005 I was watching birds in the park-like compound (c38° 35' 12" N, 68° 46' 25" E) of Tajik State University in Dushanbe. The site is located near the periphery of the city and 3 km south of the foothills of the Hissor mountains, which form the edge of the large plain in which Dushanbe is situated. It was a misty day with a little bit of snowfall and the sun barely shone through the clouds. The ground was partly covered in snow and reflected the light well. Between 10.00 and 11.00 h, two juvenile Eastern Buzzards flew north over the site in close succession. A description was taken in the field and the second of the two birds was photographed (Plate 1).

Both of them showed conspicuous black carpal patches, pale underwing coverts with fine markings, pale body with a dark brown bar from the flanks across the upper belly (broader in the second bird), prominent whitish primary patch on the upperwing, a rather dark uppertail, and paler undertail with fine barring merging into a diffuse dark terminal band. The head had a creamy-whitish base colour and showed contrasting dark moustachial and eye-stripes merging with the brown neck sides.

The first individual, which was not photographed, showed a narrower and less solid brown bar across the upper belly. Moreover, its head pattern was probably not quite as clear-cut and contrasting, but my notes are not precise on this point.

The birds did not fit the two species that are common in Tajikistan, Steppe Buzzard *Buteo (buteo) vulpinus* and Long-legged Buzzard *B. rufinus*. Also the potential vagrants Upland *B. hemilasius* and Rough-legged Buzzards *B. lagopus* could be excluded. The birds showed a general underparts pattern that resembles Rough-legged Buzzard with



Plate 1. Juvenile Eastern Buzzard *Buteo japonicus*, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, 13 February 2005. © R Ayé. Told from Steppe Buzzard *B. (b.) vulpinus* by combination of characters including prominent carpal patch, otherwise pale underwing-coverts, very limited streaking on body and underwings, prominent narrow patch across belly and somewhat broader wings.

prominent black carpal patches, otherwise pale underwing coverts and a dark belly patch. However, the wings were narrower than in Rough-legged Buzzard (and the same is true in comparison to Long-legged and Upland Buzzards). Most importantly, the tail showed discernible barring on the undertail and rather dark grey-brown uppertail, which does not fit Rough-legged Buzzard. Long-legged Buzzard, apart from size and structure, has been excluded due to the strong head markings (for a pale bird), the dense tail barring and the lack of rufous. Steppe Buzzard would usually be smaller and more narrow-winged and a majority of individuals would show some rufous in the plumage. The unstreaked central breast, lower belly and trousers contrasting with the very dark band across the upper belly and the moustachial and eye stripe are not consistent with Steppe Buzzard and neither are the unstreaked underwing-coverts contrasting with the prominent carpal patch. Upland Buzzard was excluded mainly due to size and structure. Moreover, it would typically show a different distribution of dark on the underparts, with the trousers and flanks often darkest and the central belly less heavily marked or even whitish. During the observation I suspected that these two birds were *japonicus* and wrote them down as such. Literature search later on seemed to support this and Dick Forsman kindly confirmed that the bird in Plate 1 is a classical juvenile *japonicus* (*in litt* August 2014).

DISCUSSION

The observation constitutes the first record of Eastern Buzzard for Tajikistan. Given the low ornithological coverage of the country, we can only speculate how commonly the species actually occurs in Tajikistan and during which seasons. The two birds were observed early in the year, when the numbers of the most similar species, Steppe Buzzard, are still rather low. However, the latter regularly winters in lowland Tajikistan in certain numbers (Vaurie 1965, Ayé *et al* 2012). Further careful observation is needed to clarify how regularly Eastern Buzzard occurs in Tajikistan and other countries of the region.

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Raffael Ayé, BirdLife Switzerland, Wiedingstr 78, PO Box 8036 Zurich, Switzerland. raffael.aye@birdlife.ch