

Book Review

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Title: Flight Identification of Raptors of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East – 544 pp

Author: Dick Forsman

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Any book on raptors is of great interest to birdwatchers of Gujarat, as the state is considered to be one of the 'hotspots' for raptor watching. Hence, the publication of this new book on raptor identification is a welcome addition for those interested in this subject.

Dick Forsman is one of the leading experts in the field of raptor identification in Europe. The author's previous book, 'The Raptors of Europe and the Middle East' (Poyser, 1999), is a definitive guide to the raptors of the region. Seventeen years later, he has come up with his latest book. It is published under the 'Helm Identification Guides' series. The title is self-suggestive, covering only 'Flight Identification' of raptors; depiction of perched raptors is well detailed in his earlier publication. This new publication is much more than an upgrade from his last one, covering the detailed approach of identifying raptors in flight in fine detail. The introductory sections are covered in brief, which had been covered in sufficient detail in his earlier book, as explained by the author. For anybody interested in the study of diurnal raptors, the introductory section in the first publication is a must read. Two books complement each other very well and hence both are a must have on the book shelves of the serious raptor enthusiast.

The Indian Context:

Although the book is a flight identification guide to raptors recorded in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, there are quite a few species of interest to Indian readers (Osprey, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Black Kite, Black-eared Kite, White-tailed Eagle, Pallas's Fish Eagle, Gyps and other Vultures, Harriers, Shikra, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Northern Goshawk, Common Buzzard, Steppe Buzzard, Long-legged Buzzard, Aquila Eagles, Bonelli's Eagle, Booted Eagle and most small and large Falcons) and many identification traits for these can be used successfully in the Indian context. Of particular interest are the moult and ageing sections under each species, the study of which is still in its nascent stage in India. Quality pictures of the different age classes with clear captions are apt and explanatory.

Juvenile, male and female birds of all species covered in the book are represented by good quality pictures from various angles showing the details of plumages very well. Similarly, plumage variations and morphs have been covered wherever required. Another interesting subject that has been covered in the latest publication is 'Hybridization'. The author describes quite a few hybrids (few confirmed and a few unconfirmed individuals) E.g. Oriental x European Honey Buzzard, Montagu's x Pallid Harrier, Greater x Lesser Spotted Eagle, Peregrine x Barbary Falcon, etc.

along with identification pointers, which is very useful for the Indian reader as, at times, there are individuals that do not quite fit the traits of any one species.

Limitations for Indian readers:

Although the book covers quite a few of raptor species found in India, it somehow fails to connect with the Indian reader, probably due to the slight difference in the general appearance of some species like Shikra, Tawny Eagle, Eurasian Merlin, Peregrine Falcon and Saker Falcon. The geographical variation in plumage and structure of the subspecies found in that region appear a little different and hence some traits cannot be simply applied in the Indian context without checking. While this book covers a lot of raptor species seen in India, several other species (Eg. Besra, Crested Goshawk, Changeable Hawk Eagle, Crested Serpent Eagle, Black Eagle, Indian Spotted Eagle, Grey-headed Fish Eagle, Lesser Fish Eagle, Red-necked Falcon, etc.) are missing because their range is not in the areas covered within the scope of the book.

Another important aspect the Indian reader must keep in mind is that this book deals with raptors in flight and the fact that most of the views (photos) that the reader gets in the book are of birds on migration, taken mainly at migratory sites. This is described in a special chapter in the book, giving the main migration sites in Europe and Israel, which are the congregation points for migrating raptors. Such views are not frequent or easily afforded to the Indian observer in the field here to appreciate the minute details (e.g. finely barred secondaries and molting inner primaries). For this, a different approach might be needed when it comes to identifying raptors in flight.

Conclusion:

To sum up, this book, in combination with the earlier one, complement each other well and having both is a good inclusion to one's literature collection. They will serve anybody interested in raptors for a long to come. The most important aspect to take away from this book is that the art of identifying raptors in flight needs a disciplined approach, which has been provided in this latest publication. Though the price of approximately Rs 3,500 (online retailers in India) seems a bit steep, the book is well worth it. □

