

Sighting of
European Honey Buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*)
x
Oriental Honey Buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*)
hybrid from Bharuch, and notes on its identification



Honey Buzzard....

On 19th January 2020, while exploring the wetlands around Motvan, Bharuch, I came across three individuals of Honey Buzzards (*Pernis* sp.) soaring in the afternoon. All of them were initially identified as Oriental Honey Buzzards (*Peris ptilorhynchus*). Fast forward three years later, ongoing through the archives, I noticed that one of those buzzards had prominently dark carpal patches. Other than the dark carpal patches, the bird had an absent mesial stripe, characteristic of European Honey Buzzard. The bird wasn't in a definitive plumage though which made the identification harder.

On communicating with renowned raptor expert Dick Forsman, regarding this buzzard, his opinion is given below. *'Thanks for getting in touch regarding this hybrid. To me, it looks like a hybrid. If it was a European of this rather light color morph, it should have more distinct carpal patches, for*



one thing. Also, the silhouette looks intermediate, so I believe this is a female-type hybrid/backcross. It doesn't look like a proper European I'm used to seeing.'

Thus, the bird was finally concluded as a hybrid rather than a pure European Honey Buzzard. There has been a recent rise in the reports of such hybrid individuals across West and South India (Table 1). Apart from hybrids, there have been several reports of 'pure' European Honey Buzzards from the southern part of the country (Anand et.al 2020). In addition, two birds have been reported from Gujarat too. One was a storm-swept individual recovered from the coast of Porbandar (Vargiya et al. 2020) and the other was from Bhavnagar (Bhil 2022).

Since both of the congeners are morphologically similar to each other and may cause confusion in field identification, it tries to summarise all the identification keys for 'pure' European Honey Buzzards (Table 2). Note that pale morphs are easy to distinguish but the dark morphs need careful evaluation and scrutiny. Identification in detail has been covered by several authors (Forsman 2016; Faveyts et al. 2011; Campbell et al. 2016; Corso 2009; Scuderi & Corso 2011). Hybrid individuals show overlapping characters of both species and are best identified by eliminating both the 'pure' individuals. There is a good chance that European

Table 1: Confirmed hybrid reports across India

Sr. No.	Date	Location	State	Reference
1	19 January 2020	Motvan, Bharuch	Gujarat	Present Study
2	29 March 2020	Kannur	Kerala	Munderi 2020
3	10 April 2020	Kozhikode	Kerala	Paleri 2020
4	6 December 2020	Kottayam	Kerala	Balagopal 2020
5	15 September 2021	Kasaragod	Kerala	Puravankara 2021
6	11 January 2022	Thrissur	Kerala	Chandran 2022
7	14 February 2022	Mumbai	Maharashtra	Sharma 2022
8	18 April 2022	Chennai	Tamil Nadu	Neelamegam 2022
9	18 December 2022	Mumbai	Maharashtra	Urs 2022
10	3 February 2023	Kottayam	Kerala	Issac 2023

Table 2: Summarise all the identification keys for pure European Honey Buzzards

Features	European Honey Buzzards	Oriental Honey Buzzards	Author's Bird
Carpal Patch	Dark; Well defined	None (present in dark morph)	As in European
No. of 'fingers'	Five	Six	Not well visible
Mesial Stripe	Absent/short	Present	As in European
Gorget on throat	Absent/short	Present	As in European
Tail Pattern	Terminal dark bar followed by two finer bars	Two broad black bars (of variable intensity)	Intermediate between the two
Outer bar of secondaries	Doesn't reach the body (gradually perishes into the coverts)	Reaches the body	As in Oriental
GISS	Smaller, slimmer, longer tail & narrower wings	Larger, bulkier, shorter tail & broader wings	Intermediate between the two

Honey Buzzards and its hybrids with Oriental Honey Buzzards are often overlooked by birders across Gujarat. Birders are recommended to be aware of such potential individuals.

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