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ASPECTS OF THE BIOLOGY OF THE AUSTRALASIAN HARRIER

(*CIRCUS AERUGINOSUS APPROXIMANS* PEALE 1848)

A thesis presented for the degree of
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Massey University

David John Baker-Gabb

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NOTE

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D.J. Baker-Gabb,
Botany and Zoology Department,
Massey University,
Palmerston North, New Zealand.

27 May 1978

ABSTRACT

The study is based on 18 months intensive field-work during which 212 Australasian harriers were trapped, retrapped, measured, sexed, aged, individually marked and observed. Fortnightly observations of the individually marked population were made over a further seven months. The Australasian harrier and European marsh harrier are considered to be conspecific. Evidence is presented showing that there is no valid reason for considering *Circus aeruginosus* of the Pacific Islands to be a different subspecies from *C. aeruginosus* of Australia and New Zealand. During the breeding season ten territories in the 12 km² study area averaged 31 ha, nest sites averaged 910 m apart, pairs' overlapping home ranges averaged 9 km² and favourite hunting areas 3 km². A high population density of one bird per 50 ha was calculated. A low fledging success rate of 1.8 young per successful pair and 1.1 young per nest site, and two cases of polygyny were recorded during two breeding seasons. Territorial and courtship behaviour, nest parameters and the parental division of labour is described. Seasonal movements and the dispersion of all age and sex classes from the study area at the end of the breeding season are described. Most (66.7%) individually marked adults returned after the autumn dispersal phase and established winter home ranges averaging 9 km². The home range of an adult female in open farmland was calculated to be 14 km² using radio-telemetry techniques. A non-breeding season population density of one bird per 80 ha was calculated. Communal roosting, which occurred throughout the year, is discussed. Four hundred and seventy food items were identified in the diet from pellets, prey remains, stomach contents and field observations. In descending order of numerical importance in the diet were mammals (46.4%), introduced passerines (29.0%), insects (7.6%), game birds (6.7%), birds' eggs (4.8%) and aquatic prey (4.6%). Australasian harriers ate significantly greater numbers of live prey than carrion annually. Adults took significantly greater numbers of agile food items than juveniles. Females ate significantly more large (>200 g) and fewer agile food items than did males. Seven search techniques and five attack techniques, including some buteonine techniques, are identified and described in the Australasian harriers' wide range of hunting techniques. Ninety five attacks on prey are recorded and 15.8% of these were successful. Adults were significantly more successful hunters than juveniles. Co-operative

hunting, hunting in the daily cycle, feeding behaviour at carrion, interspecific competition for carrion, interspecific disruption of hunting and prey escape tactics are described. From a computer analysis of hunting behaviour data it is concluded that adult males are more manoeuvrable and less conspicuous than adult females and juveniles because they flew significantly lower and faster. Adult males also hunted, to a significantly greater degree, those habitats where there were greater numbers of agile prey. The hunting inexperience of juveniles was quantified. The Australasian harrier is moderately sexually dimorphic. Current hypotheses proposed to explain the degree of sexual dimorphism in raptors and why the females of most raptor species are larger than males are critically reviewed.

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I was billeted in the Wildlife Service's newly erected house at Pukepuke Lagoon for four months. Prior to this I used a shooter's hut owned by the Department of Lands and Survey for accommodation. The manager of the Department of Lands and Survey's Tangimoana farm, Mr H. Ellison, kindly allowed me to set traps on the farm and to travel to and from the traps at will. Neil Bowick of the Manawatu Pest Destruction Council provided a steady supply of rabbits which were used as bait in the traps.

Besides allowing me to use equipment at Pukepuke Lagoon, the Wildlife Service of the Department of Internal Affairs provided \$300 towards travelling expenses. The Botany and Zoology Department, Massey University, paid for the materials for the 11 traps I built. I travelled between Palmerston North and Pukepuke Lagoon and around the study area on a Honda C.T.90 motorbike my parents generously lent to me.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis was initially proposed as part of a more general study of the influence of predators on the fauna at Pukepuke Lagoon Wildlife Management Reserve. The broad aim of the thesis is to describe the Australasian harriers' hunting behaviour and to discuss the factors influencing that behaviour. A further aim is to elucidate differences in morphology, diet, hunting techniques and habitat use between the Australasian harrier age and sex classes, and to relate these differences to current theories on sexual dimorphism in raptors.

Hunting behaviour is an integral part of the birds' breeding and non-breeding biology. In the course of the study numerous original observations and data were collected pertinent to the Australasian harriers' biology, and although breeding and non-breeding biology are discussed individually, frequent reference is made to their effect on diet and hunting behaviour.

Within the text of the thesis I have endeavoured to describe at all times the data collected and what I observed, rather than what I felt. However I believe that some of the understanding gained during the study is expressed in a short verse written in my field-notes as I observed an adult female hunting at the end of the 1976-77 breeding season.

Already she feels the winter, and it is sad.
 Still she flies to feed her young, but the excitement,
 expectation and wonder of the sexual spring is gone.
 The race is almost run, and she can see the finish line.
 She's a little tired, but it was a great race,
 full of tactics and new doors opened.
 And there's all those wonderful memories of finding out
 what few have seen and fewer still noted.
 There's still time, and more,
 a need for that new feather dress to greet next spring.
 Will she choose again the same C-1,
 or will she mate a-new?
 Yes winter's coming, but then so is spring.
 She wonders what it will bring?
 Life, I hope, for you A-2.
 The free life to hunt the long grasses,
 and soar on the wind, and on ... and on ... and on ...