

First-summer Hobbies in the New Forest



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Génsbøl (1987) mentioned that the Hobby *Falco subbuteo* has a 'distinctive' first-summer plumage, but he failed to describe it, merely stating that the majority of such individuals presumably remain farther south during the summer. Observations in the New Forest, Hampshire, indicate, however, that brown-backed first-summer Hobbies reach Britain quite regularly, and G. P. Catley (*in litt.*) has also observed them in Derbyshire. Inexperienced or unwary birdwatchers could perhaps confuse these one-year-old Hobbies, especially in flight and under certain viewing conditions, with first-summer female Red-footed Falcons *F. vespertinus*, which they can sometimes resemble in both plumage and behaviour.

I have watched Hobbies in the New Forest, particularly at Bishop's

continued ...



Fig. 1. Hobby *Falco subbuteo* (top four) and female Red-footed Falcon *F. vesperinus* (bottom three) in first-summer plumages (Brian Small). Top four: first-summer Hobbies showing range of observed variation. Bottom three: female Red-footed Falcons in plumage resembling first-summer Hobby

Dyke, for many years, and have become aware of the existence of distinctive, pale brown individuals in early summer. During each of the four summers 1986-89, I visited the area on up to five days per week in May, June and early July and made detailed notes and sketches of six first-summer Hobbies (one in 1986, two in 1987, two in 1988 and one in 1989). These birds were absent in late July and August, possibly having left the area.

As well as being brown above, these Hobbies were notable for their conspicuousness, being visible, if not active, throughout the day (adults typically tend to be more obvious from mid-morning until 11.30 hours, and then from around 14.30 onwards); often they hunt from or simply rest on prominent perches, in this respect resembling Red-footed Falcons, but remaining 'wild' and not allowing close approach. Their flight was generally low, short and of varying speeds. This 'loafing' behaviour can be explained by the fact that these are non-breeding birds, and are not defending territories.

Description

Fig. 1 illustrates four first-summer Hobbies and three first-summer female Red-footed Falcons.

First-summer Hobby closely resembles juvenile Hobby, but is generally a more washed-out, faded brown above; it lacks the pale buff margins to mantle, scapulars and upperwing-coverts and also the pale trailing edge to the wing. Juvenile Hobby has blackish-brown or blue upperparts with buff feather fringes, and has a prominent pale trailing edge to the wing. The following is a detailed description of first-summer Hobby:

HEAD Forehead pale, varying from pale brown to cream, generally extending as thin supercilia to just behind eye; crown brown, shading darker towards rear; area surrounding eye evenly dark brown-black, blackest immediately around eye, and extending as 'moustache'. At rest and in flight, shows noticeable pale cream area(s) on nape separating crown and mantle, with crown joining the mantle via either broad dark bands on side of neck or a central dark line from crown (see fig. 1). Variability in head coloration great: one individual in May and June 1987 had an extensive pale forehead, minimal 'bleached-out' brown on crown, and a complete pale cream collar (fig. 1, top centre).

UPPERPARTS Mantle, scapulars and upperwing-coverts chocolate-brown, with slight rufous tinge in some lights, upperwing-coverts contrasting markedly with the darker remiges. (G. P. Catley *in litt.*

noted a blue-grey tinge to the centre of brown mantle.) Uppertail and rump as mantle, but faint dark barring discernible on outer tail feathers, especially when tail spread on landing. As with juvenile, tail may be tipped pale buff.

UNDERPARTS Base colour shading from an off-white chin and cheeks, deepening through a rich buff on breast and flanks to cinnamon-buff tibial feathers ('pale orangey apricot': G. P. Catley *in litt.*), latter lacking the rich rufous colour of adult. Breast, belly and flanks streaked with brown-black (not black as on adult), streaking variable in width, being generally narrower on belly, and clustered on upper breast to form heavy 'necklace'. Undertail pale rusty-cream, barred brown or black.

BARE PARTS Legs pale yellow-ochre or sandy; eye, bill and cere as on adult, but with bluish basal area on bill.

Discussion

Cramp & Simmons (1980) stated that after post-juvenile moult, which occurs in March or April, the Hobby's plumage resembles that of the



adult; as well as failing to describe the plumage, they show no illustration. Presumably, the first-summer plumage is acquired through fading and wear—it certainly looks like a faded juvenile plumage. There is, however, a possibility that it is a definite plumage phase acquired by moult, as with first-summer Red-footed Falcon. More research, and observations on the wintering grounds, are obviously needed in this area.

Behavioural features and shape are usually diagnostic. The Hobby has long and pointed wings, as opposed to the broad-based, shorter and rather blunt wings of Red-footed Falcon (which, to my eyes, can be nearer to Kestrel *F. tinnunculus* in shape and flight action). Hobby has a dashing flight, catching prey on the wing, compared with Red-footed's more deliberate perching or hovering when hunting. On several occasions, however, I have seen first-summer Hobbies perch in prominent positions, resting or hunting like shrikes *Lanius*, dropping on prey and then returning to the same exposed perch, a behaviour reminiscent of Red-footed Falcon; and sometimes hover briefly before the final 'pounce'.

In addition, my notes made in 1989 on a first-summer female Red-footed Falcon reveal some plumage similarities with first-summer Hobby. This Red-footed's plumage was basically as that of a juvenile, but differed in its paler, slightly greyer, mantle, scapulars and upperwing-coverts, which also had a less 'scalloped' effect (I was surprised at how brown the bird could look in flight); its rich yellow-ochre underside and lesser underwing-coverts, with thin dark streaks strongest on breast and flanks; and its orange-red cere and eye-ring. First-summer Hobbies can show some plumage characters normally associated with juvenile and first-summer female Red-footed Falcon: pale cream forehead, supercilia and collar; small restricted area of brown on crown; limited amount of brown-black around the eye (Hobby will always show a longer moustache); brown back and upperwing-coverts, occasionally with a blue-grey tinge to mantle, and darker, contrasting remiges; and also some barring on the uppertail.

While most birdwatchers would not, given good views, misidentify Hobby as Red-footed Falcon, some caution is required when claiming flight-only views of first-summer Red-footed Falcon. I find it strange that neither Cramp & Simmons (1980) nor Porter *et al.* (1976) mentioned first-summer Hobby, failing even to recognise such a distinctive plumage phase. Harris *et al.* (1989) depicted, and in their second edition (1990) described, first-summer female Red-footed Falcon, but in their illustration the underside is too richly coloured and is not streaked enough.

There is concern that the British population of the Hobby, as a rare breeding bird, may be slightly overestimated, since some of those reported may well be first-summer and thus non-breeding individuals. Spencer *et al.* (1990) stated that reports in 1988 from 321 localities indicated between 101 and 361 breeding pairs in Britain. Presumably, these numbers were inflated by a small percentage of first-summer Hobbies. Perhaps, if observations were made in late July and August, a more accurate assessment of breeding numbers could be attained.

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Summary

A first-summer plumage exists for the Hobby *Falco subbuteo*, and individuals in this plumage reach Britain with some frequency (albeit in small numbers). Observers need to be aware of such a plumage when evaluating breeding numbers. Claims of first-summer female Red-footed Falcon *F. vespertinus* should eliminate Hobby in this plumage stage.

References

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