

The 1864 Wiltshire 'Steppe Buzzard'

A review on behalf of the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee

Andrew H. J. Harrop and Martin Collinson

ABSTRACT As part of its continuing review of records in Category B of the British List, the BOU Records Committee re-examined the specimen record of a Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* shot at Everleigh, Wiltshire, in September 1864. Although this specimen was previously identified as *Buteo buteo vulpinus* ('Steppe Buzzard') it is impossible, on the basis of current knowledge, to exclude the possibility that the bird is an intergrade, or even an exceptional nominate *B. b. buteo*. Consequently, 'Steppe Buzzard' has been removed from the British List.

In September 1864, J. Clarke Hawkshaw shot a buzzard *Buteo* at Everleigh, Wiltshire, on the northeastern edge of Salisbury Plain. It was recorded as *B. desertorum* by Gould (1873), and subsequently confirmed as *B. b. desertorum* (= *vulpinus*) by Witherby (1921). The specimen is now in the Natural History Museum, stored as a cabinet skin (registration number 1881.5.1.4023) (plates 183 & 184). Its provenance has never been questioned. In addition to the features described below, it has a small bill, a streaked head, and dark restricted to the outer primary coverts (therefore not forming complete round dark carpal patches).

The plumage is unusual for nominate Common Buzzard *B. b. buteo* (henceforth known as 'buteo'), and shows features normally associated with 'Steppe Buzzard' *B. b. vulpinus* (henceforth referred to as 'vulpinus'), especially the rufous tones on the upperparts, tail, undertail-coverts and axillaries. The plumage is not, however, as distinctive as that of some 'classic' *vulpinus* from the eastern part of the range, in Siberia. The bird was not sexed, but can be aged as a juvenile on the basis of its streaked under-

body and narrow subterminal bar on the tail, and the lack of moult in the remiges (Forsman 1999). Witherby gave the following measurements: wing 363 mm, tail 200 mm, tarsus 76 mm and bill 20 mm. These are at the lower end of the range for *buteo*, but are not conclusive in themselves since they fall within the ranges of both *buteo* and *vulpinus* (Cramp & Simmons 1979).

During the review, the identification of other buzzards (notably Red-tailed Hawk *B. jamaicensis* and Long-legged Buzzard *B. rufinus*) was also discussed. Although variable, Red-tailed Hawks do not closely resemble *vulpinus* because (among other differences) they are larger and heavier, have broader wings with contrastingly dark marginal coverts along the leading edge of the underwing, and tend to have the head darker than the breast (Wheeler & Clark 1995). Some juvenile Long-legged Buzzards of the African race *cirtensis* can closely resemble *vulpinus*, but differ in having a more uniform, less streaked head, a heavier bill and contrasting round dark carpal patches (Forsman 2000). The measurements of both the

bill and the wing of the Wiltshire specimen fall within the ranges of *buteo* and *vulpinus* but not those of Long-legged Buzzard (Cramp & Simmons 1979).

The problem which the Committee faced, therefore, was that although the specimen resembles *vulpinus*, *buteo* is extremely variable, and a judgement had to be made as to whether there is a significant probability of it being an intergrade or an unusual *buteo*. Within the normal range of *buteo*, birds with reddish tails are not infrequent (R. Prytherch verbally; pers. obs.) but reddish tones are much less often present in other plumage tracts.

There is no known single diagnostic feature which enables completely safe separation of *vulpinus* and *buteo*. Indeed, the problems involved in distinguishing these two forms were recognised by Voous *et al.* as long ago as 1948. Furthermore, Ulfstrand (1977) documented clinal variation in Swedish Common Buzzards

between birds in the north, which tend to be smaller and redder (and may have a connection with *vulpinus*), and birds in the south – probably *buteo* – which tend to be larger and more frequently pale but may also be reddish (perhaps because reddish hues tend to persist as depigmentation proceeds). He found no trace of a demarcation line between two distinguishable populations, and concluded that 'subspecific labelling of single specimens of so variable a species as *Buteo buteo* seems to be a rather futile exercise'. More recently, work by Haring *et al.* (1999) found no unambiguous genetic differentiation among the subspecies of *Buteo buteo*, with the exception of *B. b. japonicus*. Scriber *et al.* (2001) found extremely low molecular genetic variation within populations of *buteo* in Germany and tried to reconcile this with the extreme variation in plumage pigmentation among individuals. The authors discussed mechanisms by which, in populations



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Andrew Harrop

183 & 184. Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* shot at Everleigh, Wiltshire, in September 1864, and formerly considered to be 'Steppe Buzzard' *B. b. vulpinus*. Now in the Natural History Museum, Tring.

where genetic diversity has been reduced by repeated falls in the effective population size ('bottlenecks'), polygenic characters such as plumage pigmentation could show extreme individual variation. In light of this, it is possible that rare mutations in populations of nominate *buteo* might occasionally produce individuals which show *vulpinus*-like characters. In these circumstances, members of BOURC concluded that the Wiltshire specimen cannot be diagnosed as *vulpinus* with sufficient confidence, and that this is likely to remain an insoluble problem for the foreseeable future.

Although this record is no longer considered acceptable, it is possible that future developments in the fields of *Buteo* identification or genetics will make it possible to re-evaluate the record. Common Buzzards which show characteristics of *vulpinus* are recorded occasionally in Britain (Skevington 2002), but sight records, even if they are supported by photographic evidence, are unlikely to be acceptable. Nonetheless, observers are encouraged to document Common Buzzards which 'show the characters' of *vulpinus*, since it is likely that some continental birds, including intergrades and possibly genuine *vulpinus*, reach Britain occasionally.

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Andrew H. J. Harrop, 30 Dean Street, Oakham, Rutland LE15 6AF

Dr Martin Collinson, 31 St Michael's Road, Newtonhill, Stonehaven, Aberdeen AB39 3RW

