

Birds of Prey in Vietnam

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This account is based on Delacour and Jabouille (1931), Vo Quy (1975, 1983, 1986; pers. comm.), Fischer in the Hanoi area from 1958-64 (1961, 1965, 1974) and my own brief observations in southern parts of the country in Jan/Feb 1984 and Jan 1986 (less than 70h observation on foot). I am not aware of any other published accounts, except that of Wildash (1968), which relies heavily on Delacour and Jabouille for distribution information. Information from south China (Cheng, 1976, in Chinese) is referred to, where relevant to north Vietnam.

The threats to birds of prey in Vietnam are similar to those in other tropical countries. Loss of forest cover is worse than it might appear on paper since it frequently involves fragmentation and invasion by essentially-subsistence farmers, who rely on forest animals and birds as a source of meat. Wood and charcoal is the main source of fuel for the rapidly-expanding population in the south. It seems likely that pesticides (including DDT) and rodenticides are widely and often indiscriminately used and may well be responsible for the dramatic declines in populations of kites (*Milvus*, *Haliastur*), vultures (*Gyps*) and crows (*Corvus*). The importance of direct persecution by fishermen and farmers is unclear, but domestic fowl are a very valuable commodity in Vietnam and most large birds of prey are regarded as "chicken-killers".

The effects on raptor populations of spraying forests with defoliants contaminated with dioxin, as carried out by the American military before 1975, are unclear and it is particularly unfortunate that no population data are available immediately before and after this period to establish any effects. This alone should convince the Vietnamese government of the need for raptor population surveys of the whole country, using a greatly-increased number of competent naturalists, trained and equipped, if necessary, with international aid.

The remaining forests appear to support significant populations of resident raptors, many of them considered to be uncommon or rare in the region. For their conservation, forest reserves for each distinct habitat should be created and protection within them enforced. Urgent research on pesticide and rodenticide use is required in order to minimise the risks to human health and animal resources (including fish stocks), using the recovery of key raptor populations as one means of monitoring the success of this policy. The Vietnamese government has been presented with a National Conservation Strategy recently published (in English and Vietnamese) by a Vietnamese team (led by Vo Quy) and John MacKinnon (IUCN). Adoption of this ambitious programme would demonstrate that Vietnam is almost unique in S.E. Asia in taking a long-term view of its natural resources.

Vietnam is a long, thin country, widening into heavily-populated delta

areas at each end. The Mekong delta in the south is mainly agricultural lowlands and has lost most of its forest cover, except for some important coastal and mangrove forests. The Red River delta in the north is surrounded by high mountains up to the borders with Laos and China and its remaining forests are very fragmented. The mountain chain of the connecting central region retains some substantial forests, but only in South Annam is there a large area of continuous lowland forest running from the Ban Me Thuot region south to the Dong Nai river valley at Nam Cat Tien and stretching east along the mountainous edge of the Di Linh (Djiring) plateau (e.g. at Deo Bao Loc). The proposed reserve at Nam Cat Tien on the edge of this forest is now threatened by agricultural developments and its future will be an interesting indicator of the commitment of the Vietnamese government to a rational conservation policy.

Wintering raptors, such as Pandion, Butastur, Accipiter and Circus, appear to be holding their own and raptor migration through Vietnam is well-known even to lay people but appears not to have been studied.

SUMMARY OF STATUS

My own records for 1984 and 1986 are mentioned for less common species. "Specimens" are mentioned for very rare species or species of unknown present status. (R) = breeding resident, (W) = Winter visitor, (?) = present status unclear to me (though historical status may be known).

BLACK-WINGED KITE Elanus caeruleus. (R)

Breeds throughout. The commonest raptor of open country from lowlands to 5,000 ft in the South, but less common in the North.

JERDON'S BAZA Aviceda jerdoni. (R)

A January 1986 sight record at Nam Cat Tien would, if confirmed, add this species to the Vietnam list. Possibly a scarce and rarely-seen resident, as elsewhere in its extensive Asian range.

BLACK BAZA Aviceda leuphotes. (R)

Breeds throughout (except the NE) where suitable forest habitat still exists. Seen once at Nam Cat Tien in January 1986.

CRESTED HONEY BUZZARD Pernis ptilorhyncus. (R)

HONEY BUZZARD Pernis apivorus (orientalis). (W)

The former has probably been an uncommon breeding bird throughout, though there appear to be no records for the NE or for S. Annam. Present status unclear. The latter is an uncommon winter visitor throughout. Often treated as one species, the distinctions are beyond the scope of this discussion. Seen once in January 1984 over cleared forest in S. Annam. No data on migration, though in the 1960s Fischer made several observations of Pernis spp. in late March and early October near Hanoi.

BLACK KITE Milvus migrans. (R, W)

The subspecies lineatus is thought to be a winter visitor to the NE and to

N. Annam, while govinda is a breeding resident in the south. Once abundant in the south, even in Saigon, the latter is now quite uncommon, especially in populated areas, though it can be found near inland rivers. Four singles were seen along the Dong Nai river system in the south in January 1986. Around Hue in the central region, only a single bird was seen in February 1984. Even in the north, it was the commonest raptor in the 1960s and a daily sight in the Red River delta. The dramatic decline in the Saigon area may have occurred after 1968 since Wildash makes no reference to it.

GOSHAWK Accipter gentilis. (W)

Winter specimens from the NE only. Present status unclear.

CRESTED GOSHAWK A. trivirgatus. (R)

Once regarded as a rare breeding resident of the NE and N. Annam, but an apparent breeding pair was seen in a rubber plantation in the south in January 1984. Possibly an uncommon resident throughout.

SHIKRA A. badius. (R)

A common breeding resident in the south and S. Annam, and possibly throughout.

CHINESE GOSHAWK A. soloensis (?)

One specimen from the south only. Present status unclear.

SPARROWHAWK A. nisus. (W)

A winter visitor to northern areas.

BESRA A. virgatus. (R)

Specimens from the south and the NW. Fischer identified it in Hanoi and Thanh Hoa.

JAPANESE SPARROWHAWK A. gularis. (W)

Recorded as a winter visitor throughout, except the NW. Possibly quite common in the south.

PIED HARRIER Circus melanoleucos. (W)

EASTERN MARSH HARRIER C. aeruginosus spilonotus. (W)

Both occur as winter visitors everywhere, except the NW, though they are clearly likely to be commonest in the delta areas and coastal lagoons. In February 1984 Circus spp. were common around Bac Lieu in Minh Hai province of the Mekong delta, but since the two species differ considerably from their European counterparts, the Montagu's (pygargus) and Marsh (aeruginosus aeruginosus) Harriers, I was unable to identify them satisfactorily. The Marsh Harrier was the commoner in Hue-Quang Tri lagoons of N. Annam in the 1920s and in the Red River delta in the 1960s.

PALLID HARRIER C. macrourus. (?)

Fischer recorded an adult male in March 1958 near Hoa Binh in the north. Present status unclear. C. cyaneus, the Hen Harrier, has not been recorded in Vietnam, though Cheng shows it wintering in south China up to the Vietnam border.

BUZZARD Buteo buteo. (?)

Delacour took specimens in the NE and on the DiLinh plateau in S. Annam. Present status unclear. It winters in China near the Vietnam border (Cheng, 1976).

BRAHMINY KITE Haliastur indus. (R)

Once abundant residents almost throughout, they are now, like Milvus, quite uncommon. Two adults were seen in forest wetland at Nam Cat Tien in January 1986, and they can still be found in the coastal forests of the extreme south, but they may be regarded as a threatened species in parts of Vietnam.

GREY-FACED BUZZARD Butastur indicus. (W)

A common winter visitor from lowlands to 5,000ft in the south and S. Annam in forest clearings and areas with scattered trees. Also found in the NW and N. Annam.

RUFous-WINGED BUZZARD Butastur liventer. (R)

A fairly uncommon resident of the south and S. Annam in the 1920s. Fischer saw a Butastur on the Black river in the north in July 1964, which he took to be this species. Present status unclear. Cheng records it breeding near the Red River on the Chinese side of the border.

CHANGEABLE HAWK-EAGLE Spizaetus cirrhatus. (R)

Although Delacour himself saw no Spizaetus spp. in the 1920s and refers to a specimen taken by Oustalet near Nha Trang, this species is probably not uncommon as a resident of forests in the south and S. Annam. An immature bird was seen on a forested mountainside at Deo Bao Loc in S. Annam in January 1986. Fischer recorded it twice in mountains near Hanoi in the 1960s.

MOUNTAIN HAWK-EAGLE S. nipalensis. (?)

Fischer's record at Tam Dao, north of Hanoi on October 19th 1962 is the only sight record of this species, though Cheng records it breeding in south China near the Vietnam border.

IMPERIAL EAGLE Aquila heliaca. (?)

In the 1920s, Delacour took a specimen at Bac Can in the NE.

STEPPE/TAWNY EAGLE A. rapax. (?)

In the 1920s, Delacour took a specimen at Sa Pa in the NW. Cheng shows it

migrating through south China towards Vietnam.

GREATER SPOTTED EAGLE A. clanga. (W)

A fairly common winter visitor to the south in the 1920s. It has also occurred in N. Annam. Present status unclear.

BONELLI'S EAGLE Hieraetus fasciatus. (?)

Delacour took a specimen in the Mekong delta in the 1920s.

RUFUS-BELLIED EAGLE H. kienerii. (R)

Resident in S. Annam and possibly all upland areas. Delacour saw it twice in central forests in the 1920s (KonTum, DiLinh). A small eagle seen over coastal evergreen forest north of Nha Trang in January 1986 may have been an immature of this species. In the 1960s, Fischer saw it twice near Hoa Binh in the north.

BLACK EAGLE Icinaetus malayensis. (R)

Possibly a fairly common resident throughout the forested regions of Vietnam. Seen once at Deo Bao Loc in January 1984.

WHITE-BELLIED SEA-EAGLE Haliaeetus leucogaster. (R)

Resident on S. Annam coasts, though greatly reduced in numbers since the 1920s when it was very common and even seen inland up the Mekong river. It bred in the Bay d'Along on the north coast in the 1960s. In February 1984, one adult was seen on the coast at Ba Ngoi (Can Ranh Bay), south of Nha Trang in S. Annam. In January 1986, one was seen on the coast north of Nha Trang and south of Vinh Hoa and another sighting was obtained nearby on the same day about 10km inland over forests.

PALLAS'S SEA-EAGLE H. leucoryphus. (?)

Recorded by Tirant in the 19th century (Delacour & Jabouille, 1931).

GREY-HEADED FISHING-EAGLE Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus. (R)

An uncommon resident throughout Vietnam, even in the 1920s. In February 1986, an immature bird was seen in forest wetland at Nam Cat Tien.

LESSER FISHING-EAGLE Ichthyophaga nana. (R)

Resident of high forest rivers in the NW.

SHORT-TOED EAGLE Circaetus gallicus. (?)

Specimens have been taken in winter in the south and on the KonTum plateau of S. Annam.

CRESTED SERPENT EAGLE Spilornis cheela. (R)

Resident throughout Vietnam, except in the NW. Common in the 1920s. In January 1984, a pair was seen over a forest clearing at Nam Cat Tien. In

January 1986, a single was seen at the same place and a second in partly-cleared forest 10km away.

Sarcochaps calvus.

Gyps indicus.

Gyps bengalensis. (R)

Though never abundant in Vietnam, breeding vultures are now rare and localised. The first used to be found along the central mountain chain and the third was commonest in the south. Gyps indicus has always been rare. In the 1920s, Gyps bengalensis nested in trees near villages or waterways, suggesting an association with man's activities rather than with wild game. According to Vo Quy (1986), vultures still occur inland in S. Annam.

BLACK VULTURE Aegypius monachus. (?)

A specimen caught in the NW in 1959 and displayed in the Hanoi Botanical Garden for several years may be the only record (Fischer, 1974):

OSPREY Pandion haliaetus. (W)

In the 1920s, this species was a very common winter visitor throughout Vietnam but now winters only in the south and S. Annam, where it is still fairly common. In January 1986, one was seen on the Dong Nai river at Tri An north of Bien Hoa and two were seen together on a side-stream of the same river at Nam Cat Tien.

HOBBY Falco subbuteo. (?)

Has bred in the NE.

PEREGRINE Falco peregrinus. (W)

Uncommon winter visitor to coastal regions and may have bred in the NE (BaBe lake). Present status unclear.

ORIENTAL HOBBY Falco severus. (R)

Uncommon resident throughout.

MERLIN Falco columbarius. (?)

Delacour took a single specimen at Hue in winter, and it winters in China near the Vietnam border (Cheng, 1976).

KESTREL Falco tinnunculus. (R, W)

Breeds in the NE and often seen near Hanoi in the 1960s. A quite uncommon winter visitor to the south. In February 1984, one was seen hovering by the roadside south of DaNang in central Annam.

LAGGAR Falco biarmicus. (?)

Specimens exist but their precise origin is unknown (Vo Quy, 1975). The

Amur Falcon, F. vespertinus amurensis, has not yet been recorded in Vietnam, though Cheng shows it migrating through south China towards Vietnam.

PIED FALCONET Microhierax melanoleucos. (R)

Resident in the north.

COLLARED FALCONET Microhierax caerulescens. (R)

Fairly common resident of open forest in the south. In January 1986, a single was seen at Tri An and a pair at Nam Cat Tien, both in open forest near the Dong Nai river.

WHITE-RUMPED FALCON Neohierax insignis. (R)

Once a common, but local, resident in the south. Present status unclear.

SUMMARY

Of 47 full species on this Vietnam list, 25 probably breed regularly. A further 9 species occur regularly but only as winter visitors. The remaining 13 species appear to be known, at present, only from a few isolated or historical specimens or records. (Pernis is treated as one full species).

Kites (Milvus and Haliastur) and vultures (Gyps and Sarcogyps) appear to have declined dramatically in recent years, though the Sea-eagle (Haliaeetus leucogaster) can still be found on South Annam coasts. In remoter, forested areas, rich and varied raptor populations can be found and there is still much to be learnt about the current status and distribution of most species.

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