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BAT HAWKS IN LAGOS AND BENIN CITY

J. B. Heigham.

Reports of the Bat Hawk Machaeramphus alcinus in Nigeria appear to be infrequent, and in J.H. Elgood's Provisional Checklist of the Birds of Nigeria the status of the bird is given as wide-spread, resident but occasional.

In mid-November 1972, Brian Smith, who is a resident of one of the tall blocks of flats on the corner of Osborne Road and Second Avenue, Ikoyi, near the Northern shore of Ikoyi Island, Lagos, observed a dark brown predator which from time to time perched on the tallest mast in the wireless station opposite his flat at dusk and frequently attacked large bats by flying up at them; no successful attack was observed, the bat in every case escaping either by closing its wings and falling or by zigzagging - the bats were often struck but always seemed to get away.

I first observed the bird myself in the above location between 6.15 and 6.45 p.m. on 8th January 1973, when the following description was recorded immediately afterwards:

"Large predator, perhaps a little longer than a Black Kite but thicker set, perched on wireless mast about 60 ft. up. Changed position three times during observation.

Upperparts, including head, dark brown, face appeared darker than remainder of head down to chin. No appearance of side-whiskers. Eye dark. Bill and cere appeared horn colour, lighter than remainder of face. Bill not especially long but visibly hooked. Underparts lighter brown streaked with dark brown, including breast, belly and thighs. Tail dark brown above and below with lighter spots on every feather giving almost a barred effect. Legs and feet yellowish.

When preening, the tail was occasionally spread and then appeared very wide and the lifted wings were sharp-ended and sharp-angled. At rest the wings appeared very nearly as long as the tail.

In flight the general appearance was dark brown, though lighter underneath than above. The wings were sharp and narrow, reminiscent of a falcon, as was the flight.

Its general position when perched, except when preening, gave the impression of crouching forward, the body nearer the horizontal than is common with predators at rest."

The same bird was subsequently seen in the same place by my wife, by Mr. and Mrs. Brian Smith and by Mr. and Mrs. J.A. Franklin, and it was recorded on the following dates, always in the evening at dusk: 9th, 12th, 17th, 19th, 23rd and 29th January, 13th and 18th February 1973. On two occasions it was seen to fly off the wireless mast to attack unsuccessfully, once from above and once from below, Straw-Coloured Fruit Bats (Eidolon helvum) which had a wing-span comparable with itself and on other occasions when it flew off and

returned to the mast it was possible that, while out of sight behind trees, it attacked other bats such as Gambian Fruit Bats (Epomorphus gambianus) and Pipistrellus spp. which were also about and are of a more manageable size.

As an interesting coincidence during a visit to Benin City on 15th and 16th January 1973, a Bat Hawk was observed by my wife and myself on both evenings hunting over the Government Residential Area. On one occasion it was seen to catch from above and apparently devour a small bat, probably a pipistrelle. In this case the bird appeared darker underneath than the one seen in Lagos but, since it was only observed in the dusk and did not perch for long periods, thus permitting itself to be watched closely, it is difficult to be too positive on this point. Its wing shape and strong aggressive flight were, as in the Lagos bird, reminiscent of a falcon.

On two occasions in February, visits to the wireless station in Ikoyi revealed not a Bat Hawk but a Peregrine Falcon (Falco peregrinus) perched on the mast in the evening. The two species were never present at the same time and the Peregrine was not observed to attack bats nor the Bat Hawk to attack the Palm Swifts (Cypsiurus parvus) and Ussher's Spine-tailed Swifts (Chaetura ussheri) which constantly circle the blocks of flats nearby in the evening.

Discussion.

There appear to be only two previous records of a Bat Hawk in Lagos, Mark Forrester's in July 1969 (Bull.N.O.S. 8(30):13) and Sir Bernard Bourdillon's in March 1943 (quoted by F.Sander from the larger Bannerman), but the three records spread its appearance fairly well over the months so that it may well be present throughout the year, but not often observed because of its crepuscular habits. The observation made in Benin was so fortuitous as to merit no further comment.

What surprised this observer was its persistence in attacking without success Straw-coloured Fruit Bats which must surely be far too big for it to consume in what is generally reported to be its normal method, on the wing. The Straw-coloured Fruit Bat is present in Lagos in vast numbers during the dry season, roosting by day all round Lagos Island in Casuarinas and "African Almond" trees and, as dusk comes on, flying in thousands out over the lagoon towards the mangroves behind the shore. It disappears from the city during the rains.

The description of the Bat Hawk above does not tally exactly with either Bannerman (1953) page 260 nor Mackworth-Praed and Grant (1970) page 125, but seems to fall pretty well between the two, leaving no doubt, however, that this was the bird observed.

The writer would be interested to hear of other accounts of the Bat Hawk from Lagos or elsewhere in Nigeria.

/References...

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GREY PHALAROPES (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) NEAR LAGOS

J. F. Brown.

While out in my boat fishing in the sea off the West Mole of Lagos Harbour on the evening of 25 March, 1973, I observed a group of about twelve small birds swimming close to the Mole. At first I thought they were young terns, but I approached for a closer look. Although the sea was fairly rough, I got quite close to them, and they appeared quite undisturbed by my boat. Being still unsure of the birds' identity, I mentioned the incident to Joe Heigham the following day. Mr & Mrs Heigham therefore walked out to the end of the West Mole on Saturday, 31st March at about 3.30 p.m. and observed the birds, which they identified as Grey Phalaropes (*Phalaropus fulicarius*). The birds were observed for about 15 minutes, flying in among terns (Black Terns, Sandwich Terns, Common Terns, Common Noddies) fishing, and also occasionally alighting on the sea and swimming for short periods.

I went out again by boat the following evening, Sunday 1st April, observed the birds again, and confirmed Mr Heigham's identification. The relative unconcern at the approach of my boat is confirmed by Bannerman, who comments that Grey Phalaropes are extremely tame when resting on water.

I understand that this may be the first time Grey Phalaropes have been reported from Nigeria.

[This is the first record from Nigeria, but there have been previous encounters from the coasts of Liberia and Cameroun.

Editor.]