

# The European Honey-Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* in India, and notes on its identification

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Anand, V., Aiyappa, P., Pavukandy, U., & Forsman, D., 2020. The European Honey-Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* in India, and notes on its identification. *Indian BIRDS* 16 (2): 45–47.

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Manuscript received on 23 June 2020.

Honey-Buzzards *Pernis* sp., are medium-sized birds of prey that have a wide distribution in Eurasia and Africa. The two widely distributed species in this genus are the European Honey-Buzzard *P. apivorus* (hereinafter EHB), and the Oriental Honey-Buzzard *P. ptilorhynchus* (hereinafter OHB). The EHB breeds across most of Europe and western Asia, from Spain, France, Britain, and Scandinavia through western Russia and the Caucasus to the River Ob in south-western Siberia, and southwards to southern Turkey and northern Iran. It winters mostly in Africa, south of Sahara (Orta et al. 2020a). A few occasional winter records from southern Europe and Arabia were also documented (Grussu et al. 1998; Corso et al. 2000; A. Corso *pers. com.*). The polytypic OHB consists of two wide-ranging subspecies: (a) *orientalis* and, (b) *ruficollis*, apart from three other endemic, island subspecies. While *ruficollis* occurs in most of southern Asia, including India, and is sedentary, with only local movements, the northern *orientalis* subspecies is strongly migratory, breeding across south-central Siberia, eastwards to Amurland and Sakhalin, southwards to north-eastern China, Japan, and Korea, and winters in South-east Asia, southward to the Greater- and Lesser Sundas, Philippines, and Sangihe, with very small numbers farther west, possibly also wintering in eastern Africa (Scuderi & Corso 2011; Orta et al. 2020b). In India, *orientalis* has been reported rarely from different parts of the country (Ali & Ripley 1987; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Despite there being definite molecular differences between EHB and OHB (Gamauf & Haring 2004), occasionally apparent hybrids have been reported (Faveyts et al. 2011; Forsman 1994, 2016), presumably originating from the region where the northern populations of OHB meets the EHB breeding range—around southern Russia and north-eastern Kazakhstan (Orta et al. 2020).

Till date, there has not been any definitive report of EHB from India (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), and here we report the first sighting of EHB from India.

## Observation & Identification

On 15 February 2015, while we, VA, PA, and UP, were birding at Manjolai (08.56°N, 77.40°E), Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu, we saw a bird of prey flying close to a tea plantation. Our initial impression was of a Jerdon's Baza *Aviceda jerdoni* as the bird looked sleek and compact in its wing to tail proportions, and we clicked a few pictures. After having studied the pictures [33, 34,

35] we identified it as an OHB, as this species is a polymorphic raptor, despite the bird not showing a typical OHB jizz.



33. European Honey-Buzzard with underwing showing the well-defined dark carpal patch, a dark terminal tail band, with two finer bars. on 15 February 2015, Manjolai, Tamil Nadu.



34. European Honey-Buzzard, showing bright yellow iris without a dark gorget, or mesial stripes on 15 February 2015, Manjolai, Tamil Nadu.

Both: Vinoba Anand

While browsing an old hard disk, VA accidentally came across these images which he took a couple of years ago. Having gone through a few records of EHB x OHB hybrid sightings from Kerala and one other suspected EHB from Sri Lanka and their identification features, the different pointers between the OHB vs



Vinotha Anand

35. European Honey-Buzzard, upperwing on 15 February 2015, Manjolai, Tamil Nadu.

EHB registered in his mind faintly. On reviewing the pictures once again, he realised that they could be a good candidate for an EHB, based on the following features: The bird had well-defined dark carpal patches, and the tail- and wing barring patterns were similar to EHB—a dark terminal band followed by two finer bars in the tail, and a dark trailing edge, followed by two narrow bars in the wings. The greyish face featured a bright yellow iris, the dark gorget and mesial stripes were lacking, and the outermost dark bars in the secondaries were disappearing under the wing coverts before reaching the body.

In order to eliminate a potential hybrid, VA sent these pictures to DF who confirmed the bird as a male EHB without any trace of OHB features.

### Status in India and South Asia

EHB is not listed for the country in any of the standard guides (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), nor in the India Checklist (Praveen et al. 2020a). It has been included in the South Asia checklist (Praveen et al. 2020b) based on a photographic record from the British Indian Ocean Territory (Carr 2015). Sight reports from Afghanistan have not been accepted by Praveen (2018), and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). However, two cases of EHB x OHB hybrids have been recently reported from Kerala (Munderi 2020; Paleri 2020). There was also a photograph of a putative EHB from Mannar Island, Sri Lanka, in 2019 (Moditha 2019). Hence, it is likely that EHB and EHB x OHB hybrids are overlooked in the country. We provide a brief summary of the identification features that would help differentiate them.

### Identification hints

Identification of OHB and EHB has been well-covered in several works (Forsman 2016; Faveyts et al. 2011; Campbell et al. 2016; Corso 2009; Scuderi & Corso 2011). However, we cover some details of its identification that are relevant for bird enthusiasts in India.

The adult EHB occurs in three main morphs: the pale, the dark, and the various intermediates. The typical adult pale and mottled morph EHB (both sexes) shows the prominent dark carpal patches (always absent in OHB), which would be a very good pointer to start with. In the EHB five-fingered primaries (P10–P6) are visible prominently, and six are visible in the OHB (P10–P5), but these are tricky to evaluate in molting birds between October–January/February, and in some birds P5 could sometimes appear slightly fingered too, or at least protruding. The EHB does not show a gorget and mesial stripe, whereas OHB shows both.

The pale morph of an adult male EHB shows cleaner flight feathers, with underwing coverts varying from being pale, to barred. Adult male EHBs generally have a grey head with yellow iris (dark red in male OHB), however, this feature is best assessed in a series of photographs. The male has a broad black terminal bar in the tail and a broad black trailing edge to the wings. The barring on the flight feathers is mostly confined closer to the coverts, and the outermost underwing barring disappears just under the coverts before reaching the body, as though there were a long jump from the trailing edge to the next dark bar.

The pale morph of an adult female EHB shows more patterned flight feathers, with finer bars, and the dark trailing edge on the wings is much narrower compared to a male. The wing bars on the secondaries run further out, which makes it a narrow jump from the trailing edge to the next barring.

Dark morph birds are challenging as the carpal patches, though present, cannot be appreciated in either of the sexes because of the lack of contrast. However, the tail and underwing patterns remain more or less the same including the five-fingered primaries. In these situations, some familiarity with the structure of the bird would be needed to resolve such cases.

In the field, the EHB stands out as being smaller and slimmer than an OHB, with proportionally longer tail and narrower wings, its wing tip is slightly rounder, whereas an OHB is broader-winged and shorter-tailed. The five primary fingers of an EHB give an impression of a less broad wingtip compared to an OHB. However, female EHBs can also present a broad-winged profile. As a rule, an EHB's tail is longer than the width of the wing-base, while it is vice versa in an OHB (Forsman 2016). These

**Table 1.** Key features that separate a pale morph EHB from an OHB (not exhaustive)

Features	EHB	OHB
Carpal patch	Well defined and prominent	None (or) not well-defined
No of fingered primaries	Five	Six
Gorget on throat	Not present (or) incomplete	Yes
Mesial stripe	Not present (or) short and ill-defined	Yes
Tail pattern	Dark terminal bar followed by two finer bars	Usually two broad black bars (highly variable)
Outer bar in secondaries	Disappears into the coverts before reaching the body	Reaches the body

features make an EHB look slightly smaller, and less bulkier in flight than an OHB (Faveyts et al. 2011), with which most of Indian observers are familiar. The flight of an EHB is generally less heavy and more elegant than that of an OHB, but this should be used with care, and prolonged views are recommended when using this as a diagnostic feature.

Finally, hybrids between EHBs and OHBs show a number of overlapping features, and special care should be taken to identify an EHB, and its identification should be confirmed only if all diagnostic features are observed (Forsman 2016). These hybrids are known to occur in southern India as well, as reported by Munderi (2020) and Paleri (2020), where birds showed most EHB characteristics except one or two. The bird from Kannur, Kerala, photographed by Abdul Raheem Munderi, showed the dark outer line in the secondaries reaching the body like that of an OHB (disappearing under the coverts in a male EHB), and an orange iris, which is a trait of the hybrid, instead of deep red for a male OHB (bright yellow in EHB). The bird from Kozhikode, Kerala, photographed by Abdulla Paleri, showed a prominent gorget like that present on an OHB (absent in EHB), and the bird has the six protruding primary fingers (five in EHB).

The plumage of an EHB is also extremely variable, like an OHB, however the wing and tail barring in the EHB is less prone to variation, being diagnostic in all plumages, while the body plumage of the underparts varies from white, through streaked (or) barred, to all dark (Forsman 1998, 2016). However, juvenile plumages of both, the EHB, and the OHB are extremely variable, superficially similar to each other, and difficult to tell apart, though the difference in the number of fingered primaries remains. They are beyond the scope of this paper, and interested readers are directed to Forsman (2016) for a detailed summary.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Chandrashekar S., Dipu K., Gnanaskandan K., Mujeeb P. B., Praveen J., and Wichyanan L., for their time and discussions on the identifications. We would like to thank Praveen J and Andrea Corso for their help and guidance in improving this article.

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