

The Eleonora's Falcon in Essex

Russell Neave

It was 4.00pm on 13th September 2008, a pleasant, sunny and warm Saturday afternoon, and I had just returned to my home at Maldon, Essex, after finishing a wetlands bird survey count at the Blackwater Estuary.

Almost the last bird I had seen was a Common Buzzard, which I had checked in case it was a Honey Buzzard, as several had been reported passing over east Essex. I had a little over an hour to do a few chores at home before heading off for the evening for a family commitment. With the hope of a Honey Buzzard, I set up my scope in the garden, and had my binoculars and phone to hand. I located the same Common Buzzard I had seen earlier to the north, now circling slowly south: a garden tick. I was then in and out the house, with one eye on the sky...

At about 4.45pm, I noticed all the Collared Doves take off from the telephone wires beyond the end of the garden. "Sparrowhawk" I thought, but the bird that then appeared above the hedge, from the fields to the southeast, was certainly not a Sparrowhawk. My initial impression was of a brownish, medium-sized raptor but, after a quick look through my binoculars, I was at a loss to put a name to it. As the bird gained height and began to circle, I could see that it was a falcon of medium build, but unfamiliar. As the bird was now circling leisurely, I rushed in and grabbed my camera (a Pentax K10D with a Sigma 70-300 zoom), figuring that photographs would prove more useful than a few scribbled notes in what was likely to be a brief observation. I fired off 32 shots, during which time I could make out little detail of the bird through the viewfinder, but I did see that, at least once, it appeared to catch an insect in mid air, in the fashion of a Hobby. Having secured some pictures, I grabbed my phone and called two local birders, Simon Wood and John Buchanan, both of whom live less than a mile away and in the direction the bird was heading. While on the phone and still watching the bird, it again appeared to catch an insect in mid air, but it was now gaining height as it turned south over the house and into the sun, making any plumage details impossible to discern. It then drifted off south and away.

The whole sighting had lasted no more than about three minutes. As I collected my thoughts, it puzzled me that I could not put a name to the bird. I flicked quickly through a couple of field guides, but still nothing seemed to fit and I concluded that it must have been either some dark form of Peregrine or a falconer's escaped hybrid. I was now running late and went off to my sister's.

Sunday saw me out birding and doing family things. It was therefore Sunday evening before I downloaded the pictures onto my computer for a proper look. I compared my photographs with the falcons in the old Poyser *Flight Identification of European Raptors* (Porter *et al*, 1981) and, as I turned the page and looked at the Eleonora's Falcon on plate 75, I thought "oh, it can't be – that looks just like my bird!" The structure of the juvenile looked right and, even though they were black-and-white photographs, some of the plumage details seemed to fit.

I began to question my own sanity as I zoomed in on some of the better pictures and further checked the plumage. I realised that the underwing coverts, even in the sun, were jet black! That detail alone eliminated most other options, although I could not find an illustration that quite fitted my bird: most books show only juveniles and the two forms of adults. The rusty tones to the belly and the brown wash on the cheeks led me to think the bird must be an immature dark morph. The size too, seemed right, being larger than Hobby, which I see locally, or Red-footed Falcon. The bird, in too many ways, matched Eleonora's!

The combination of the unfamiliar plumage and the structure had thrown me. The classic image of Eleonora's Falcon (which I have seen abroad, many years ago, in Mallorca) is of the long-winged, long-tailed adult, not the stockier-looking immature. Apart from its initial flight to gain height, the bird had never flapped its wings, apart from a couple of flicks to catch insects; it had just glided on open wings, so I had not seen the true flight action. Reading the literature, the feeding on insects fell into place too.

I was cautiously convinced that the bird must be an Eleonora's Falcon, though I was well aware of its extreme rarity and wondered about the possibility of a hybrid or escape of some sort.

I tried to email some of my photographs and brief details, without mentioning my ultimate thoughts, to four knowledgeable local birding friends for further opinions – still expecting them to tell me it was a hybrid. But it was late and I could not get the emails to go. Next morning, however, I finally succeeded in sending them.

Rather to my surprise, my friends agreed with my tentative conclusion, but it was still important to eliminate the possibility of it being some sort of escape or hybrid. For expert comment, Adrian Kettle kindly contacted Dick Forsman for me and emailed my photographs to him on the Wednesday morning. Adrian then phoned me at lunchtime to say he had already had a reply from Dick. "Do you want the good news or the bad news" said Adrian. "Well, go on then" I said. "Dick says: "Congratulations, the bird is indeed a second calendar-year Eleonora's Falcon; the photographs show all the relevant characters and second-years are the most common vagrant." "And the bad news, Adrian?" "Only you saw it!" he said.

My special thanks are due to Dick Forsman.

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