

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

EASTERN MARSH HARRIER IN SULAWESI

by

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On 15 April 1997 at approximately 16.30 hrs the authors sighted a large raptor flying in a northerly direction across the eastern slopes of Gunung Lokon, at an elevation of approximately 1300 m, Minahasa District, North Sulawesi (1°20'N, 124°44'E). The bird was watched for just under a minute as it flew above the volcanic crater. The bird flew steadily with occasional shallow flaps of the wings, but most of the time it glided with wings held in a shallow 'V, immediately recalling a harrier rather than the locally occurring Black Kite *Milvus migrans*. Closer inspection showed the bird to have a relatively long tail held closed, with long, parallel edged wings somewhat pointed due to the swept back primaries. These features combined with the bird's slender body and relatively small head confirmed the raptor as a harrier, a genus with which the principle author has extensive experience.

The bird had a distinctive underwing pattern, mid brown and lightly barred with the primaries showing pale bases, visible as the bird glided. This feature allowed the possibility of Spotted Harrier *Circus assimilis* to be ruled out. As the bird passed, the underparts were noted as being an unmarked brown. The head appeared all dark, although the crown was not observed. As the bird flew away, the tail was seen to be mid brown with fine black banding and the upper tail coverts showed some white feathering, visible when the bird banked. The back and upper surface of the wings were not clearly observed.

The first author was reminded of female Western Marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, by the bird's underwing pattern and general shape, although the observed tail pattern did not agree with that species. Later consultation of the literature available (MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993) showed the harrier's banded tail to be a feature shown by female or immature female Eastern Marsh harrier *C. spilonotus*. The white feathering on the upper tail coverts has also been noted as a feature sometimes displayed by females of this species, rather than Western Marsh harrier (King *et al.* 1975). The dark head suggests that the bird may have been immature, but minor plumage variations in harriers prevents the exact ageing of this individual.

The identification of this individual is further supported by information related to the species' known distribution. Although there are no previous published records of Eastern Marsh harrier for the Wallacean region, which covers Sulawesi, the Moluccas and Lesser Sunda Islands (Coates & Bishop 1997), it reaches northern Borneo (Smythies 1981) and the Philippines as a winter visitor, and its occurrence has been predicted in North Sulawesi (White & Bruce 1986). Western Marsh harrier has a more westerly distribution in Asia and does not normally winter further east than the Malay Peninsula (MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993). It seems feasible that wintering Eastern Marsh harriers occasionally

straggle as far as Sulawesi, returning to their breeding grounds in eastern Asia in the spring. The date and location of this record suggest the bird was a returning individual in the process of migrating north. A passage of Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava* took place on Gunung Lokon on !~ the same date, with over 1000 birds observed (J. Wardill, pers. obs).

References

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