

## Separating Common Buzzard and European Honey-buzzard

Despite being two of the region's commonest birds of prey, the Common Buzzard and the European Honey-buzzard are still often confused and misidentified. It is the juvenile honey-buzzard, in particular, which remains unknown to many birders and causes a lot of confusion. In fact, this is probably the most often misidentified raptor in the Western Palearctic. The explanation is probably the short period that juvenile European Honey-buzzards are available to European birders. They are visible only for a few weeks each autumn before they leave Europe, not to return again until they are in full adult plumage nearly two years later.

Buzzards in general are extremely variable, with a lot of different plumage types. While the adults and the juveniles are pretty similar in Common Buzzard, with only small differences in proportions and plumage, the situation in European Honey-buzzard is quite the opposite. Adults and juveniles are so different, in shape, proportions and plumage, that they could easily be seen as belonging to different species by the unaware. While the adult European Honey-buzzard is a most distinctive bird, with diagnostic shape and plumage, and easily told from Common Buzzard,

autumn juvenile honey-buzzards appear much more similar to Common Buzzards, especially from a distance when plumage details cannot be seen.

To an experienced observer the flat wings and the relaxed and somewhat slower wing-beats of European Honey-buzzard catches the eye, but also the habit of flying with a protruding chest and slightly lifted head in active flapping flight are good pointers compared to Common Buzzard, which always shows a kink in the wing in frontal views and the wing-action appears a bit more hurried in comparable situations. Even the silhouette of a circling juvenile European Honey-buzzard differs from Common Buzzard by its clearly pinched-in wing-base, more bulging arm and clearly narrower hand, fuller tail and with wings pressed more forward in full soar. *The diagnostic difference is found in the underwing pattern, where the barring of the remiges, as well as the markings of the coverts, are clearly different between the species.* For closer encounters, it is worth remembering the juvenile honey-buzzard's bright yellow bill with just a dark tip, and its dark brown eye, while young Common Buzzards show less yellow on the bill-base and the iris is often a lighter brown with a clearly visible black pupil.

## Identification of *Buteo* buzzards

The *Buteo* buzzards are a challenging group to identify. The huge individual plumage variation within each species is further complicated by notable geographical variation between populations of the same species, added to plumage variation depending on age and sex.

Although the nominate Common Buzzard *B. b. buteo* is a highly variable bird, the major identification problem is distinguishing Steppe Buzzard *B. b. vulpinus* and Long-legged Buzzard *B. rufinus*, which in some plumages can be practically identical. In this particular case the size and structure of the bird are even more important to note than details of plumage. Some first-year birds can be almost identical

Important details to register are:

- the age of the bird
- general colour of upperparts and underparts, with special attention to the actual colour of the light and dark areas
- colour and pattern of lesser underwing-coverts (patagium)
- colour of uppertail and type of barring
- iris colour
- structure of feet and bill

## Identification of *Buteo* hybrids

Identifying any interspecific hybrid between two *Buteo* buzzards would be a difficult, if not an impossible, task owing to the immense plumage variation within each species. Perhaps because of this variation and the similarity of different species, possible hybrids may have gone undetected, as very few documented cases are known. To date, hybrids between Rough-legged Buzzard and Common Buzzard (*sensu lato*) are known, with one documented case each for Norway and Finland. In both cases the mixed pair successfully managed to fledge young. In Hungary Long-legged and Common Buzzards are known to have hybridised, and in Italy and Spain mixed pairs between Common and (Atlas) Long-legged Buzzards have bred successfully raising chicks. From further afield, outside our region, mixed pairs between Long-legged Buzzard and Upland Buzzard *B. hemilasius* occur quite frequently where the two species meet.

A presumed hybrid *Buteo* buzzard should look somehow odd, not matching any described taxon of buzzard, and should preferably combine features of two parental species or taxa. It goes without saying that such a hybrid would escape the notice of most birders as 'just another buzzard'. In fact, most proven cases of *Buteo* hybridisation are based on nest-finds, where the identity of the breeding adults has been confirmed. The plumages of the known hybrids between Common and Rough-legged Buzzards have been very similar to certain pale juveniles of Common Buzzard, but the tarsi have been half-feathered. In the field these

hybrids are likely to be identified as Common Buzzards, as would probably be hybrids between Common and Long-legged Buzzard. For images of presumed hybrids between Common Buzzard and Atlas Long-legged Buzzard see the Atlas Long-legged Buzzard.

### References

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