

# On the status of the Nicobar Sparrowhawk *Accipiter butleri* on Great Nicobar Island, India

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The Nicobar Sparrowhawk *Accipiter butleri* is presently considered to comprise two distinct races, the nominate on Car Nicobar, northern Nicobar Islands, and *A. b. obsoletus* on Katchal and Camorta in the central Nicobars (Richmond 1902, Abdulali 1968 and 1978; Ali and Ripley 1983). However, a single juvenile female (BMNH 1909.10.28.2) labelled as having been collected on Great Nicobar Island by B. B. Osmaston on 21 April 1905, has been identified for many years as this species (Abdulali 1968, 1978). This specimen, which is well-illustrated in Grimmett *et al.* (1999: Plate 66, figs. 3e, 3f) has been thought likely to represent an undescribed race of *Accipiter butleri* that differs conspicuously from the few known juveniles of *A. butleri* in its mainly brown rather than rufous coloration. No other specimens have come to light from Great Nicobar, despite subsequent collecting expeditions there. However, numerous recent sight records of *Accipiter butleri* exist from Great Nicobar (Sankaran 1998).

When examining the single specimen of this putative new taxon, contrary to expectations I found it to be a misidentified Besra *Accipiter virgatus*. In plumage it closely matches three juveniles of the Andaman race of Besra (BMNH 1885.8.19.687-689), *A. v. abdulalii* Mees 1980 with which it was directly compared, and it is similar in size to the four Andamans females measured: two adults; BMNH 1885.8.19.688-690, and two juveniles; AMNH 533912). In fact, no salient differences are evident that would allow its diagnosis at the subspecific level, especially given that there is only one Besra specimen from Great Nicobar, and that a juvenile. While the Great Nicobar specimen is definitely a Besra, further material would be required for a final judgement on its identity with the Andamans race.

In addition to the obvious colour differences, the Great Nicobar specimen differs from juveniles of *A. b. butleri* in its broadly, heavily dark-banded tail. While the juvenile plumage of *A. b. obsoletus* is not known with certainty, a subadult at the USNM shows remnants of a bright rufous juvenile plumage (as for the nominate). Compared with all ages and races of *A. butleri*, the Great Nicobar specimen has a different wing formula, noticeably longer primary projection, heavily banded underwings, and a differently shaped bill and cere. In all these characters, it matches Andaman Besras.

In a book of extracts from his diary (edited after his death by one of his sons), Osmaston (1977) had written "I had always been very anxious to visit" the Nicobars, and that in the spring on 1907 he was finally able to do so. The wording strongly implies that he had not been to the Nicobars prior to that date, although the Besra is dated 1905. However, Osmaston had acquired at least two other Nicobars birds in his collection prior to that date: a Nicobar Parakeet *Psittacula caniceps* (BMNH 1909.10.28.7; dated ?/4/05, from "Great Nicobar"),

which based on feather condition appeared likely to have been a captive; and a juvenile Slaty-breasted Rail *Gallirallus striatus obscurior* (BMNH 1909.10.28.4; dated 1904, from "Nicobars", apparently acquired from C. W. B. Anderson). Any of these three could have been brought either alive or as specimens to Osmaston while he was in the Andamans. However, the possibility that the Great Nicobar Besra was accidentally mislabelled either as to date or locality cannot yet be ruled out. Other minor anomalies (such as confusion among dates) involving specimens in Osmaston's collection have previously been noted (M. P. Walters pers. comm., H. Osmaston *in litt.*; Rasmussen 1998), and Osmaston's original diaries were evidently destroyed or lost. Given the possibility of error involving the labelling of Osmaston's specimen, the existence of Besra in the Nicobars requires further confirmation. The species would be expected there, as it occurs both in the Andamans and in Sumatra. It is shown as occurring in the Nicobars by Kazmierczak and van Perlo (2000).

With the reidentification of the sole Great Nicobar *A. butleri* specimen as a Besra, the occurrence of the former species in the southern Nicobars is evidently based solely on undocumented sight records. However, other *Accipiter* species including Chinese Sparrowhawk *Accipiter soloensis* and Japanese Sparrowhawk *A. gularis* definitely occur on the Nicobars, and they and/or the Besra may account for sight records of *A. butleri* on Great Nicobar. If it can be confirmed that *A. butleri* does indeed occur on Great Nicobar, it would be important to determine which (if either) of the two quite different-looking races are involved. One would predict on geographical grounds that it would be *obsoletus*, which is very pale and greyish below, virtually lacks the mesial throat streak, and has red eyes. Especially given the range-restricted, near-threatened status of this species, the burden of proof must be on unequivocal establishment of the occurrence of *Accipiter butleri* on Great Nicobar, which is well-separated from the documented portion of the species's range.

I thank especially R. P. Prys-Jones, and also G. H. Osmaston, M. P. Walters, W. S. Clark, and M. P. Adams for assistance and information. The following museums provided access to specimens of *Accipiter butleri*: American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), New York; The Natural History Museum (BMNH), Tring, UK; the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), Mumbai; and the National Museum of Natural History (USNM), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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## Correction to *Forktail* 14

B. S. Fletcher (1998, *Forktail* 14: 80-81) described a breeding record of Minahassa Owl *Tyto inexpectata* from Dumoga-Bone National Park, Sulawesi, Indonesia. We have received several responses pointing out that the site described is known as a regular breeding site of a pair of Sulawesi Owls *T. rosenbergii*, and it is therefore highly likely that the birds seen and heard were actually of the latter species. The identification literature available at the time of BSF's visit was not very comprehensive,

but more recent publications have clarified the differences between the two species. It does appear that an identification error was made and we feel that this record should now be treated as very doubtful. The field characters and vocalizations of the poorly known Minahassa Owl have been further elucidated in this issue by I. Mauro and R. Drijvers, but its breeding behaviour remains unknown.