

Are dark morph Rough-legged Hawks overlooked in Europe?

Jens-Kjeld Jensen

The question has twice been posed in *Birding World* (in 15: 348 & 16: 458): Are dark morph American Rough-legged Hawks overlooked in Europe? (See also Mullarney & Murphy 2005, which details the status of this form in the Western Palearctic.) Well, the answer seems to be... yes!

A dark morph Rough-legged Hawk came aboard a fishing boat in international waters west of the Grand Bank (at c.55°N 48°W, about 350 miles east of Newfoundland) on 13th September 2003. It was taken into captivity and handed in to care when the boat finally docked at Torshavn, Faeroe Islands, on 24th October 2003 (*Birding World* 16: 456 & 458).

It was then kept in captivity on the Faeroe Islands until May 2006. It had long been planned to release it, but it was considered that the bird would have a poor chance of survival on the Faeroe Islands and that it would have a much better chance if it was released near Shetland. The bird's caretaker eventually

took the ferry from the Faeroe Islands to Denmark in May 2006, so that he could release the bird himself. He released it from the ferry immediately east of the Isle of Noss, Shetland (five miles east of Lerwick, and the other side of Bressay) at 4.00am on 5th May.

The bird was kept in a small box on the ferry, and a few of its feathers were inevitably damaged before it was released. Before its release, its jesses were removed and it was fitted with a metal bird ring from the Zoological Museum of Denmark.

Whilst perusing the internet a couple of days later, Hans Eli Sivertsen noticed some photographs taken by John Coutts on Shetland on 6th May and labelled as Common Buzzard. However, Hans noticed the feather damage and quickly realised that it was, in fact, our Rough-legged Hawk!

References

Mullarney, K. & Murphy, J. 2005. The Rough-legged Hawk in Ireland. *Birding World* 18: 503-504.

Jens-Kjeld Jensen, Faeroe Islands.

Plates 1 & 2. Dark morph Rough-legged Hawk *Buteo lagopus sanctijohannis*, in captivity, Torshavn, Faeroe Islands, October 2003 (*Jens-Kjeld Jensen*), left, and 4th May 2006 (*Age Davidsen*). This bird was caught on a fishing boat east of the Grand Bank, Newfoundland, on 13th September 2003 and taken to Torshavn, Faeroe Islands, where it was looked after in captivity from October 2003 until May 2006, when it was released off Shetland.





Plates 3-8. Adult dark morph Rough-legged Hawk *Buteo lagopus sanctijohannis*, Shetland, May 2006, the Knab, Lerwick, 6th May (*John Coutts*, Plates 3-7) and Wester Quarff (five miles south of Lerwick), 14th May (*Billy Smith*). Clearly, this was the released bird from the Faeroe Islands (note the damaged head feathers and the metal ring). It was found at Lerwick the same day it was released off the Isle of Noss. It remained there next day, and was subsequently seen by crofter Billy Smith, feeding on a dead lamb on his croft at Wester Quarff, five miles south of Lerwick. No further sightings were reported. Common Buzzard is a very scarce passage migrant in Shetland and, in the last 35 years at least, it has been sighted only twice as often as Rough-legged Buzzard. Dark morph buzzards are not always what they seem though and, in these photographs, it is the feathered tarsi which give the game away. Note also the in-flight proportions of this Rough-legged Hawk, its plain brown underparts and the all-dark underwing-coverts. The tail shows a broad dark terminal bar and a pale base which is obscured by just three or four wide dark bars.

Several species of North American raptor have been proven to reach Europe, but European birders are rarely primed to identify them. Birds such as Taiga Merlin and Marsh Hawk, for example, may slip past the unwary. Because pale morph Rough-legged Hawk so closely resembles Rough-legged Buzzard, it is inevitable that some of the former will go unnoticed, while dark

morphs (frequent in *sanctijohannis* but unknown in *lagopus*) can - and do (as demonstrated here) - easily masquerade as Common Buzzards.

Eds.

Jensen, J.-K. Are dark morph Rough-legged Hawks overlooked in Europe? 2006. *Birding World* 19 (??): ??????????. 