

# On the migration of raptors through Yemen

by Max Kasperek

**Abstract:** On 9 October, 1992, over 3,000 migrating Steppe Buzzards *Buteo buteo vulpinus* together with smaller numbers of other raptors were observed over the Yemeni Tihamah, apparently escaping from a thunderstorm. This observation provides evidence that the flight path of soaring birds in Yemen extends over the entire Tihamah which runs parallel to the Red Sea coast and is mostly between 40 and 70 km broad.

**Kurzfassung:** Am 9. Oktober 1992 wurden über 3.000 Steppenbussarde, *Buteo buteo vulpinus*, beobachtet, die zusammen mit einigen anderen Arten in der jemenitischen Tihamah nach Süden zogen. Sie wichen offenbar einem Gewitter aus. Die Beobachtung gibt einen Hinweis darauf, daß sich der Zug der gleitfliegenden Großvögel im Jemen über die ganze Breite der parallel zur Rotmeerküste verlaufenden Tihamah (meist 40 bis 70 km breit) erstreckt.

**Key words:** Raptors, *Buteo*, migration, flight path, Yemen, Middle East.

## Introduction

The Bab el-Mandab, on the crossroads of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula and at the narrowest point of the Red Sea, is thought to be one of the world's important bottlenecks for migrating raptors: WELCH & WELCH (1989, 1992) established through counts in Djibouti in 1984 and 1987 that significant numbers cross the straits, particularly of Steppe Buzzards *Buteo buteo vulpinus* and Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis*. They counted 16,700 Steppe Buzzards and 61,000 Steppe Eagles over 17 days in October and November 1985, and 98,400 Steppe Buzzards, 29,900 unidentified Buzzards, and 76,600 Steppe Eagles over 38 days in October and November 1987. A total of 27 raptor species was recorded as using this migration route (see also WELCH & WELCH 1988).

However, our knowledge of raptor migration on the Arabian side of Bab el-Madab is far from adequate. Although there are some observations of migrating raptors, they are sporadic and do not include large numbers of migrants. It was therefore one of the major aims of two expeditions of the *Ornithological Society of the Middle East* to the Yemen in 1985 and 1993 to document the migration of raptors and other large soaring birds (RANDS et al. 1987, PORTER, MARTINS & STONE 1996). Although some evidence of large-scale migration was obtained and is summarised by PORTER & CHRISTENSEN (1987), no substantial information could be obtained (see also PORTER, MARTINS, SHAW & SØRENSEN 1996).

This paper reports the observation of a mass migration of raptors through Yemen in autumn, which may fill in a further piece in the puzzle of raptor migration from the Middle East into Africa.

## Records

In the early afternoon of 9 October, 1992, I observed approximately 3,000 Steppe Buzzards at Bayt al-Faqih, in the Tihamah between Al Hodaydah and Zabid. They were circling in a single flock above the town, and continued straight towards the south after a while. Among them were 20 Steppe Eagles, one Booted Eagle, *Hieraetus pennatus*, and four Sparrowhawks *Accipiter* sp. In addition, approximately 50 Black Kites, *Milvus migrans*, and eight Egyptian Vultures, *Neophron percnopterus*, were circling with the other raptors, but they did not join the group to the south and are thus thought to have been residents.

When I continued my journey to the south, I recorded a further ten Steppe Buzzards and one Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* some 10 km south of Bayt al Faqih.

The weather was hot and sunny. No clouds were present in the sky. However, a thunderstorm came up suddenly about one hour after the observation, resulting in extraordinarily heavy rainfall. Although the rain lasted less than an hour, many human settlements, roads and agricultural fields were inundated and seriously damaged. Once the rain stopped, the clouds disappeared immediately and the sun came out again.

After the thunderstorm, I again observed a flock of 20 Steppe Buzzards migrating south, between Hays and Al Khawkhah.

## Discussion

The observation of such a large flock of migrating raptors was apparently directly linked with the thunderstorm which came up shortly after the observation. The thunderstorm “pushed” the raptors forward, and they were escaping from the adverse weather conditions.

Previous records of large flocks of migrating raptors were recorded at Al Luhayyah, Mafraq al Mukha, At Turbah (PHILLIPS 1982). 2,500 migrating Steppe Eagles were recorded in the Tihamah foothills (no exact locality given) (PORTER & CHRISTENSEN 1987). All these places are located in the Tihamah or in the adjacent foothills. These observations provide evidence that the western foothills running along the edge of the Tihamah towards the Bab el Mandab provide some flight path for migrating raptors, but do not concentrate migrating soaring birds. Migrating raptors may well migrate all over the entire Tihamah, which is mostly between 40 and 70 km broad. Observers may thus easily miss migrating flocks of soaring birds, and this may explain the scarcity of observations.

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