

A Zebra Finch is perched on a grey, leafless branch. The bird has a grey head with a prominent orange cheek patch and a bright red beak. Its body is white with a black and white striped pattern on its wings and back, and a brown and white speckled pattern on its chest. The background is a soft, out-of-focus brownish-green.

Bowra Station

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY JOHN BARKLA

Zebra Finch

28 June 2008. About 12 months ago, Elizabeth Lloyd told me of her visit to Bowra Station in south-west Queensland with the Nissan 4WD Club and encouraged me to go there. Then a few weeks ago, Xenia Dennett showed me great photos of a family group of Grey Falcons she had taken at Bowra a week or so earlier. That was the incentive for me to go there over the past two weeks. I let Elizabeth know I was going and she and her husband, Peter, joined me for four of the nine days I was there.

Bowra Station formerly covered a much larger area but has been carved up over the years and is now only about 14,500 h. The Cunnamulla airport and the golf course are both on what was part of the station. It is about ten kilometres north-west of Cunnamulla in what I would describe as mainly dry Mulga habitat. There are other vegetation types, but I do not know how to describe them: open woodland with rocky outcrops and large areas of eremophila (emu bush) is a rough approximation. The vegetation is remarkably intact, although there is evidence of some paddocks being bulldozed to feed the stock during the drought. The Station is close to the Warrego River and when the river floods, as it has recently, much of the property benefits. When I was there, surface water was still present in some of the creek beds and in other low lying areas. There is also a flowing bore (which I was told is to be capped in accordance with Government directives aimed at conserving artesian water) with a bore drain flowing a few kilometres. This water was a magnet for many, many thousands of birds.

Despite driving 1300+ km to get there and a considerable effort while there, I did not see the Grey Falcons—they moved away from the known sites when they finished nesting. I was not too disappointed because I did see:

- 125 of the 212 bird species recorded on the property.
- Hundreds of Plumed Whistling-Ducks.

- Evidence of Great Cormorant and possibly Darter nests at Gumholes Waterhole.
- A staggering 14 raptors:- Black-shouldered Kite (only a few, and sadly no Letter-winged Kites), Black Kite (not many on the property, but hundreds en route), Whistling Kite (a few); Square-tailed Kite (only one, but fantastic as it robbed Zebra Finch nests less than 20 m from us); Black-breasted Buzzard (only one, but again—wow!); Brown Goshawk (hard to count this skulker, but many were seen chasing Diamond Doves and Zebra Finches); Collared Sparrowhawk (many great views of this very approachable raptor); Wedge-tailed Eagle (2); Little Eagle (2); Spotted Harrier (about ten on the property, but many more between Cobar and Cunnamulla); Brown Falcon (dozens); Black Falcon (hard to estimate the number, but one day I saw three at one time); Australian Hobby (dozens feeding on Zebra Finches) and Nankeen Kestrel (20+).
- Seven Brolgas (also seen and heard on other days, so possibly more than seven) in incredibly unlikely habitat.
- Probably three or four separate pairs of Australian Bustards.
- Red-chested (only one) and Little (about 50) Button-quails.
- Waders in an area that would be dry in more years than not—Black-winged Stilt, Black-fronted and Red-kneed Dotterels and Masked Lapwing.
- Thousands of Diamond Doves.
- Ten species of parrot including about 30 Major Mitchell's Cockatoos, ten Cockatiels (plus more than 100 en route), Red-winged Parrot, Blue Bonnet, Mulga Parrot, Budgerigar and around 15 Bourke's Parrots.
- All of the nocturnal species recorded for the property



Top: Spotted Nightjar, **Above Left:** Redthroat, **Above Right:** Barn Owl

(except Barking Owl)—Barn Owl, Southern Boobook, Tawny Frogmouth, Spotted Nightjar and Australian Owlet-nightjar—all of which I photographed.

- Red-backed Kingfisher.
- White-browed and Brown Treecreepers.
- A male Redthroat.
- Red-browed Pardalote.
- Striped, White-fronted, Black and Painted Honeyeaters. We missed Grey-headed which was there and Pied which had apparently been present two weeks earlier.
- 50-100 Crimson Chats, all in eclipse plumage, unfortunately.
- Lots of very photogenic Red-capped Robins and impossible-to-photograph Hooded Robins.
- Hall's, Grey-crowned and Chestnut-crowned Babblers.
- Chestnut-breasted Quail-thrushes.
- A pair of beautiful Ground Cuckoo-shrikes (which I succeeded in photographing).
- Lots of Spotted Bowerbirds.
- Double-barred (only three) and Plum-headed (about 60) Finches.
- And finally, the most special of all, maybe 50-100,000 Zebra Finches (there were certainly many tens of thousands).

I did not see Flock Bronzewing, but could have if I had wanted to drive a few kilometres to the north, as they had been on the Station a few weeks before I arrived.

In all I managed to photograph 66 species—a most pleasing result for only nine days.

I would strongly recommend everyone making a visit. The accommodation is either camping under a magnificent sky (which I enjoyed for \$10.00 per night), the shearers' quarters (clean and very adequate at \$30.00 per night) or a cottage (\$80.00 for 2).

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The Magic Faraway Tree

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY DR XENIA DENNETT AND
SUSAN ABBOTTS

The 'magic' Leopardwood Tree containing all four roosting Grey Falcons. Taken with 70 mm lens.

The Grey Falcon *Falco hypoleucos* has always been considered rare, for many of us it is almost 'mythical', so when Marilyn Dyer rang saying she was observing both adults and their two fledged young, we were galvanised into action. Whether from Benalla, Fraser Island, Melbourne or Perth, it seemed all roads led to Bowra Station, south-west Queensland.

A short time after arriving at Bowra, Kathy Costello and I saw a juvenile Grey Falcon perched on a dead branch and later, an adult bird high in the sky disappearing into the sun, just like a puff of smoke—after all they were once called the Smoke Hawk. Over the next few days we returned to a 'roost tree' area without any further sightings. One morning a bird made a single low pass directly overhead as we stood near a waterhole. But Sue and Helen Clark, who had arrived several days earlier, still had not seen the Falcons.

Sue takes up the story: "On Thursday 23 May at approximately 0900 hrs we travelled yet again along the track looking for the elusive Grey Falcon. This was our third day of looking for them without success and clearly the birds had moved from their known roost tree to somewhere else. We drove slowly down the road stopping at everything that could possibly be a Grey Falcon—Crested Pigeon, a pair of Black-shouldered Kites and Nankeen Kestrels. We then birded around the area and retraced our steps back to the homestead. At 10.30 am I saw two white dots sitting side by side on a horizontal branch, about 30 cm above the ground and 100-150 m away. The ground between the car and the two dots was bare and we could just see with binoculars that they were likely to be the Grey Falcons. We started walking toward them and they flew up to the left and out of sight. They were almost definitely the elusive Falcons. We carefully walked through a small patch of trees and could see a tall single tree standing by itself about 100 m away, with the Falcons in it. They were quite cryptic, sitting in the middle of the canopy. Retrieving the scope from the car, we saw first one, then two, then a third Falcon roosting close together. Finally, the

fourth Falcon, the juvenile male, was located to the left of the other three.

"Everyone at the camp and the owners of the station gathered to look through the scopes as we watched and photographed them for about 45 minutes. While they kept their eyes on us, they appeared to be unconcerned at our distant presence and we could even see the juvenile male's closed eyelids as he dozed."

The Grey Falcon, found in arid and semi-arid areas where rainfall is less than 500 mm, is endemic to Australia. Medium-sized, the Falcon has a heavy, thickset and deep chest. Being sexually dimorphic in size, the female (falcon) is more than 1.5 times heavier than the male (tiercel), 600 compared with 350 gm. Adult birds are grey above and almost white below (*hypoleucos*), a faint but dark malar stripe, a yellow cere and orbital ring, bill tipped black with a yellow base and yellow-orange legs and feet. The juvenile birds are darker grey above and almost white below, with faint streaks on breast and some spots on flanks, a darker malar stripe and have a pale grey cere and orbital ring, bill pale blue-grey at base with dark tip and dull yellow legs and feet. Cupper and Cupper (1981) suggested the cere gradually turns yellow during the first year, and the orbital skin is likely to change at the same rate. Photographs show the young Bowra birds have pale yellow cere and orbital ring and yellow-orange feet, so they are somewhat older juveniles.

All birds have a long middle toe, which is considered by some (Olsen & Olsen 1986) to be an adaptation for catching fast-moving prey, especially birds. Almost 90% of the Grey Falcon's diet consists of birds, especially grainivorous species such as pigeons and parrots. Mainly hunting early in the morning and late afternoon, the birds often loaf during the day and typically rest on one leg, the other tucked up in the feathers.

Their cryptic colouration, even in dead trees, provides camouflage when perched—and we can certainly agree with that! Whilst their preferred hunting strategy is the dive and

stoop attack; direct flying attack, low transect flying and even paired cooperative hunting are also used. By direct pouncing they will pluck and eat prey on the ground.

Anecdotal accounts from several observers at Bowra recounted the adult birds “driving away the juveniles, especially the young male”. One recounted an adult bird “screaming at and directly attacking one young bird, driving it to the ground”. It was suggested that the young were being driven away from their natal territory. However, we are unable to find any specific references in the literature to this behaviour by Grey Falcons.

The period of dependency for Grey Falcons is not known, but Olsen (1982) says their dependency “appears to be extended, perhaps until the next breeding effort of the adults”. This may be an adaptation to harsh life in the arid environment. Penny Olsen (1982), referring to Peregrine Falcon, a congener, says fledglings may remain in parental territory up to nine months after fledging. There appear to be no definite statements concerning Peregrine adults driving young away (Marchant & Higgins 1993). Jones and Bren (1978), referring to Peregrines say, “The factors responsible for the departure of the young falcons from their nesting area are unknown but we suspect that they are related to increased aggression by the adults towards their young”, but offer no evidence. Brown (1976), when referring to Peregrine Falcons in the UK, states, “the young separate from their parents in autumn, but there is, so far as I know, no evidence to support the common statement that they are driven away”.

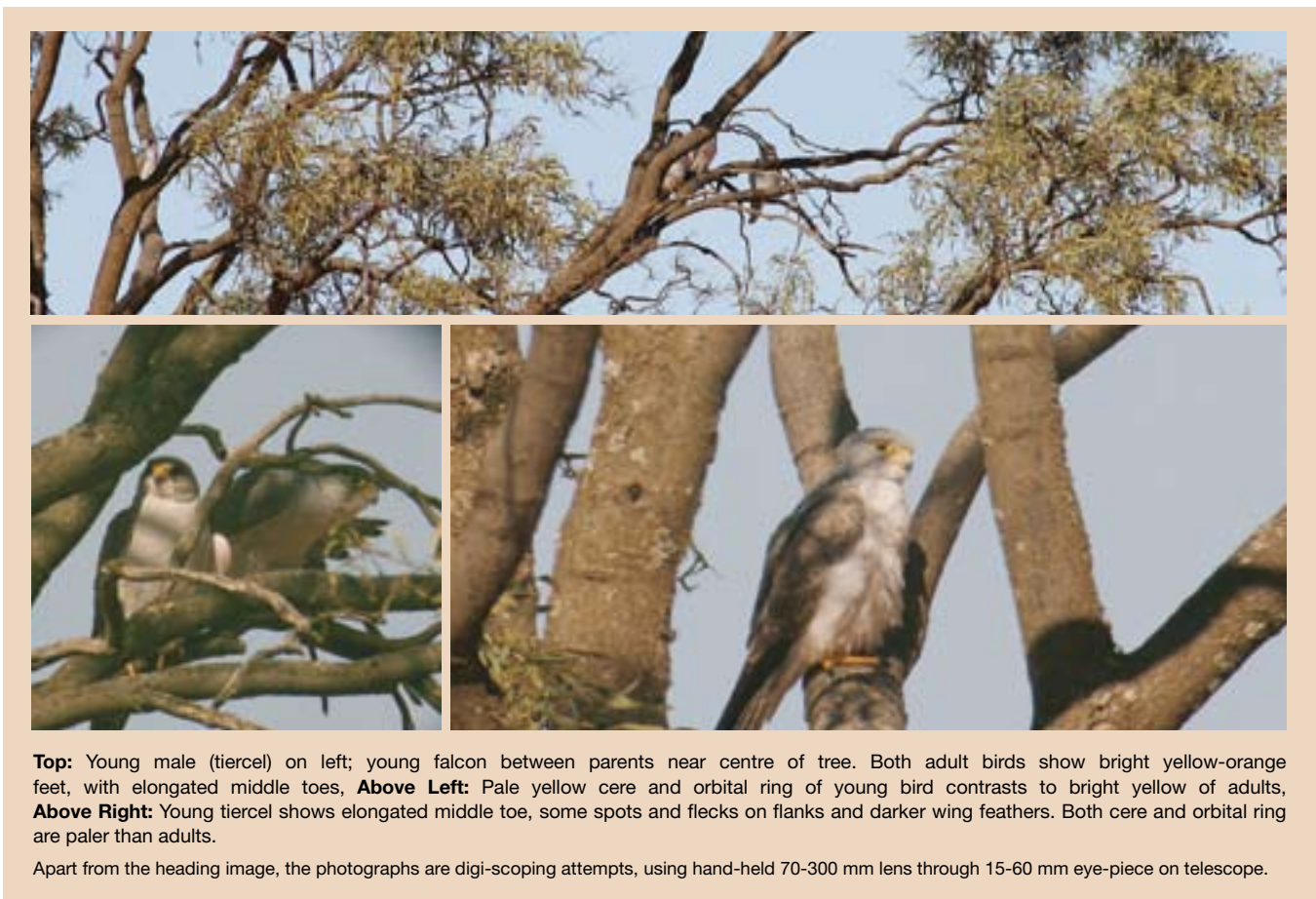
So what do these apparently very threatening, even aggressive behaviours mean? Are they evidence of family rupture and parent-offspring conflict, true aggression, training

techniques with display screams, boisterous play (Hollands, 1984), or something else, and is the distance of separation of the young tiercel from the others of significance? Observations on family dynamics are rare, but Bowra, with its wealth of habitats and birdlife, offers a magnificent opportunity for further field research on this elusive and enigmatic species.

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Top: Young male (tiercel) on left; young falcon between parents near centre of tree. Both adult birds show bright yellow-orange feet, with elongated middle toes, **Above Left:** Pale yellow cere and orbital ring of young bird contrasts to bright yellow of adults, **Above Right:** Young tiercel shows elongated middle toe, some spots and flecks on flanks and darker wing feathers. Both cere and orbital ring are paler than adults.

Apart from the heading image, the photographs are digi-scoping attempts, using hand-held 70-300 mm lens through 15-60 mm eye-piece on telescope.