

Short communications

Comments on the type specimen of *Falco rupicoloides arthuri* (Gurney) in the Natural History Museum, Tring, United Kingdom

The Greater Kestrel *Falco rupicoloides* is currently represented in southern, eastern and northeastern Africa by three forms: nominate *F.r. rupicoloides* Smith, *F.r. arthuri* Gurney and *F.r. fieldi* Elliot. The type specimen of *arthuri*, from Mombasa in coastal Kenya, and well outside the range of all, is discussed here, with additional comments on *fieldi* and the nominate form.

Around 1880, a kestrel *Falco* sp. was obtained in Mombasa, Kenya by the missionary schoolteacher John William Handford, who sent it to the Rev. Fowell Arthur Buxton (1851–1881) who had earlier worked at the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Mission at Rabai, just north of Mombasa town. In turn, Buxton presented the specimen to the Norwich Castle Museum, in Norfolk, England where it soon came to the attention of J. H. Gurney Snr. who, in his *List of Diurnal Birds of Prey* (1884: 156) described it as the holotype of a new species he named *Tinnunculus arthuri* in honour of his late relative the Rev. Arthur Buxton. The Norwich Castle Museum collection was later purchased by the British Museum (Natural History) (now the Natural History Museum), where this specimen is currently housed in its bird collection at Tring, Hertfordshire (specimen NHMUK 1955.6.N.20.1215).

The type specimen clearly presented Gurney with several identification problems, who commented that, while it came nearest to Greater Kestrel *Tinnunculus rupicoloides* in its markings, its much smaller size separated it from that species (Fig. 1). Gurney compared it to *T. alaudarius* (an early name for the migratory Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*), but it had a much shorter wing compared to that form. However, it would appear from Gurney (1881) and later comments in his *Diurnal Birds of Prey*, that *T. alaudarius* (European Kestrel) was his first choice.

Just how the bird was obtained is unknown. Handford did collect a few birds (Gurney 1881) around his school for Buxton, but this falcon was the most notable of his acquisitions. Certainly, in those days few people travelled far from Mombasa or indeed inland away from the CMS Mission compound, but under what circumstances Handford acquired the falcon may forever remain a mystery, as Mombasa is an extremely unlikely and totally unexpected locality for *Falco rupicoloides*.

While first-year migratory Common Kestrels *F. tinnunculus* are periodically recorded in the Mombasa area, the Greater Kestrel *F. rupicoloides* has never been recorded within several hundred kilometres of the coast, being very much a bird of open savannas. Nominate southern African birds are reportedly non-breeding season wanderers, but there is no evidence that any have ever occurred at Mombasa. The nearest known localities for *F. rupicoloides* are the grasslands south of Nairobi, Amboseli National Park and around Moshi and Arusha in northern Tanzania.

Given that this specimen posed an identification challenge for such an expert as Gurney, together with its occurrence in an area where *F. rupicoloides* has never been

recorded, it is possible that the specimen may have originated from Somalia, having reached Mombasa by dhow, as trade along the coast by dhow was common practice at the time. Ash & Miskell (1998) describe *F.r. fieldi* as a fairly common and widespread resident in northern Somalia, but with some birds recorded in eastern coastal areas south to 2°N from 15 April to 13 December. Should this be a regular movement south then there is the possibility that this taxon might reach some Kenya coastal areas as a vagrant.



Figure 1. Holotype specimen of *Tinnunculus arthuri* (top), a *Falco rupicoloides fieldi* specimen from Somaliland (middle) and a typical *Falco r. rupicoloides* from Southern Africa (bottom) (©Mark Adams, British Museum (Natural History)).

During a recent visit to Tring, I examined the holotype of *T. arthuri* and compared it with specimens of *F. rupicoloides fieldi* (Elliot 1897) from northern Somalia. In addition to its smaller size, it was the paleness of the underparts that struck me initially. It bore little resemblance to other East African birds in the collection, or to others with which I am also familiar here, where I live, in the central Kenya Rift Valley; all these birds have much richer tawny-coloured underparts. There is some considerable barring on the sides of the breast of the holotype specimen, and some narrow streaking down to the abdomen. The crown is also heavily streaked, showing some resemblance to specimens of *Falco rupicoloides fieldi* in the collection. Elliot (1897) had described *fieldi* as “nearest to *Cerchneis rupicoloides* Smith from South Africa, but differs in being much lighter in colour generally. At first sight this bird seemed to answer to the description of *Tinnunculus arthuri* Gurney, the unique type of which is in the Norwich Museum, but on sending the specimens to J. H. Gurney to have them compared with the types, he replied that they were ‘larger than *T. arthuri*, a good deal more rufous on the breast and belly, and had not the conspicuously barred sides and flanks, which are the chief characteristics of the bird in the Norwich Museum”.

The holotype of *Tinnunculus arthuri* is held by the Natural History Museum, Tring, and two syntypes of *Cerchneis fieldi* are housed in the Field Museum, Chicago. Elliot (1897) gave the locality for a male as Silo Plain and for a female as Toyo Plain, while White (1965) followed Sclater (1924) in restricting the type locality to Silo Plain which may refer to Ban Seila, close to Hargeisa, Somaliland at 9°15' N, 43°54' E.

Both *Cerchneis fieldi* and *Tinnunculus arthuri* were named and described well over 120 years ago and, to my knowledge, there has not been a critical examination or discussion of either since then, other than a comment in Archer & Godman (1937) that

'*fieldi* is closely allied to the South African *F.r. rupicoloides* with *arthuri* an intermediate form between the two'. Meanwhile, although Zimmerman *et al.* (1996), Ash & Miskell (1998), Carswell *et al.* (2005) and Ash & Atkins (2009) together with all major world checklists recognize both *fieldi* and *arthuri* as valid subspecies, Clark & Davies (2018) feel that subspecific differences in *Falco rupicoloides* are minimal at best, and so prefer a monotypic treatment.

Given all of the above, the possibility that the type of *arthuri* may be a sub-adult *fieldi* cannot be ruled out, so the true identity of birds occurring from northern Tanzania north to Ethiopia and Somalia may only be determined following a comprehensive genetic sequencing of these two taxa.

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