

The Bockhill Booted Eagle – A Category “A” individual? Dylan Wrathall

Picture this, if you can? My brother, Simon, and myself are walking up the central highway in Mahon, Menorca, when a medium sized raptor over flies the buildings. Raising my bins, I am confidently able to identify the bird (basic plumage detail) as a pale-phase Booted Eagle (*Hieraetus pennatus*) and age the bird as an adult-type individual, based upon the well defined pale throat and general feather condition – a few of the tail and primary feathers are showing signs of wear! The date is 6th May 2000 and **significant, only, because it is the second time in my life that I had seen Booted Eagle**. The fact that I was on Menorca meant that there was no description to be written, or any question about my ability to id, or age, a blatantly obvious individual. This encounter lasted no longer than 30 seconds and I have seen several hundred more since!

Now wind back the clock! It is 11.38hrs on 28th September 1999. Jack Chantler and myself have just spent a wonderful morning, in glorious sunshine, birding the area around Bockhill Farm, St Margaret's, KENT. As we make our way back towards our cars, we stop for one last scan across the fields. In the distance, I pick out two medium/large raptors circling over Hope Point, Kingsdown – 1 mile plus away! The larger (longer winged?) of the two is obviously a Marsh Harrier (imm/female – type) being joined briefly by 2 Sparrowhawks; the other, buzzard-like, bird was much paler and defied immediate id. We were both watching through binoculars, so I volunteered to run to my car and collect my scope (2 minutes maximum)! Upon erecting my tripod/scope combo, Jack informs me that the larger, dark bird is indeed a Marsh Harrier! Bloody brilliant, what about the other bird? We relocate the bird with our bins, and then I get it in my scope. Jack is very quiet as I give the bird a first look.

. “What do you reckon?” asks Jack.

“It's an Osprey” say's I focussing the scope on the bird.

“Of course it is” says Jack then stays silent!

“Are you sure?” asks Jack, in a quizzical tone.

“No” I reply – **“No !!.... It's a F**king BOOTED EAGLE!”**

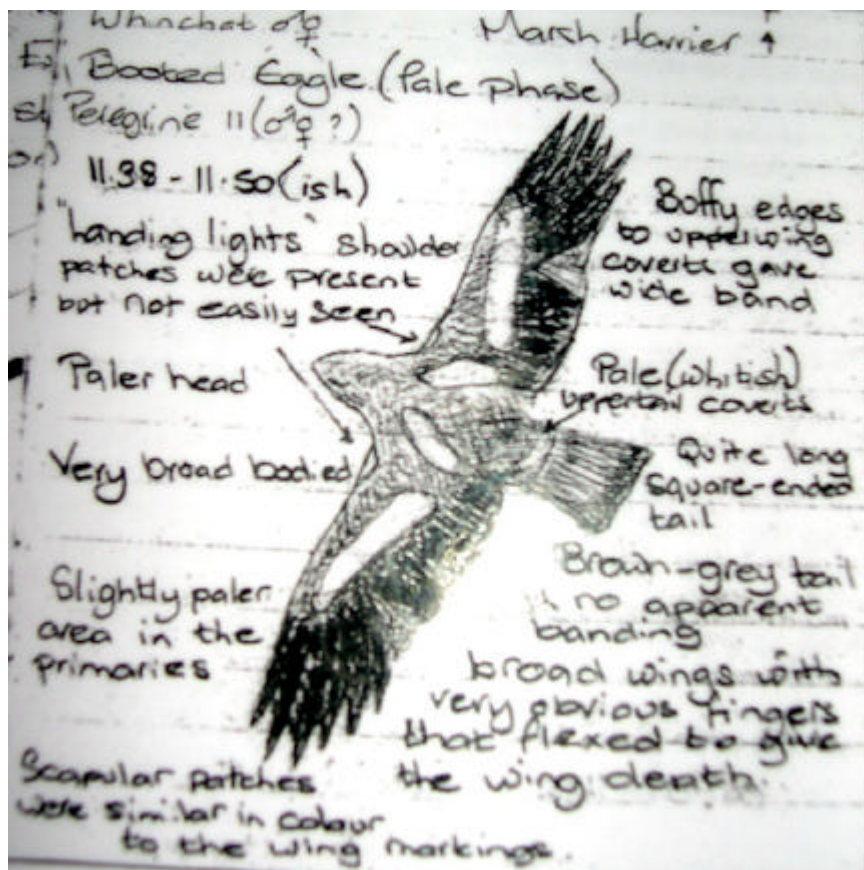
Jack & I spend the next three, or so, minutes watching the bird through our bins/my scope (Kowa TSN 823 with x30w eyepiece) as it slowly drifted closer to us from Hope Point following the valley that runs inland behind Bockhill Farm before finally heading off North – West towards the A2 and Canterbury! At the closest, the bird was probably within 300m, but for the most part it was over 1/2 mile away. Although the bird was flying at a reasonable height above the valley, from our elevated position on the field just below the Monument, we were able to

see both the upper and lower plumage details very well as the bird soared and circled its way towards us.

I was watching a "lifer", hence the dodgy shout of Osprey! Jack had seen the species before so acted as a calming influence, calling the out various id criteria we needed to note to ensure a proper record. We took turns in using the scope, whilst attempting to scribble down some field notes. Jack and I continually questioned each other on what we could actually see! A sketch (not a discipline that either of us are very accomplished in – as you can see below) was also made, outlining the features we had noted. The total time of this encounter, from first spotting to it setting off to the NW, was over 10 minutes.

Yes, I was very excited. It's moments like these that make birding such a rewarding pastime. Watching migrant raptors is always a thrill, and a rare raptor is the "cherry on the cake!" After the bird was lost from view, Jack and I had no doubts as to what species we had just witnessed, but disagreed about the age. Jack felt sure that it was an adult, whilst I was convinced that it was a juvenile.

Rich, when you consider that I had never seen one until that moment!



The sketch from my notebook 28.09.99 - drawn as we watched the bird.

How did I reach my verdict? Well, there had been a Booted Eagle in Ireland since March of 1999. Much discussion about this bird had ensued across the various Internet sites (Lee Evans' 400 Club site had a lengthy section about this individual with some very clear, well reasoned support from Steve Webb) I had

followed the debate closely and spent a long time studying the id features for this species, reading up all that I could in the various field guides I had in my library at the time, plus scanning the Internet for further info. Apart from the very obvious fact that a "pale morph" Booted Eagle is a simple bird to id, three key elements led me to my conclusion of its' age. Firstly, the feather condition was perfect. There were no signs of wear or damage on any of the major feather groups on either wings or tail, thus typical of all juvenile raptors. Secondly, and rather more important, was the fact that the bird appeared to be "hooded"! There was no white throat patch – despite the fact that "Birdwatch" Magazine carried an article, based upon a phone conversation with Jack, stating that this feature had been "**clearly**" seen! A buff colouration extended from the head towards the breast with the effect that the bird looked as if it had been dipped, headfirst, into a pot of dye! I could find no reference to this feature in any field guide until, that is, I purchased a copy of Forsman's "Raptors of Europe & Middle East. There on plate 523 was an image of a bird that matched the head pattern of the individual, we had watched at Bockhill, perfectly. Thirdly, yet I have found subsequently to be of little relevance, was the fact that I was only able to see the "landing lights" on the leading edge of the wing on one occasion as the bird flew directly towards me. Incorrectly, I also used this as a sign to age the individual. Now I have been privileged to watch many more of these birds since and this field mark, in my experience, is **never** easy to see on pale morph individuals, although it is quite obvious on the dark and intermediate coloured birds. The "Birding World" mob then managed to link the Bockhill bird into the chronological sequence of sightings of the Irish/Cornish individual and hence the Bockhill Booted Eagle was "lumped" with all the other sightings of this species.

Where does this lead from here? Well, sadly, the answer is nowhere. In spite of my protestations, Tony Marr (e-mail correspondence) and the rest of the BOURC System couldn't accept that this bird was different to the Irish, thus subsequent Cornish/West Country individual, so opted to take the easy option and place Booted Eagle in category "D". What was their problem with the Bockhill bird? We didn't have photographic evidence! Utter **Bull-sh*t!** Ever since I started birding, the emphasis on accurate and detailed field notes had been the clear directive. Even if I'd been equipped with my current digi-scoping gear, I still wouldn't have managed to get a flight image! In 1999, the cost of photographic equipment to get pictures at that range would have been phenomenal! Two key features on the Bockhill bird clearly separate it from the, much watched, Irish/West Country bird - feather condition and the hooded appearance. Photographs of the Booted Eagle in Ireland and again in Cornwall allowed the two sets of sightings to be attributed to one individual based upon the feather condition. It was **VERY OBVIOUS** that there were worn feathers in the wings and tail! Jack & I would have seen this and mentioned it as we were watching the bird, just as we questioned each other on the various markings and colouration during the encounter.

So that's the state of play today. The UK list does not have Booted Eagle in Category A, where it rightfully belongs, because those who are empowered to make the decisions are woefully short on "good faith!" Jack and I are guilty, until proven innocent, of sending in an erroneous description and field sketch. We cannot be trusted to give an accurate account of the bird and events that we had the great good fortune to witness. Why else would this record be lumped with all others during the period? It has never been judged on its' own merit, as a separate individual – which it quite clearly was. Did the BBRC and BOURC accept that we provided the details of our sighting accurately and consequently make a decision based on these details alone? The frustrating answer is clearly no and my reason for posting this article on **Planetthanet.org**

As you may be able to discern, the rejection of this bird didn't go down too well with me. That the Irish rare bird authorities were also party in the decision making process that led to its rejection, just adds to the insult. As individuals, Jack and I will not become overnight millionaires or rocket up the "good birders" rankings if this record had been accepted. No; we would still be two ordinary Kent birders who had the luck to be in the right place at the right time. No extra-ordinary skill required, just good fortune. That we were able to confidently id the species is purely because there are no confusion species for "pale morph" Booted Eagle, when seen well. I am not able to speak for Jack but I make no claims to be a particularly talented birder, just a passionate observer. Booted Eagle accepted or not, my enjoyment from birding will not be diminished. For those few wonderful minutes we had superb views and, thankfully, no one can take that away with a poor, "sitting on the fence" decision!

Dylan – December 2004 (E-mail dylandbev1@btopenworld.com)