



Illustration, Robert Allen, QM

The Pacific Baza or Crested Hawk

Each year from about early winter to mid-spring, Brisbane is treated to an 'invasion' by large numbers of a medium-sized, strikingly beautiful bird of prey - the Pacific Baza or Crested Hawk (*Aviceda subcristata*). In the wake of the first birds arriving in suburbia, numerous inquiries come from perplexed residents concerning the yellow-eyed, crested, cuckoo-like apparitions that take up residence in gardens or nearby parkland. Most encounters with the Pacific Baza during this time are of the closest kind as it is not unusual to find them perched in ornamental trees, on clothes-lines or even on the balconies of multi-storey buildings. On fine warm days single birds, pairs, or even small parties may be seen soaring effortlessly overhead.

Appearance and identification

The head, neck and upper breast of the hawk are blue-grey with a fine, blackish or dark grey crest at the back of the head. The upper wings and back are dark blue-grey, although brownish feathers are often present on the shoulders and lower wing. The lower breast is white with broad, dark brown bars. The feathers below the tail are apricot. The upper surface of the tail is blue-grey and the under surface is pale-grey. A broad blackish band is present on the upper and under surfaces of the tail near the tip (There may be a few broken bars above the terminal band). The eye is bright yellow.

A Pacific Baza can be easily distinguished from all other Australian birds of prey in flight by its barred breast, broad rounded wings with barred flight feathers and broad black terminal band on its tail. At rest, the prominent crest, yellow eyes and boldly barred breast will distinguish the Pacific Baza from all other hawks.

Voice

The call of the Pacific Baza is a mellow double whistle 'whee chu' or 'ee tiu'. The first note rises and the second falls in pitch. The call is often repeated several times, especially during breeding season display flights when Bazas are very vocal. Young birds utter a similar call, but this is less of a whistle than their parents' call. Outside the breeding season, Pacific Bazas are usually silent.

Distribution

The Pacific Baza is the sole Australian representative of a group of hawks variously known as Cuckoo Falcons, Bazas or Lizard Hawks. The former name is not inappropriate as these hawks do bear a superficial resemblance to some species of cuckoo. Pacific Bazas are found through coastal northern and eastern Australia, from near Derby in the north-west to about Sydney in the south-east, but are rarely found beyond the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range in semi-arid Australia. Little is known of their distribution through the Gulf of Carpentaria. Pacific Bazas also occur in eastern Indonesia, New Guinea and associated island groups.



Map showing distribution of the Pacific Baza

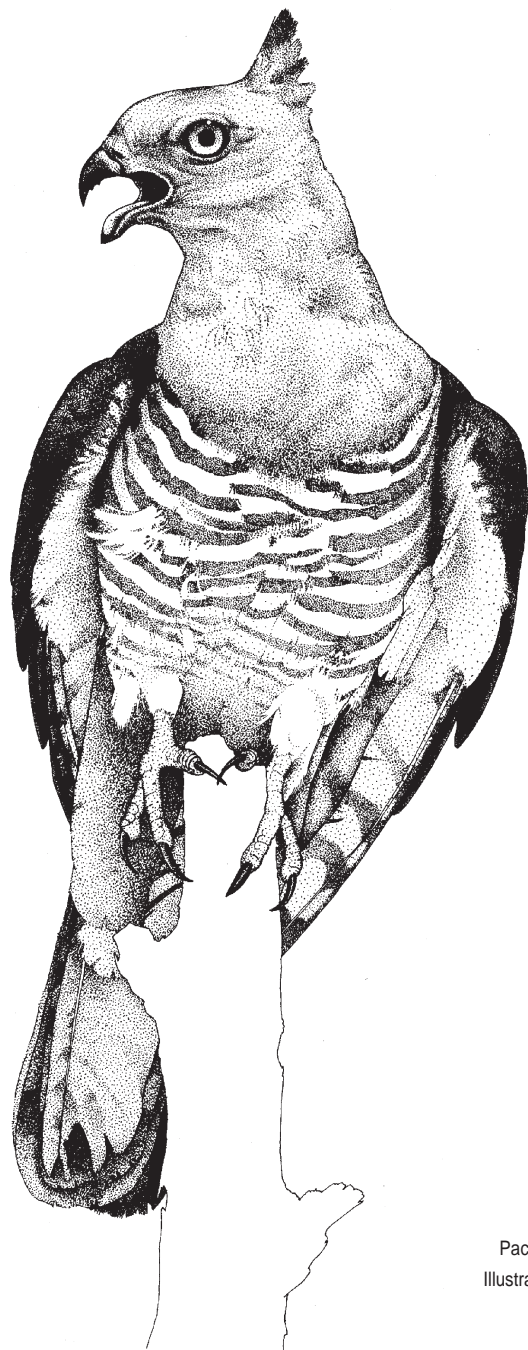
Natural history

Pacific Bazas may be encountered in a variety of habitat types ranging from rainforest to suburban gardens. It is rare, however, to find them in open, sparsely timbered or treeless areas. Invariably, Bazas sighted in such open habitats are simply local birds overflying or others in transit. During the breeding season Pacific Bazas favour tree-lined watercourses or neighbouring rainforest, sclerophyll forest or woodland. Outside the breeding season they range widely and it is during this time that they appear in town and city gardens and parks in sizeable numbers.

The Pacific Baza's diet consists of a variety of small lizards, tree-frogs and insects. On some occasions small birds, small mammals and fruit may also be taken, but insects such as preying mantids, phasmids (stick-insects) and large grasshoppers seem to be their favourite prey. Pacific Bazas feed almost exclusively in the treetops. They usually snatch prey from the outer foliage of shrubs and saplings, but will pursue larger or more active prey through the leaves and branches. It comes as no surprise to find that Pacific Bazas are highly agile and manoeuvrable in flight.

Sometimes Pacific Bazas may be seen hanging upside down with outspread wings from vines or the outermost branches of a tree's canopy while picking at nearby leaves. It seems that on these occasions, they may be feeding on insect larvae or small leaf-eating insects.

During the non-breeding season, Pacific Bazas may be secretive and difficult to locate except where local concentrations of birds occur, particularly in the coastal lowlands. During winter and early spring small parties of Pacific Bazas may be seen moving between lowland and upland areas in south-eastern Queensland. Large parties of up to about 30 birds have sometimes been observed during the March-September period. Pacific Bazas breed



Pacific Baza
Illustration QM

between October and early January depending on weather conditions. In drier times, breeding may be delayed until mid to late January. The onset of breeding will be advertised by the calls, soaring and acrobatic displays of the mated pairs. The display flights of the male Pacific Baza include a series of tumbling displays in which the male climbs steeply, stalls and briefly holds position with deep and rapid wingstrokes. The bird will then allow itself to fall with closed wings in a shallow arc only to rise again and repeat the performance. It is only rarely that the Baza will perform a complete somersault before falling through the arc, in the same manner as a 'tumbler pigeon'.

The nest is a rather flimsy, insubstantial structure, composed of small sticks lined with green leaves. Almost all nests are located on horizontal branches of very tall trees such as Flooded Gums and

angophoras. Nesting trees are usually located close to permanent watercourses, although a few nests may be located some distance from water.

Why Do Pacific Bazas Suddenly Appear In Brisbane in Winter

The reason for the marked influx of Pacific Bazas into suburban Brisbane during winter, although spectacular, is poorly understood. The 'invasion' of Brisbane and other coastal parts of south-eastern Queensland appears to coincide with their 'disappearance' from neighbouring uplands. Seasonal movements of Bazas have also been detected in other parts of eastern Queensland and around Darwin, but there is no evidence to suggest that large scale migrations occur over long distances. Observations also suggest that some birds may even remain in a given locality throughout the year (eg. Moggill-Brookfield area).

These movements of Bazas probably occur in response to changes in the availability of prey during the year. Most of the favoured prey (e.g. phasmids, mantids and tree-frogs) are subject to variations in abundance and are often less common in winter, especially at higher elevations. As a result, decreased numbers of these animals would require the Bazas to move to localities where hunting is easier.

Further information

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