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Field Identification of the Rufous-bellied Eagle *Hieraaetus kienerii*

WILLIAM S. CLARK and N. JOHN SCHMITT

The Rufous-bellied Eagle *Hieraaetus kienerii* is a fairly common resident of humid evergreen forests of India and South-East India, including Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Very little has been written about this eagle's behaviour and field identification. From our field experience in India, we find it a distinctive raptor that is easily recognised whether perched or flying. Field marks are presented that will facilitate identification of this small eagle, particularly of distant flying birds.

The Rufous-bellied Eagle shares the aerial hunting habits of its congeners: African Hawk-Eagle *H. spilogaster*, Bonelli's Eagle *H. fasciatus*, Booted Eagle *H. pennatus* and Little Eagle *H. morphnoides*. In flight, however, the wing and tail shape and pattern of Rufous-bellied Eagle are more like those of buzzards (especially Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*) (Figure 1), and are quite unlike that of the other species in the genus. We are unaware of any field guide in which its wing shape has been correctly depicted.

Adult and juvenile plumages are quite different (Figure 1) and are described below. Transitional birds can show a variety of intermediate plumages.

Flying adults appear mostly black, grey and white below when seen from a distance (Figure 1); the white breast and face pattern is suggestive of Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*. The rufous colour of the adult's underparts is usually seen only on close birds under good light conditions. Perched adults show a short crest and distinctive black, white and rufous coloration.

Flying juveniles appear mostly white below, with distinctive black marks on the face, sides of the upper breast and on the flanks. Viewed head-on, the leading edge of the inner wing appears white. The secondaries of distant flying birds appear somewhat darker than the rest of the underwing. Perched juveniles show a face pattern like that of an Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, and white underparts with dark marks on the sides of the upper breast and on the flanks.

Adults and juveniles in flight appear uniformly dark above except for distinctive pale primary patches and strong black and white head patterns.

Rufous-bellied Eagles spend much time in the air, hunting (gliding or soaring), usually 50-100 m above the forest, but sometimes lower and occasionally much higher. Upon sighting prey, they fold their wings (forming

a tear-drop shape) and stoop rapidly into the forest canopy. When they are present in an area, they can usually be readily seen soaring or gliding during periods of strong thermal activity.

We found Rufous-bellied Eagles to be fairly common in forested areas of south-western India (Western Ghats) and the central and eastern Himalayan foothills, after we became familiar with their buzzard-like appearance and other relevant field marks.

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Plate 1. Adult Rufous-bellied Eagle
Hieraetus kienerii.
Photo: W. S. Clark

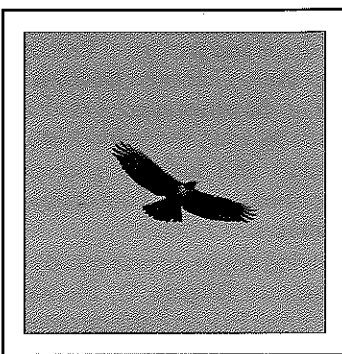


Plate 2. Adult Rufous-bellied Eagle
Hieraetus kienerii in flight.
Photo: W. S. Clark

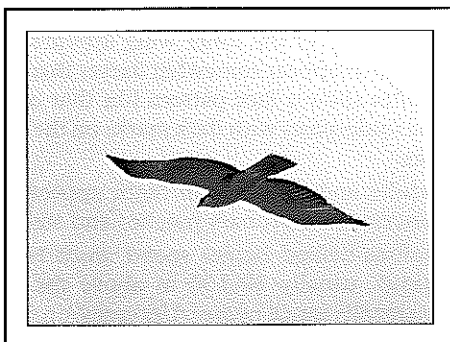


Plate 3. Juvenile Rufous-bellied
Eagle *Hieraetus kienerii* in flight.
Photo: W. S. Clark

Plate 4. Rufous-bellied Eagles *Hieraetus kienerii*. N. J. Schmitt
1 - 3 adults, 4 - 5 transitional, 6 - 10 juveniles, 11 - 13 adults.

