

Diurnal birds of prey with long fingered or pointed wings; long tail; short hooked bill with coloured facial skin at the base of the bill (cere); powerful, largely unfeathered legs with long sharp talons for grasping prey or gripping carrion. Sexes usually alike, but females larger. Juveniles darker than adults.

NANKEEN KESTREL *Falco cenchroides*

Uncommon Australian vagrant

♂ 32 cm, 160 g; ♀ 34 cm, 180 g. Small long-winged and long-tailed raptor with *habit of hovering*, poised in mid-air facing into the wind with tail fanned. In flight, back and upperwings cinnamon brown with black wingtips; underparts white with buff wash on breast and variable fine dark streaks. Male has blue-grey head streaked black, and tail blue-grey with black band near tip and narrow white tip. Female and juvenile have pale rufous head, finely streaked black; tail pale rufous with black band near tip and narrow white tip. **Habitat:** Open country. [Sp 144]



RAPTORS

The raptors, or diurnal birds of prey, are found worldwide from inshore marine habitats to the mountain tops. There are about 217 species of eagle, kite, hawk and harrier (Accipitridae), of which only 1 breeds in New Zealand and 1 is a vagrant, although

Accipitridae and Falconidae

there are occasional rumours of large eagles, presumably vagrants from Australia. There are 61 species of falcon and kestrel (Falconidae); again only 1 species breeds in New Zealand, but 2 are vagrants. Subfossil bones of a large, long-legged, short-winged eagle

Harpagornis moorei and of a sea eagle *Ichthyophaga australis* show that New Zealand used to have a greater variety of raptors.

very sharp talons; a small, broad, hooked bill with a waxy cere at the base of the upper bill; and large eyes.

New Zealand raptors are medium-to-large, mainly brown birds. Raptors have long wings and tail; long, unfeathered powerful feet with

Reading: Brown, L.H. *Birds of Prey*. London: Hamlyn. Cade, T.J. 1982. *The Falcons of the World*. London: Collins. Newton, I. 1976. *Population Ecology of Raptors*. Berkhamsted: Poyser.

144. NANKEEN KESTREL *Falco cenchroides*

Plate 33

Other name: Australian Kestrel
Size: Males 32 cm, 160 g; females 34 cm, 180 g
Geographical variation: Two subspecies; *cenchroides* in Australia and Lord Howe and Norfolk Island and a vagrant to New Zealand, *baru* in New Guinea.
Distribution: Widespread and common on mainland Australia but scarce in Tasmania. They are mainly sedentary, but occasionally inland droughts force them to move northwards or towards the coast. They colonised Lord Howe Island in the 1940s and Norfolk Island in 1969. Frequent vagrants appear anywhere in New Zealand, especially in the autumn and early winter. The numerous records since 1889 include small irruptions in 1969 and 1990 when birds were seen widely in both North and South Islands. There is no firm evidence that they have bred in New

Zealand, despite conditions being suitable for them judging from repeated sightings of two birds near Te Mata Peak, Hawke's Bay, for over five years from the late 1980s.
Feeding: Kestrels have an unmistakable hunting method of hovering, poised in mid-air with head facing into the wind and tail depressed according to the strength of the wind. They drop by stages before plunging to the ground to seize prey in their talons. Small birds are sometimes taken on the wing. Kestrels are typically in open country, sometimes riding the updraughts around hilltops or sand dunes as they search short grass for mice, small birds, lizards and large insects.
Reading: Edgar, A.T. & Grant, P. 1969. *Notornis* 16: 288-298. Powell, W.J. 1978. *Notornis* 25: 94-95.