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FIRST NORTH AMERICAN RECORD OF THE ORIENTAL HONEY-BUZZARD (*PERNIS PTILORHYNCHUS*)

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ABSTRACT: On 27 May 2024, Pohlen and Benter observed an adult female Oriental Honey-buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*) at Eareckson Air Station, Shemya Island, Aleutian Islands, Alaska—a first record for North America. The presence of six prominent primaries, cinnamon underside, and absence of dark carpal patches are diagnostic of this species and exclude the European Honey-buzzard (*P. apivorus*), a similar-looking congener unknown in North America.

On 27 May 2024, while surveying wildlife for the U.S. Air Force at Eareckson Air Station, Pohlen and Benter observed an Oriental Honey-buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*) when it flushed from a boulder-strewn graminoid meadow on the island's north side. After flushing, the bird gained altitude and soared west. Pohlen and Benter followed it until it landed on the graminoid-covered north-facing coastal bluff, 1.3 km away (Figure 1B). The bird flushed again, soared along the bluff to the west, and eventually disappeared and could not be immediately relocated. Approximately three and a half hours after the initial sighting, Pohlen and Benter relocated the bird, 3.3 km from the original observation site and 5.6 km from its last observed location, at the southeasternmost point on the island. The honey-buzzard flushed again and landed on the road on the east side of the island, where they saw it for the final time.

A long tail, small head, and barred wings and tail are diagnostic of *Pernis*, with *P. ptilorhynchus* being the most likely species given its closer distribution and migratory tendencies (Brazil 2009). The Shemya honey-buzzard showed cinnamon undersides with a pale throat bordered by dark feathering that extended to the nape. The remiges had evenly spaced heavy barring. The underside of the tail displayed one broad dark subterminal band beyond the undertail coverts and one broad dark terminal band, with fine barring in between. The bird showed six prominent outer primary feathers that were mostly dark, a gray cere, and a pale eye (Figure 1A). When the bird was perched, the feathers on the hindcrown and nape appeared elongated and partially erect, giving the bird a subtly crested appearance (Figure 1B). The dorsal side of the bird was mottled brown, with dark-tipped primaries and darker secondaries. The dorsal surface of the tail exhibited two distinct subterminal bars (Figure 1C). The gray cere, patterned distal half of the outer primaries, evenly banded remiges, and yellow eye identify this bird as an adult female (Forsman 2016).

The migratory European Honey-buzzard (*P. apivorus*) poses the greatest identification challenge to *P. ptilorhynchus*. Given the recently observed zone of overlap and hybridization between the two species, however, multiple published articles have focused on differentiating the two species and identifying possible hybrids (Forsman 1994, 2016, Faveyts et al. 2011). Structurally, the prominent and clearly separated six

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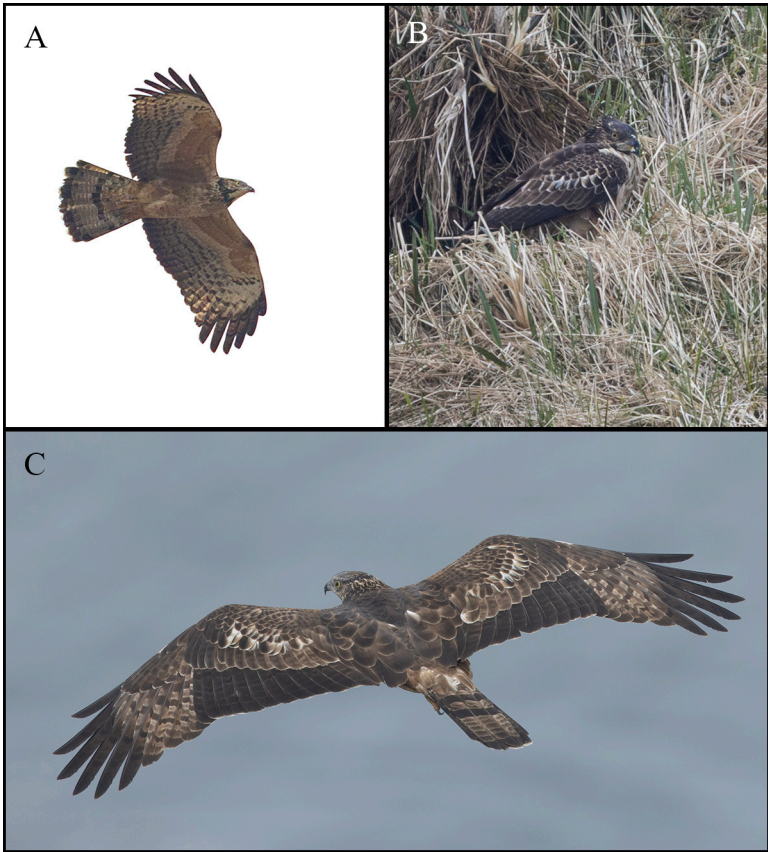


FIGURE 1. Images of the Oriental Honey-buzzard photographed on Shemya Island, Alaska, 27 May 2024. (A) The ventral surface of the bird in flight; (B), the perched bird; (C), the dorsal view of the bird from above.

Photos by Zachary M. Pohlen

primaries on the Shemya honey-buzzard support the identification as *ptilorhynchus*, as *apivorus* shows only five prominent primaries. The Shemya honey-buzzard also lacked the dark carpal patches that are prominent in *apivorus*, and it had a distinct dark border surrounding the gorget, which is absent or reduced to thin lateral throat stripes in *apivorus*. The secondaries are barred throughout, whereas in *apivorus* the barring is concentrated at the base of the secondaries. As the zone of overlap and hybridization is in western and central Siberia (i.e., the western portion of the range of *ptilorhynchus*), the occurrence of a hybrid honey-buzzard on Shemya (northeast of the expected range of *ptilorhynchus*) is unlikely (Forsman 2016). Even so, the Shemya honey-buzzard lacked any prominent or subtle features of *apivorus*. Adults of the other less likely, nonmigratory species of *Pernis* in southeast Asia—the Sulawesi Honey-buzzard (*P. celebensis*) and Philippine Honey-buzzard (*P. steerei*)—do not show the unbarred cinnamon undersides seen in the Shemya honey-buzzard.

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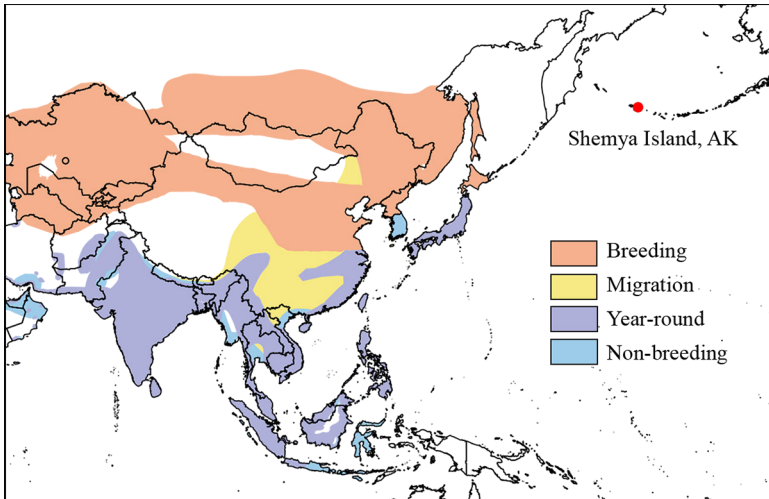


FIGURE 2. Range of the Oriental Honey-buzzard (BirdLife International and Handbook of the Birds of the World 2023), including the location of the first North American record, on Shemya Island, Alaska, 27 May 2024.

Of the six currently recognized subspecies of *P. ptilorhynchus*, *orientalis* is the only migratory one. In Russia it breeds from south-central Siberia east to Sakhalin, and from there south into northern Mongolia, northeastern China, North Korea, and Japan. It winters in south and southeast Asia, where it overlaps with the sedentary subspecies (Figure 2; Orta et al. 2020). In recent years, *P. ptilorhynchus* has also been increasingly recorded wintering in southwest Asia (Babbington and Campbell 2016).

Given the frequent west/southwesterly winds in the region during May 2024, the Shemya honey-buzzard likely drifted north and east from its intended breeding areas in Japan. This type of drift displacement is common during northbound migration in the western Aleutian Islands (Howell et al. 2014). Possible destinations for breeding west of the Sea of Okhotsk are less likely given the scarcity of records in the western Aleutian Islands of species that follow a primarily inland migration route (i.e., west of the Sea of Okhotsk; Howell et al. 2014). While the journey from Asia to the western Aleutian Islands requires multiple prolonged overwater crossings that raptors often avoid (see Bildstein 2006), *P. ptilorhynchus* is known to cross 650 km over the East China Sea regularly during fall migration (Nourani et al. 2016). Like many raptors migrating long distances, *ptilorhynchus* is prone to vagrancy, with extralimital records for east Africa (Kennedy and Marsh 2016, Welch and Welch 2017, Levorato et al. 2022), central Africa (Clark and Christy 2006), and Europe (Harrison 2014, Zannetos et al. 2018, Fenech and Sammut 2024). Shemya Island is part of the Near Islands group of the western Aleutians (Figure 2). It is a well-known stopover site for migratory birds along the East Asian–Australasian Flyway and has produced multiple records of birds new to the North American avifauna (Gibson 1981, Howell et al. 2014, Schwitters 2015, Pohlen et al. 2025).

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