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Basics of raptor identification

Below are some basic points to help you with raptor identification. When identifying a raptor you should first ask yourself, *Is it a raptor?* Flying pelicans are as large as eagles, cormorants can resemble large falcons, Rock Doves can resemble small falcons. How do you differentiate them? The first step is to understand the basic raptor shape, and raptor size compared to some common high country birds (Figure 4.1).

Next, consider three characteristics of raptors important for species identification. First, male raptors tend to be smaller than females. Sometimes in flight this is not easy to detect because some males have proportionally longer wings than females. In perched Collared Sparrowhawks, Brown Goshawks, Peregrine or Brown Falcons, the size difference is more obvious, but less so in perched large and *Elanus* kites, eagles, kestrels or Hobbies. Second, juvenile raptors are often coloured differently from adults, for example adult Collared Sparrowhawks and Brown Goshawks are grey on the back and rufous-barred on the front (in spite of the confusing name 'Brown' Goshawk) whereas juveniles are brown, so can be confused with other brown raptors such as Brown Falcons, male Little Eagles or juvenile Peregrines and Hobbies. Juvenile Black-shouldered Kites have brownish breasts, heads and backs and can be confused with kestrels or other raptors. Third, some raptors come in different colour morphs, for example, light and dark-morph Little Eagles and maybe light and darker-morph Brown Falcons, though there is good evidence that these Brown Falcon 'morphs' are mostly