

The Common Buzzard

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Source: Journal of Raptor Research, 55(2) : 291-292

Published By: Raptor Research Foundation

URL: <https://doi.org/10.3356/0892-1016-55.2.291>

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BOOK REVIEW

J. Raptor Res. 55(2):291–292

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The Common Buzzard. By Sean Walls and Robert Kenward. 2020. T & AD Poyser, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK. 304 pp., 8 pp. color photographs (32 total photos), 66 figures, 5 maps, 27 black and white photos, 15 black and white illustrations, 4 appendices, and index. ISBN 978-1-4729-7208-8. Paperback, \$50.00.

After over thirty years of studying Common Buzzards (*Buteo buteo*) across England, Sean Walls and Robert Kenward compile their expertise and passion for the species in *The Common Buzzard*. This book summarizes the existing knowledge and understanding of Common Buzzard biology. Tying in information with findings and observations from their own studies, this book provides the reader with a comprehensive and engaging overview of the life history, ecology, and conservation of this European *Buteo*. We (the reviewers who have experience with the North American genus *Buteo*) admit to knowing little about the book's specific species—the Common Buzzard—prior to having read it. At first we wondered if this made us good candidates to review this work; however, we both came to realize that we were among the authors' target audience and, as North American raptor biologists who did not have preconceived notions of Common Buzzard biology, were well suited to speak to the success of the book's intent and the clarity of its message.

There are 29 species worldwide classified in the genus *Buteo*. In Europe, raptors from the genus *Buteo* are commonly called “buzzards,” while in North America, *Buteos* are referred to as “hawks.” Both terms are rather ambiguous and occasionally cause confusion, since they can occasionally refer to species outside of the genus *Buteo*. For example, worldwide there are birds commonly called “hawks” that are not classified as *Buteos* (e.g., Sharpshinned Hawk [*Accipiter striatus*]; Cooper's Hawk [*Accipiter cooperii*]; Eurasian Sparrowhawk [*Accipiter nisus*]). Similarly, there are also birds commonly called “buzzards” not classified as *Buteos* (e.g., European Honey-Buzzard [*Perisoreus apivorus*]; Black-breasted Buzzard [*Hamirostra melanosternon*]). So while the terms “hawk” and “buzzard” can refer to raptors outside the genus *Buteo*, the terms are not used in common names of all raptors. Adding further to confusion between the two terms is that the term “buzzard” has long been a colloquialism for a North American vulture. Indeed, it is not a simple task to answer the question: What is a buzzard? Fortunately, this book reminds us that, no matter

what word we use—“hawk” or “buzzard” or otherwise—raptors are fascinating critters. As different as raptor species can be from each other, they are also similar in many ways. As such, what we learn about one species might have applications to another. Indeed, many of this book's chapters, described below, will resonate with researchers studying other raptor species around the globe.

From cover to cover, this book informs the reader about Common Buzzards in a logical way that addresses most aspects of their ecology. It begins with a discussion of evolutionary traits and taxonomy (Chapter 1: A Common Buzzard), and moves through topics such as hunting abilities and prey variety (Chapter 2: Prey, and Chapter 3: Hunting), habitat use including territoriality and nest defense (Chapter 4: Habitat use, and Chapter 5: Territoriality and nest defence), reproduction (Chapter 6: Courtship and nesting, and Chapter 7: Incubating and chick-rearing), movement (Chapter 8: Dispersal and migration), survival and demographics (Chapter 9: Longevity and survival, and Chapter 10: Common Buzzard populations), and finally concludes with a look at the history of human interactions with the species (Chapter 11: Our relationship with the Common Buzzard).

One favorable aspect of this book that is likely to set it apart is the connection both authors have with its subject, the Common Buzzard. We realized soon after starting our reading that both Walls and Kenward have dedicated a great deal of their careers to studying the species. In particular, together they conducted a long-term telemetry study of Common Buzzard fledglings and followed them for multiple years after fledging. This research project was, no doubt, an incredible undertaking and contributed much to the knowledge of the species. Their understanding and enthusiasm for Common Buzzards shines through in the writing. The book includes many delightful lessons on raptor ecology in general, going beyond the limited topical scope suggested by the title. This too makes the book stand out not just as an excellent contribution to the Common Buzzard body of knowledge but to the general raptor research and conservation literature.

Despite their obvious affinity for this species, we liked that the authors avoided using gushing language or hyperbole to describe it or compare it to other raptors. In fact, on occasion they did the opposite, describing Common Buzzards as a “base-line model hawk” (page 20) that is rather plain in appearance, small in stature, and relatively common. The authors let the information they provide and their respect and passion for the species invoke the reader's interest in Common Buzzards, something that we (the reviewers) noticed and appreciated. Indeed, this book does a wonderful job illustrating that a species does

not have to be outwardly “flashy” to be captivating. The reader of this book will find interesting all the details provided about this abundant generalist raptor, which the authors describe as paradoxical with a unique ability to survive, and even thrive, in vastly varied environments. One tidbit from the book, too fascinating not to share here, is that Common Buzzards are known to have uncommonly long intestinal tracts and, as such, can subsist on prey items (such as earthworms) that would not provide adequate nutrition for most other raptors. The authors paint vivid pictures for the reader’s imagination of Common Buzzards that look like a “cross between a thrush and a waddling-duck” (page 31) while the birds walk through a freshly plowed field foraging on earthworms, and note that the hawk has been “likened to a ‘drunken sailor’” when foraging on the ground (page 70). The book goes on to marvel that Common Buzzards forage on earthworms with raptor adaptations (hooked bill, talons, long-distance eyesight) that are not ideal for such a foraging strategy. But in fact, so important are earthworms to Common Buzzard diets that the availability of these invertebrates appears to occasionally dictate Common Buzzard movements during parts of the year.

This book is well written and is clearly a well-edited piece of writing. We appreciated the use of numerous clean and informative figures and diagrams, as well as relevant black/white and color photographs, and beautiful illustrations by Alan Harris throughout the book. As books of this nature can tend to be, there are parts that get a little information-heavy and cumbersome to read, but all things considered we thought the authors did a good job keeping readers engaged and not overloading us by simply listing studies and facts. Another aspect we enjoyed about the writing was the authors’ willingness to speculate a little bit in an attempt to fill information gaps or explain observations or tendencies of the species. These speculations not only added an expert’s perspective and some “food for thought” to the chapters, but they highlighted potential future research and occasionally left us pining over unanswered questions about Common Buzzards that we did not have prior to reading this book. One of our few criticisms of the book, however, is that, on occasion, we had difficulty differentiating the authors’ speculation from the literature-supported conclusions. But this difficulty was offset slightly by one wonderful element of the book: the presence of a conclusion section at the end of each chapter. For the reader wanting to skim a chapter, looking only for a summary of what is known about a topic, we appreciated this feature. If one should be inclined to only read the conclusion sections at the end of each chapter, the book takes the form of something closer to a species account, and could be summarized rather quickly.

Although rare, and relatively minor, we did have several criticisms about the book. First, given the breadth of information covered within the typically long chapters, we would have appreciated subheadings that could have been

included in the book’s Table of Contents to benefit the reader when referencing the book for certain details. For example, if a reader wanted to quickly find the description of a Common Buzzard nest site, to what section or page would one turn? This is not clear in the Table of Contents as currently written. Additionally, we noted that there are very few maps included in the book. We assert that even those that are included could be improved upon. The two maps included in the first chapter are at a very broad scale (global), small size, and appear messy with too much information presented. We suggest other maps did not have enough information. In particular, we would have liked several figures to include an inset map. For instance, Figure 4.9, which depicts modelled buzzard settlement in Dorset, does not include reference to the larger country and what part of England Dorset is located in. Similarly, Figure 5.3, which depicts territories in Speyside, Scotland, does not show reference to what part of Scotland is being shown. For readers from beyond the United Kingdom, like us, descriptive maps would have been appreciated, especially when specific places or regions were discussed. Finally, we noted that the authors use the terms “active” and “inactive” on occasion to describe the status of nests without including a clear definition of each term. This practice has been confusing and is contrary to recommended practices (Steenhof et al. 2017). These recommendations have been widely applied in the raptor research community. Transitioning away from this terminology has been a recurring discussion for *Journal of Raptor Research* editors and raptor biologists in recent years.

All things considered, we give this book high marks for its content, writing, and overall importance to Common Buzzard research and management. Not only do we recommend this book to anyone looking to learn more about Common Buzzards, we recommend it to raptor researchers and/or enthusiasts at any career stage or depth of prior knowledge who are seeking to enhance their knowledge of the genus *Buteo* or raptors in general. It is difficult to imagine any reader who would not learn from the contents of this book. It is indeed a valuable contribution to the existing raptor literature.—**Matthew J. Stuber**, (email address: matthew_stuber@fws.gov), **Division of Migratory Birds, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Portland, OR 97232, USA** and **Elizabeth Meisman** (email address: elizabeth.meisman@ghd.com), **GHD Inc., 718 Third Street, Eureka, CA 95501, USA**.

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