

SHORT NOTE

New wintering records for the Sooty Falcon in southwestern Africa

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The breeding range of the Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor* extends from eastern Libya to the coast and islands of the Red Sea, the eastern Persian Gulf, Israel and southwards to Somalia (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Frumkin & Pinshow 1983). Sooty Falcons breed late in the boreal summer and autumn to take advantage of the large numbers of birds migrating southwards at that time of year (Moreau 1969). Sooty Falcons migrate to their main wintering area in Madagascar, where they remain from early December to May (Clapham 1964, Snow 1978).

Whereas in the past Sooty Falcons were considered rare vagrants to the southeastern coast of Africa (Clancey 1969), they are now frequently and reliably seen in Natal each year (Cyrus & Robson 1980), and occasionally in the Transkei and northeastern Cape Province (Brooke 1978, Vernon 1983). A single bird was seen near Johannesburg, Transvaal on 25 January 1983 (Sinclair, *et al.* 1986). Although Sooty Falcons may have been overlooked in the past, because of their quiet, crepuscular habits, G L Maclean *(personal communication) has suggested that there may have been a recent shift in their wintering range to southeastern Africa (Figure 1).

This may explain why many of the Sooty Falcons seen each year are immature birds (Clancey 1969, 1970, Brooke 1978, Hanmer & Blackwood 1983).

On the basis of sight records from Choma and Kitwe in Zambia (Penry 1979a & b) and one sight record from the Kalahari Gemsbok Park (Liversidge, *et al.* 1981), Hanmer & Blackwood (1983) suggested that there may be another wintering area in southwestern Africa.

On 20 February 1983 two fairly dark, uniform slaty blue-grey falcons were seen perched on a low *Acacia* *sp.* tree in the vicinity of Epukiro Mission in Hereroland East (21 41 S; 19 08 E). Although it was fairly late in the afternoon (about 17h00), there was sufficient light to identify these falcons as adult Sooty Falcons, before they flew off. Their uniform grey colour distinguished them from the more commonly seen Western Redfooted Kestrel *Falco vespertinus*, and the rare Dickinson's Kestrel *Falco dickinsoni*. Their wing tips extended slightly beyond the tips of their tails while perched, distinguishing these birds from the very similar Grey Kestrel *Falco ardosiaceus*, where the wing tips lie well short of the tip of the tail (personal observations, Cade 1982, Steyn 1982).

On 15 March 1983 an adult male Sooty Falcon was recovered alive in Windhoek (22 34 S; 17 06 E). The bird was in extremely poor condition, weighing only 125 ± 10 grams, and died two days after capture. Newton (1979, page 343) has documented the weight of an adult female to be 210 grams.

The latest Natal, Zambia and Malawi sighting dates, and those estimated by Snow (1978), suggest that the Namibia records fit well into the expected wintering period. Sooty Falcons prey on birds, bats and locusts

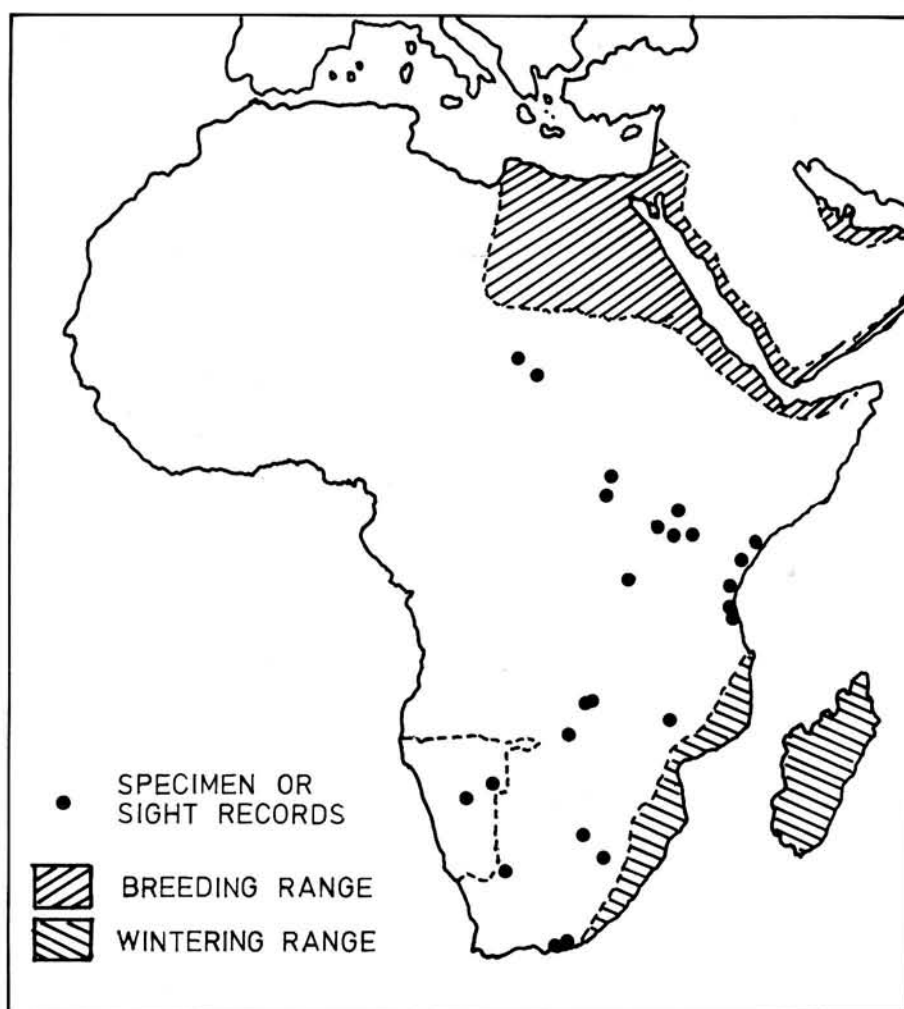


FIGURE 1: Breeding and wintering ranges of the Sooty Falcon. Adapted from Snow (1978).

in their winter quarters (Liversidge, *et al.* 1981), and therefore may not necessarily be precluded from occurring in the dry Namibia habitat.

The paucity of sight records from the central and western regions of southern Africa, suggest that these first records of Sooty Falcons in Namibia were probably of vagrant birds.

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