

CHAMBERS, S. 2009.

Birds of New Zealand - Locality Guide. 3rd edn.

Arun Books, Orewa, New Zealand.

New Zealand falcon: pp 121-123.



**NEW ZEALAND FALCON.**

**Family** Falconidae

**Species** *Falco novaeseelandiae*

**Common names** New Zealand Falcon, Bush Falcon, Sparrowhawk

**Status** Endemic

**Size** 430 mm (cf sparrow 145 mm, Harrier 550mm)

**Habitat** The Bush Falcon and Southern Falcon are confined to forested areas while the Eastern Falcon is widely spread over pastureland and rough and open high country. In recent years there has been some artificial breeding of falcons in the Nelson area as a means to reducing pest birds in vineyards.

**New Zealand range** In the North Island widespread south of a line from Kawhia Harbour to the central Bay of Plenty. In the South Island it is widespread throughout but nowhere common. Also on Stewart Island and Auckland Island.

**Discussion** The Bush Falcon is an endemic species which is not grouped with any of the five species of Australian falcons. Instead it is grouped with three species known from the southern American states of Texas and New Mexico and from Central America and northern South America (Cade T J 1982). These species are the Orange-breasted Falcon (*F. deiroleucus*), the Bat Falcon (*F. rufigularis*) and the Aplomado Falcon (*F. femoralis*). Its relationship with these

three species is to do with similarities of bill shape, tail colouring, sunbathing habits, the excretory habits of nestlings and with their carnivorous eating habits and hunting techniques. The ancestor of the New Zealand Falcon is considered to have been an early arrival to New Zealand, it adapting to the New Zealand environment and even progressing towards tameness as did other endemic and ancient species. The rounded wings and the shorter tail of the New Zealand Falcon have evolved to enhance flight manoeuvrability when hunting within dense New Zealand forest (Fleming 1982).

**Forms** It is divided into three forms (Fox 1977) –

- The Bush Falcon of North Island forests and the forests of the north-west of the South Island, which is a bird of dark plumage having only faint white barring on the wings and breast. This bird is a true forest dweller, living and breeding within the forest. It nests mostly in tall dead trees and especially in the epiphyte called kiekie (*Freycinetia banksii*). Occasional pairs nest on rock ledges.
- The Eastern Falcon of the South Island which is of paler colouration and is richly barred. This bird lives and feeds over and on open country, nesting on rock ledges inland. Its paleness causes it to blend with the paler eastern South Island environment. It is known to feed more on exotic birds and mammals than on indigenous species and nests on rock ledges.
- The Southern Falcon of Fiordland and Auckland Island which is of colouring intermediate between the Bush Falcon and the Eastern Falcon and has more barring than the Bush Falcon.

### **Description – Bush Falcon**

**Crown nape and back** Bluish-black. **Wings** Bluish-black, with grey barring and pure black primary feathers. **Underwings** Brown, barred with white. **Uppertail** Black, barred with separate narrow white bars of between 7 to 11 in number (Fox 1988). **Undertail** Buff with some grey barring. **Throat and breast** Dark, moustache-like, brown feathers at side of bill and below. Otherwise cream, vertically striped with dark brown. **Flanks** Cream horizontally barred with dark brown. **Ceres (above bill)** Yellow. **Eye** Iris dark brown with a thin yellow eye-ring. **Bill** Black, with dark markings on sides of chin. **Legs and feet** Yellow.

### **Description – Southern Falcon**

Similar to the Bush Falcon but paler with more under-barring on male birds.

### **Description – Eastern Falcon**

Paler than the Bush Falcon and the Southern Falcon and more richly barred.

### **Description – immatures**

Immatures lack the bluish tonings of adult birds and become darker and browner in winter. They lack the bright yellow ceres above the bill of mature birds. Ceres

may be blue, grey or brownish.

### **Conspicuous features**

- Yellow cere and yellow legs and feet.
- The dark brown eye separates it from the Harrier.
- Black claws and beak.

### **Conspicuous characteristics**

- When flying low and straight, with tail out, it can be mistaken for a New Zealand Pigeon or a Long-tailed Cuckoo.
- In fine weather birds will sometimes spiral on thermals.
- Often seen hovering with quick wing beats.
- Has a habit of “greeting” human visitors to a territory by flying out in a slow hovering-type flight, looking, and then returning to a high branch. Such flights are usually accompanied by a rapid “kek kek kek” call. Usually both birds will fly out if they are not nesting.

**Call** A rapid high-pitched shrieking “kek kek kek”.

**Nest** On the ground or a cliff ledge for eastern birds, and high in a tree for northern and southern birds. Up to 3 reddish, brown-blotched, eggs are laid.

### **Where to find – North Island**

**King Country** – The Waitomo Caves area has several Falcon territories. Most are on private property. Nevertheless a general watch should be kept for this bird if in the vicinity of the famed Waitomo Caves. P. 331.

**King Country** – Ruakuri Caves has a falcon territory near the Waitomo Caves. This is not on private land. From Waitomo Caves take Tumutumu Road on left and then first road on right. This territory is in the bush surrounds of the caves. There is a track into forest from which Pigeon, Tomtit, Whitehead, Tui and Bellbird may also be seen, plus limestone rock outcrops. P. 331.

**King Country** – Pureora Forest has a territory at the end of Bismarck Road near “The Tower”. Another is found near to the car park and Museum. P. 314.

**Waikaremoana** – Near the Hopuruahine Stream. P. 327.

### **Where to find – South Island**

**Southland** – Between Five Rivers and Garston birds are seen from Highway 6 especially in the Garston area about 35 kms north of Lumsden. P. 358.

**Southland** – At Lake Te Anau and Manapouri around the lake edges. P. 369.

**Fiordland** – Cascade Creek and around Lake Gunn. P. 371.

**Otago** – Makarora, between Haast Pass and Lake Wanaka on Highway 6, is excellent for falcons. Look near the Makarora information centre. P. 372.

**Westland** – Watch for birds flying above the forests south of the Paparoa Ranges just north of Greymouth. P. 374.

**Westland** – At Lake Kaniere falcons are regularly seen. P. 374.