

FALCONS BREEDING IN THE RIMUTAKA RANGE

Referring to the comment of Fox (1978, *Notornis* 25: 317-331) that there is little information on the New Zealand Falcon (*Falco novaeseelandiae*) from the Rimutaka Range, I offer these rather casual observations that seem to confirm breeding in the area. The observations were made by myself and Mr N. Taylor and family during weekend and holiday trips to a hut in the Orongorongo River valley over the summer of 1978/79.

Falcons were seen on each visit in a group of large emergent trees on the slope above a small bush terrace on the true right bank of the river, about 5 km upstream of the DSIR Ecology Division field station. The birds had not been present in the previous spring and summer.

We first noticed the birds during the weekend of 2-3 December, when their noisy behaviour attracted our attention. Our observations at this time were limited to noting a falcon returning at intervals to a large dead rata with thick clumps of *CollospERMUM* and other epiphytes in the crooks of its otherwise bare branches. As it returned to what we presumed was its nest tree the bird made the *hek-hek-hek* . . . call. Falcon screams were also heard.

On 3-7 January, we saw three birds. One bird, presumed to be a juvenile, remained in the nest tree, occasionally flying up on to the bare branches where it exercised its wings and preened in the sun. Much screaming was heard, the presumed juvenile being particularly vocal. On one occasion, a bird swooped at us as we stood in a windfall clearing about 50 metres from and level with the top of the nest tree.

On 20-22 January, I again saw three birds. One still remained close to the nest tree but all three birds were regularly perching on the dead branches and the more exposed live branches of several nearby rimu trees. Occasionally, all three birds would circle above the trees with much chasing and screaming. I observed the following sequence of events on two occasions. Odd calls between birds in separate trees erupted into much agitation and screaming. One or two birds then flew off while the third remained alertly on a prominent perch. Within a few minutes, a falcon returned carrying a small prey item in its talons, was met in the air by the third bird, screaming loudly, rolled sideways and flicked the prey into the air. Both birds then dived screaming after the falling prey but disappeared out of my sight behind some trees.

On one occasion only, on 21 January, I saw four birds circling the nest area chasing and screaming.

We did not see a nest or a bird which we could recognise by appearance as a juvenile but the numbers and behaviour of the birds round the site seemed to indicate successful breeding.

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