

The 80th Report of the Colorado Bird Records Committee

By Tony Leukering, CBRC Member

Introduction

This 80th report of the Colorado Bird Records Committee (hereafter CBRC or Committee) presents the results of deliberations of the CBRC involving three reports submitted by three observers documenting one new addition to the Colorado state list. Per CBRC bylaws, all accepted records received a final 7-0 or 6-1 vote to accept. Therefore, with this publication the Colorado state list now stands at 515 species.

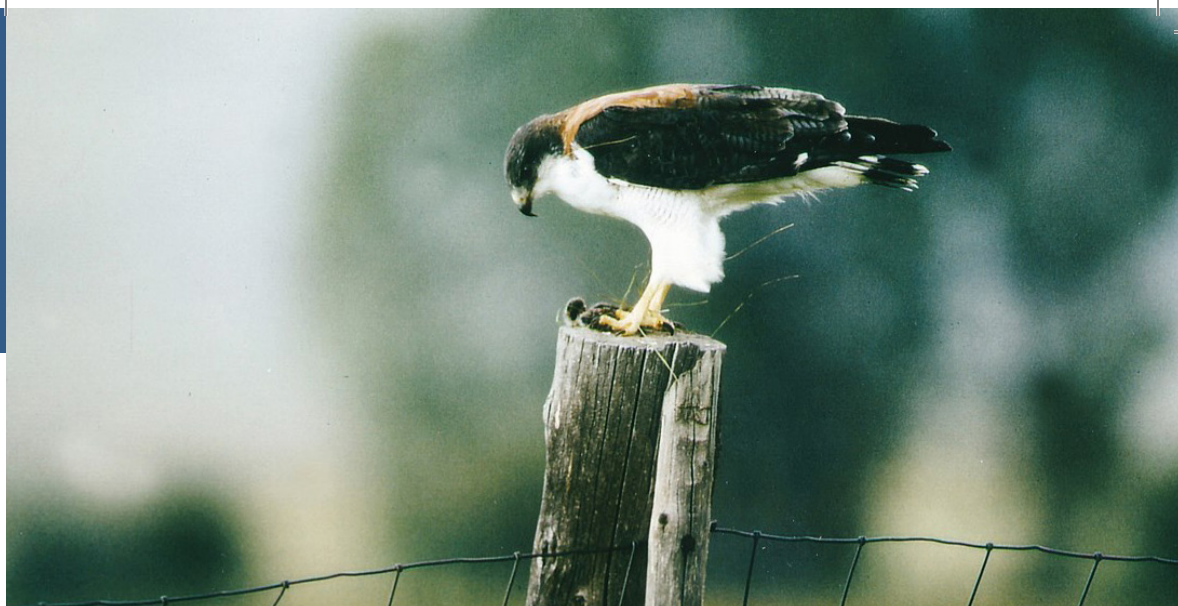
Committee members voting on this report were Peter Gent (Boulder), Tony Leukering (Dodge City, KS), Dan Maynard (Denver), Kathy Mihm Dunning (Denver), Steven Mlodinow (Longmont), Christian Nunes (Boulder) and Mark Peterson (Colorado Springs).

Accepted species new to the state list

Variable Hawk (*Geranoaetus polyosoma*)

Mark Daily first reported this bird seen just north of the town of Gunnison as an odd White-tailed Hawk (*Geranoaetus albicaudatus*) on 31 August 1987. Brian Wheeler and Joe Harrison observed the bird on 8 September, and Susan Allen and Davis Finch saw it the next day. Both came to the same conclusion that it was a Red-backed Hawk (*G. polyosoma*), which occurs in South America. Almost immediately, speculation began about how this way-out-of-range bird arrived in Colorado. Wheeler (1998) commented, "I find it highly unlikely that this bird was ever in captivity," and continued, "Plumage features prove that the bird had been exposed to nature's elements for at least a year." In contrast, Allen (1998) said, "In Davis's 38 years and my 18 years

of watching raptors closely, neither of us has ever seen a wild Buteo as tame as this." They then noted that Red-backed Hawk is mostly non-migratory in South America, and thus concluded that the bird did not reach Gunnison by its own means. The bird was observed with a male Swainson's Hawk, and the pair were seen together in the exact same area over the subsequent seven summers, producing fledglings in 1988 (Kingery 1998). After being discovered in 1987, a small number of Colorado's birders traveled to Gunnison County to observe the bird in September 1987, eventually resulting in some of the few definite data on occurrence of the individual (ebird.org/checklist/S78672672, ebird.org/checklist/S82173762). While the bird was reported sporadically through 1994,



Initially reported as an “odd White-tailed Hawk,” then later identified as a Red-backed Hawk near Gunnison in 1987. Based on new evidence, the CBRC has overturned its 1989 decision not to accept the record. Photographer unknown.

the only eBird checklists recording the bird subsequent to 1987 are from 1988 (ebird.org/checklist/558930617, ebird.org/checklist/527271205). Most interesting of those is that President Jimmy Carter was one of the observers.

The record (10-87-45) was circulated through the CBRC in 1989, and was not accepted due to its unknown wild origins. Nelson (1991) summarized the conclusion: “The bird is essentially non-migratory, and would probably not be able to undertake long distance migrations.”

However, CBRC rules allow any of its decisions to be reconsidered if a new submission is made that includes new evidence that was not available when the decision was originally made. In 2017, Bill Maynard submitted new evidence, and asked that the report be re-evaluated. By this time Red-backed Hawk had been lumped with Variable Hawk (*C. polyosoma*), which occurs further north in South America and, significantly, has some populations that are known to migrate seasonally

within South America. Bill suggested that the hawk could have reached the U.S. naturally, noting that navigational errors such as reverse direction migration and overshooting have been responsible for vagrancy in many other species.

Fork-tailed Flycatcher, which arrived in Colorado in 2018, is a species often cited as an example of reverse migration vagrancy. Bill also pointed out that the original CBRC decision had been criticized in the book *Rare Birds of North America* (Howell, Lewington and Russell 2014), which noted that some populations of Variable Hawk do migrate. Finally, Bill pointed out that a Variable Hawk had been reported on a hawk watch in New Mexico, although that sighting was not accepted by the New Mexico Records Committee.

The aptly named Variable Hawk is a polytypic and polymorphic raptor of western South America from Tierra del Fuego north to the Medellín area of northern Colombia, with a checkered taxonomic history. The subspecies to

which the Gunnison bird is referable, Red-backed Hawk (*G. p. polyosoma*; a.k.a. Red-backed Buzzard) occurs the length of the species' breeding range, but at lower elevations than the high-elevation subspecies (*G. p. poe-cilochrous*; Variable Hawk). Although

much less the 16 or so required for a Variable Hawk to traverse the distance between Gunnison County and South America twice a year. Subsequent to the published reports of migration by Variable Hawks within South America (e.g., Juhant 2011), the debate changed

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the species was formerly thought to be resident within its generally montane breeding range, more recent efforts have found some latitudinal migration in the species (e.g., Juhant 2011). Critically, that new information on Variable Hawk migration provides much of the impetus for reconsidering the possibility of the Gunnison bird being of wild provenance.

The long and, at times, contentious debate centered on the likelihood of natural occurrence, as the identification was never in doubt. At the time, the CBRC had no information on migration in the species, and most detractors pointed out how unlikely it was that a species resident in South America would occur naturally in a location more than 32° north of its known range. While a small number of other South American species have been detected in the ABA Area, all of those are known austral migrants that, presumably, simply greatly overshoot their winter range in central or northern South America or travel in the wrong direction when departing winter grounds (Chesser 1994). Detractors felt that the physiological requirements of long-distance migration precluded a wild Variable Hawk from being able to undertake even a single very long-distance migration,

tenor. However, the “physiological requirements” argument remained a sticking point for many, as, apparently, only first-cycle Variable Hawks were known to migrate.

Proponents of a wild origin of the Variable Hawk argued that a migrant first-cycle Variable Hawk became entrained in a flock of northbound Swainson's Hawks, following them to the United States, with subsequent annual departures and arrivals in Colorado possibly being encouraged or enhanced by traveling with Swainson's Hawks. This argument apparently did not consider the seasonal shift in breeding season that would have been required of a Variable Hawk from the southern portion of the breeding range, although such has since been shown to be possible in other species (Dittman and Cardiff 2005). A more-fanciful argument was that it “paired” with a Swainson's Hawk on the latter's wintering area and followed it north to the Swainson's Hawk's breeding site. Again, those physiological considerations come to the fore in the arguments against the wild origin of the Variable Hawk, as Swainson's Hawks gorge on abundant prey prior to migration in either direction in order to lay on sufficient fat to fuel the extreme migrations

that they undertake. While we are still uncertain of the distance that pre-migration fattening can support a migrating Swainson's Hawk (Bechard et al. 2006), we do know that such long distance migration requires both behavioral and physiological adaptations (Klaassen 1999, Bechard et al. 2006). The pairing argument is falsified by our understanding that pairing in Swainson's Hawk takes place on the breeding grounds (Bechard et al. 2020 and references therein).

A more-reasonable argument, and one presented during the CBRC third-round meeting in which this record was discussed, was that while no one ever reported the Variable Hawk during the long, snowy Gunnison County winters, it would not have had to migrate all the way back to South America. In fact, those physiological constraints argued against it. The bird would not have had to travel far at all to reach a more-temperate wintering site. Given that many montane-breeding Colorado Red-tailed Hawks depart such areas for the winter (pers. obs.), it seems at least reasonable that the Variable Hawk moved somewhere for the winter. A movement of only 50 miles downhill and west would have put it in the lower Gunnison

doubling that movement distance in directions from west-northwest to southwest would put the bird in far-western Colorado in one of the most lightly birded portions of the state. In sum, relatively short movements (<200 miles) in a wide variety of directions would not only result in a more-temperate wintering area but also in the bird utilizing very lightly birded areas of western Colorado, eastern Utah, or northern New Mexico. Of course, the bird may well have stayed unseen in Gunnison County during the winter given the very light birding effort at that season and in those years in the county (eBird 2021, pers. obs).

The Variable Hawk did breed with a male Swainson's Hawk in 1988, something that might be considered very unlikely given that the two species are now considered to be in different genera, and intergeneric hybrids are thought to be quite rare. However, an out-of-range female Common Black Hawk (*Buteogallus anthracinus*) has been present in Sonoma County, California, since at least May 2005, and has been found to breed with a male Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*), producing fledglings in at least two years (Hug 2016).

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River basin >2600 feet lower in elevation in Montrose, Delta or Mesa counties. While this area may well be the single most heavily birded portion of Colorado's West Slope, there were many fewer birders there then than are present currently. However,

In what may be the most controversial decision in its history, in 2020 the CBRC voted to accept the 1987 report of a female Variable Hawk from Gunnison County as being of natural occurrence. The vote extended to the maximum three rounds (10-87-45;

3-4, 5-2, 7-0). The voting shows that only three members voted to accept in the first round, but that number increased to five after members had the opportunity to see the comments made by everyone else during the first round of voting.

During the second round of voting, Christian Nunes made a great effort to find the possibility that a Variable Hawk had been kept in captivity. His comments to the CBRC concluded, "After researching the status of the Variable Hawk in captivity, it is apparent that they are essentially unknown as a falconry bird in North America. There are approximately five in captivity in the UK, all of which have come from captive breeding stock in Belgium. At least one is being kept as a falconry bird in Argentina. They can also be found at zoos in the Czech Republic and Bolivia. The sole individual I have been able to locate in the U.S. is being kept as an educational bird at Rafiki's Planet Watch, Disney World's Animal Kingdom, in Florida." This evidence of the very small possibility that the bird was kept in captivity in the U.S. was discussed in a long Zoom meeting, and the outcome was that the final two committee members were persuaded, so that the third and final vote was unanimous.

While the CBRC acknowledges that there is no definitive proof that the Variable Hawk arrived in Gunnison County completely under its own power, we also point out that there is no proof that it did not. Given the extreme rarity of the species in captivity, particularly in North America, and with the understanding that the bird did not necessarily make twice-yearly round trips between Colorado and South America, the Committee felt that natural origin was more likely

than one of the very few captives birds had escaped, or been released, and found its way to a relatively remote portion of Colorado.

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Committee Functions

The Committee solicits documentation of reports in Colorado for all species published in its Main Review List (coloradobirdrecords.org/ReviewList.aspx), species with no prior accepted record in Colorado and sightings of regularly occurring species that are considered out of range or out of season. Documentary materials should be submitted online at the CBRC website (coloradobirdrecords.org).

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