Successful mixed breeding of Atlas Long-legged Buzzard and Common Buzzard on Pantelleria, Italy, in 2008

During the spring 2008, as in every year since 2004, I spent a month on Pantelleria in the Sicilian Channel, Italy, to study raptor migration on behalf of Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli (Italian League for Bird Protection; LIPU) and LIPU UK (the British branch of LIPU). Pantelleria is a volcanic island measuring 83 km^2; it is 836 m at its highest point and lies at a distance of c 85 km south-west from Sicily and c 70 km east from Cap Bon, Tunisia. It is densely covered by Mediterranean macchia, while its main mountain, Montagna Grande, is fully covered by woodland, mainly pine *Pinus* and oak *Quercus*. From an ornithological point of view, it is a special island due to the vicinity of Africa, being the only European site for many species of African fauna and flora, as well as holding several endemic taxa. It is, for instance, the only Italian breeding site for Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* and the only European breeding site for Ultramarine Tit *Cyanistes ultramarinus*. During May 2008, two or three Tunisian Red-necked Nightjars *Caprimulgus ruficollis desertorum* were heard calling, and breeding has been suspected. Also, Atlas Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus cirtensis* has been found breeding recently, after having being regularly observed for years. In late May 2008, I recorded at least two breeding pairs while an adult male Common Buzzard *B buteo buteo* was paired with an adult female Atlas Long-legged Buzzard. The latter pair was frequenting the same cliff every day until I left the island in early June. In August-September 2008, I returned to Pantelleria for the same research programme. After a few days, at the site where I observed them in spring, I relocated the mixed pair, this time accompanied by one fresh juvenile, obviously their offspring. The following discription was made of the juvenile.

SIZE & POSTURE As female *cirtensis* of breeding pair, with similar structure, showing quite narrow and long wing, reminiscent of small *Aquila* eagle and therefore slightly larger than accompanying male nominate *buteo* and more eagle-like in silhouette. Tail long but not as long as in typical juvenile *cirtensis*. Bill and tarsus quite heavy and strong, bill also quite high and tarsus quite long but less than in nominate *rufinus* and *cirtensis*.

PLUMAGE General plumage colour and pattern very close to juvenile *cirtensis* but shade duller, with broader dark markings on breast (typical juvenile *cirtensis* has quite pale underparts sparsely and little marked; Corso in prep), although many juvenile *cirtensis* having similar plumage. Flank and thigh-feathers darker than in typical *cirtensis*, being darker brown or even blackish and closer to several juvenile nominate *buteo*, lacking rusty or rufous tinge of typical *cirtensis*. Ground colour of underparts creamy or buffish, closer to *cirtensis* but warmer in tone. Tail more densely and regularly barred than in typical *cirtensis* and warmer in tone, closer to juvenile

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263 Hybrid Atlas Long-legged x Common Buzzard / hybride Atlasarendbuizerd x Buizerd *Buteo rufinus cirtensis x buteo*, recently fledged juvenile, Pantelleria, Italy, 5 September 2008 *(Andrea Corso)*. Note sparsely streaked breast and belly, dark contrasting flanks, quite long tarsus and long and heavy bill.

264 Hybrid Atlas Long-legged x Common Buzzard / hybride Atlasarendbuizerd x Buizerd *Buteo rufinus cirtensis x buteo*, recently fledged juvenile, Pantelleria, Italy, 5 September 2008 *(Andrea Corso)*. Note long wings, well contrasting flanks and less well-marked carpal patch than in typical Long-legged Buzzard.

nominate *buteo* of Sicilian population. Underwing close to nominate *buteo* though possibly cleaner and with more contrasting median coverts; lesser and marginal coverts visibly darker and more solidly patterned than in *cirtensis*. Carpal patch not solid, not striking and quite pale, therefore different from nominate *rufinus* but similar to many juvenile *cirtensis* (Corso in prep) but less patterned and less conspicuous.

BARE PARTS Iris pale, apparently shade duller than in typical juvenile nominate *buteo*. Colour of bare parts as in nominate *buteo* but not differing from several *cirtensis*.

To my knowledge, this is the first case of hybridization of *cirtensis* and nominate *buteo* to be recorded and photographed. McCarthy (2006) mentions the potential contact zones ('PCZ') of Long-legged Buzzard (nominate *rufinus*) and Common Buzzard in Turkey and at Strait of Gibraltar (*cirtensis*) but states 'no hybrids as yet reported'. Hybridization between nominate *rufinus* and nominate *buteo*, however, has been well documented in Hungary in the late 1990s (Dudás et al 1999). Hybridization between several other *Buteo* species has been documented before (eg, Murray 1970, Clark & Witt 2006, Hull et al 2007, cf McCarthy 2006). In Central Asia, nominate *rufinus* hybridises extensively with Upland Buzzard *B hemilasius* (Pfander & Schmigalew 2001). And McCarthy (2006) states that nominate *rufinus* x Steppe Buzzard *B b vulpinus* are 'commonly hybrid' in India in winter.

The fledged juvenile observed in Pantelleria was very similar in general appearance to the birds illustrated in Dudás et al (1999), although less rusty on the thigh-feathers ('trousers') and wing-coverts.

Pantelleria lies exactly on the watershed of the regular breeding areas of both taxa; nominate *buteo* breeds in Sicily (and further north in Italy) but not on the African mainland, whereas *cirtensis* breeds in most of northern Africa, including Tunisia (and east to Arabia) but not – apart from the breeding pairs on Pantelleria – in Europe (cf distribution maps in Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001).

In spring 2009, the same male nominate *buteo*

265 Atlas Long-legged Buzzard / Atlasarendbuizerd *Buteo rufinus cirtensis*, juvenile, between Goulimime and Atlantic coast, Morocco, 20 March 2008 *(Pieter Verheij)*. Note strong similarities with Pantelleria hybrid but also more marked and obvious dark carpal patch, warmer tone of flank, paler and less barred tail, and less patterned underwing-coverts.

was paired and seen copulating regularly with a different second calendar-year *cirtensis*. Moreover, an adult male *cirtensis* paired with an adult female nominate *buteo* was seen copulating regularly and starting to breed. The increase of mixed pairs will probably lead to an increasing number of difficult-to-identify buzzards on the island in the years to come.

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