

First confirmed record of Red-headed Falcon *Falco chicquera* from Afghanistan

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On 18 September 2018 at dusk, SO saw in Qila-e Panja village (c36.9914 N, 72.4722 E, 2800 m asl) in Wakhan district of Badakhshan province, Afghanistan, a rather small and slim falcon flying very fast and low among poplar plantations in a cultivated area, presumed to be hunting Western House Martins *Delichon urbicum*, which were present in large numbers. Although the observation lasted only a few seconds, the behavior and flight were similar to those of a Merlin *Falco columbarius*, but the plumage was more reminiscent of a Barbary Falcon *Falco peregrinoides babylonicus*, although the bird was smaller and dissimilar in proportions. On 19 September, AMR, alerted to the presence of the falcon, visited the same area and saw at 17:53 a falcon matching the description chasing passerines and then perching for several minutes on top of the border police station building. It had a rufous crown, nape and moustache, pale grey faintly black-barred wings and back, chest was sparsely dark-streaked and the tail, proportionately long, had a conspicuous broad black subterminal band. Probably the same bird was seen again on 20 September in the early morning in the same area, resting on houses or hunting Tree Sparrows *Passer montanus* that sought refuge in scattered Sea Buckthorn *Hippophae rhamnoides* shrubs. Observations and photographs (Plate 1) confirmed that it was a Red-headed Falcon *Falco chicquera* in adult plumage.



Plate 1. Adult Red-headed Falcon *Falco chicquera* perched on the roof of a house in Wakhan national park, Afghanistan, 20 September 2018. © Ali Madad Rajabi/WCS

Red-headed Falcon is generally sedentary, in Asia residing throughout most of the Indian subcontinent, although not present in northern Pakistan and North Himalayas (Grimmett *et al* 1998). Some birds may be nomadic in response to seasonal changes in food resources (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001), such as perhaps the bird observed out of range and at an unusually high elevation in Wakhan, at the peak of migratory passerine passage. The staff of the Wildlife Conservation Society have been present in Wakhan district (which became a national park in 2014) continuously since July 2006 and have recorded all bird observations in a database, but this is the first confirmed record of Red-headed Falcon in Wakhan and in Afghanistan. Comprehensive ornithological surveys of Wakhan have also been carried out in July-August 2006 (Reza 2006), September-October 2007 (Ayé 2007) and June 2008 (Timmins 2008) and did not record the species, which is to be considered to be a vagrant in Afghanistan.

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