

New Zealand Falcon Management Guide #2 Recognising Karearea

The New Zealand falcon, Karearea, is a threatened species that is only found in New Zealand. Despite being on the back of our \$20 note it is bird that few people recognise. Below we describe how to identify a New Zealand falcon, Karearea and how to tell them apart from New Zealand's other diurnal bird of prey, the Swamp harrier.

Nests

New Zealand falcon



Swamp harrier



Falcons make a simple scrape to lay their eggs into: this is usually on the ground under a log, bush or rock stack, but may also be on a small bluff or in an epiphytic plant located high within an emergent tree. Harriers in contrast construct a large platform-like stick nest, which they almost always locate on the ground.

Chicks less than 10 days old

New Zealand falcon



Swamp harrier



When they first hatch and up to ten days old falcon & harrier chicks are white with pink legs. Very small harrier chicks differ by having a distinctive black bill and a yellowish eye ring and cere (skin around the bill). In contrast falcon chicks have a completely pink bill and a subtle grey/blue eye ring.

Chicks 10+ days old

New Zealand falcon



Swamp harrier



At approximately 10-14 days old the down on falcon chicks is replaced with a second grey coat. As they get older and their pin feathers begin to unfurl they become blacker but retain patches of grey fluffy down all over. Falcon chicks have distinctive blue/grey legs, feet, cere and eye ring. In contrast to falcons, after losing the first coat of white down, the second coat of harrier chicks is a more yellowish/cream colour and their cere, eye ring, legs and feet are a light yellow colour.

Recent fledglings

New Zealand falcon



Swamp harrier



Downy tufts remain on both falcons and harriers for several weeks after fledging. Falcons are more black/brown than harriers which are more of a russet/dark chocolate brown colour. Fleishy parts on falcons are blue/grey at this age whereas harriers have yellow feet, legs and cere. Recent fledglings are the same size as adults, falcons are roughly the size of a magpie, while harriers are far larger - approximately three times the size of a magpie

Juveniles

New Zealand falcon



Swamp harrier



At fledging, falcon chicks are almost uniformly dark brown/black all over with cream under the chin, a washed brown breast with darker blotching. The grey/blue coloured cere, eye ring, legs and feet that they had as chicks is retained until they become adults. Recent fledglings retain small tufts of grey down on their back and on the top of their heads. Once the remaining down is lost falcons have the overall appearance of looking very 'smart and clean' when compared to adults. Fledgling harriers are more of a chocolate brown than falcons (although at a distance they can appear quite similar in colour), and have only a small whitish patch of feathers on the back of their neck. They have yellow fleshy parts and their eye is dark brown in colour compared to adult harriers (which have yellow eyes).

Adults

New Zealand falcon



Swamp harrier



Adult falcons have a dark brown back with a cream streaked breast and russet thighs. The back and tail is thinly barred with buff. The eye ring, cere, legs and feet are a striking deep yellow in the breeding season. This becomes a paler yellow colour outside of the breeding season. When perched they have a long tail and squat neck making them an upside-down tear drop shape in silhouette. Like fledgling falcons, they retain the cream throat patch and distinctive malar strip. Harriers in contrast are highly variable in colouration, generally being a lighter tawny brown on the back and far more pale cream/white colour on the breast (although they are also streaked on the front like a falcon). Adult harriers are far more bulky, standing on very long prominent legs, have distinctive facial disks around the eyes and in contrast to juveniles have light yellowish eyes.

In flight

New Zealand falcon



Swamp harrier



Falcons in flight have long pointed wings and a long rectangular tail. When soaring these open out into a more rounded shape. Falcons are most often seen flying with rapid wing beats in direct, intent hunting flight, or contour flying low to the ground trying to surprise prey. Harriers in contrast are generally seen with their large wings held open in a shallow V-shape, lazily quartering the ground in search of food or prey. Harriers also have an obvious cream/pale rump which the falcon does not have. Falcons have an intensely checkered under wing, whereas when viewed from below harriers are more broadly banded.



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