

Brahminy Kite

Haliastur indus

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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Adult Brahminy Kite in flight (photo: Jim Thomson)

Description

The Brahminy Kite is a medium-sized bird of prey occurring at coastal habitats in tropical and sub-tropical Australia and Asia (Indonesia, South-east Asia and as far west as the southern coast of Pakistan). Adult birds have a white head and upper parts, and rich chestnut wings, back and belly. The feet and legs are pale-yellow, and unfeathered, and the bill is pale. In flight, the wing tips are black, and the wings are prominently “fingering” (although not as much as for a Whistling Kite). Males and females have identical plumage. Immature birds are broadly similar in appearance to the adults, but the head and upper parts are off-white and streaked, the areas of chestnut colourations instead are dull brown or black, and the bill is grey.

Juvenile birds look rather different and potentially may be mis-identified as Whistling Kites. They have dark brown upper parts with pale scaling, brownish head and neck with cream streaking, and a dark patch around the ear coverts. In flight, the wing pattern of a juvenile Brahminy Kite is reminiscent of that of a Little Eagle – in particular, the pale-windows in the wing when seen from

below.

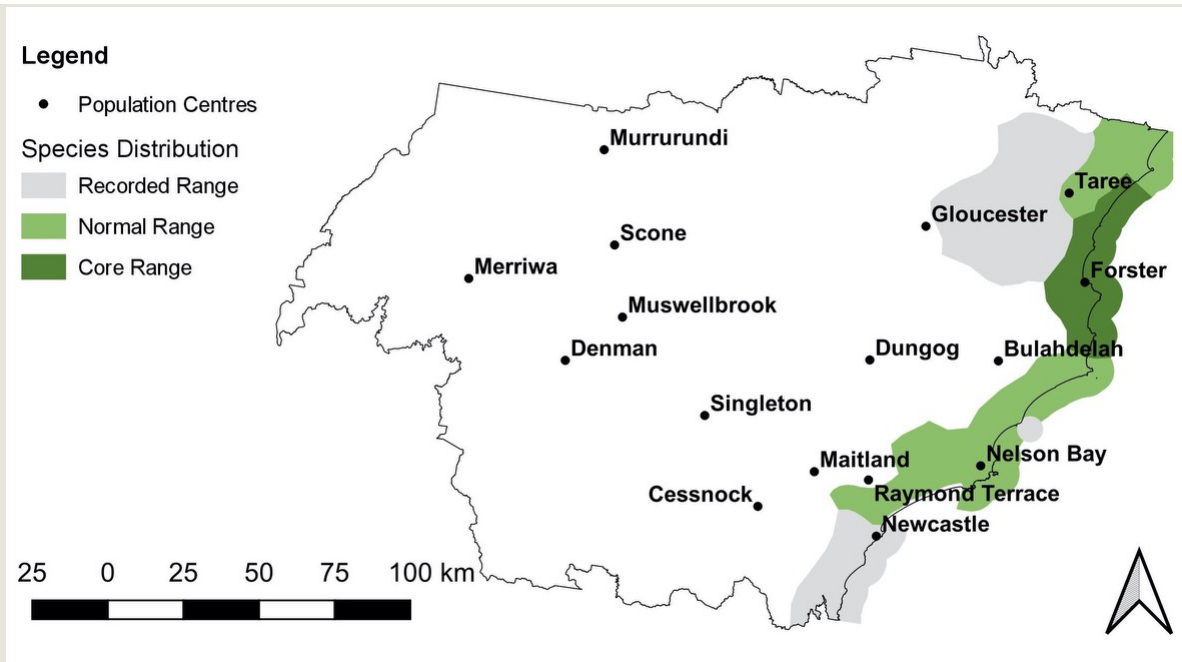
The diet is an opportunistic mixture of carrion, insects and fish. Birds will harry and take food from other species e.g. Whistling Kite, Silver Gull, Australian White Ibis, various tern species.



Adult Brahminy Kite at nest at Lemon Tree Passage, with an advanced juvenile bird (photo: Lois Wooding)

Regional status

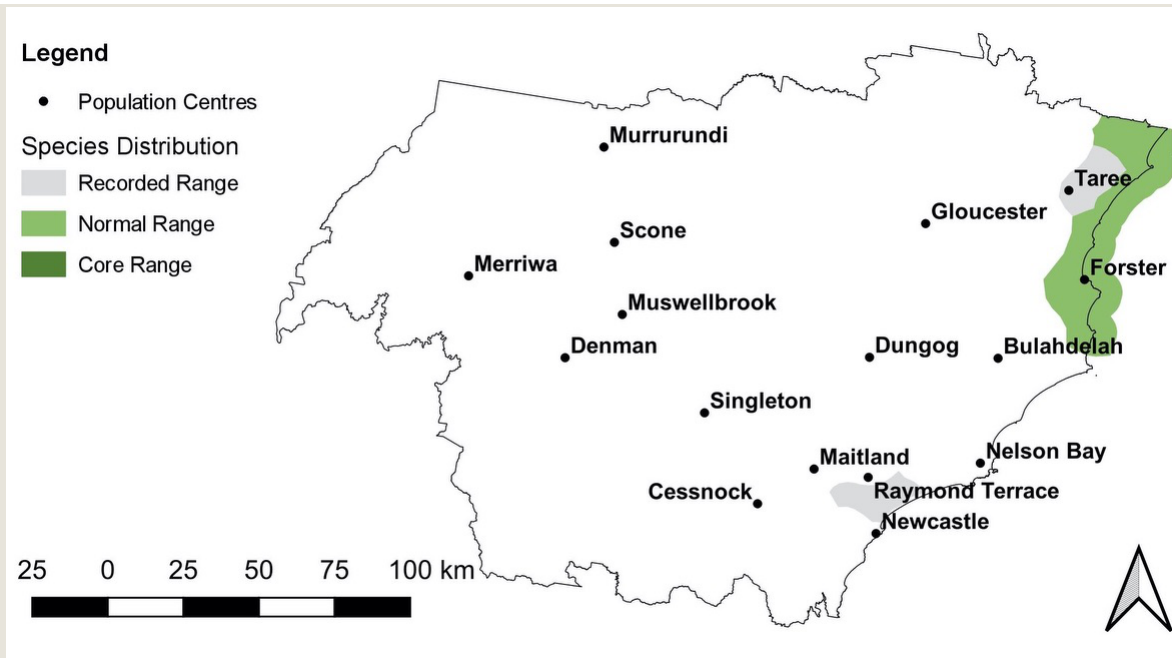
Although it is more common in the north of our region, nowadays the Brahminy Kite may be seen anywhere along our coastline, usually as a single bird or a pair, except when breeding. Birds are seldom recorded away from marine or estuarine habitats. This species is a breeding resident of the Hunter Region, although as yet no breeding has been confirmed from any locations south of Port Stephens.



Distribution map for Brahminy Kite in 2020 (map prepared by Dan Williams)

The southwards range expansion

The number of southern records has been increasing, and there is clear evidence that a range expansion has been occurring in the past 10-15 years (it may in fact be a range recovery: see NSW & ACT Atlas Vol 1). The pre-2009 range in our region (see second map) was limited to the north-east, aside from a handful of records of vagrants. Birds now breed regularly in Port Stephens but the first confirmed breeding records from there were only in 2016 (there is circumstantial evidence that a pair had begun to breed from about 2012; see *The Whistler*, vol 11, p 1-9). Breeding records from further south are anticipated, because the numbers of birds present have been increasing.



Pre-2009 distribution range of the Brahminy Kite (map prepared by Dan Williams)

Sub-species

The only subspecies found in Australia is *girrenera* (which is an indigenous Australian name for Brahminy Kite); the distribution of this subspecies includes Papua New Guinea and the Moluccas. Worldwide, there are three other subspecies.

About the name

Brahminy Kite

“Kite” derives from the Old English *cyta*, which apparently is onomatopoeic for the call of the Red Kite that once was abundant in Great Britain. The term *Kite* is now applied indiscriminately to many mid-sized birds of prey, spanning several genera.

The species’ distribution includes India where the Brahmins are important Hindu religious scholars and teachers. When the bird was first described, by Boddaert in 1783, it was named *Aigle de Pondicherry*, the latter being the then French name for India. To Hindus, the Brahminy Kite represents Garuda, the king of birds, used as a mount by Lord Vishnu. The “high-ranking” name given to this species contrasts with that of the “lowly-ranked” Black Kite aka Pariah Kite, a common scavenger in India.

Haliastur indus

The genus is from the Greek *hals* or *hali* (meaning “sea”) and Latin *astur* (“hawk”), i.e. “sea-hawk”. The species name evokes India, where the nominate subspecies is found.



Immature Brahminy Kite (photo: Alan Stuart)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 **Text** by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide.

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